



God, Īśvara, and the Brahman: A Case for a Post-Perennial Comparative Theology

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Abstract

Even though we encounter a common exchange between the categories of God and Īśvara or the Brahman in both scholarly works and faith communities, there are deeper and irreconcilable differences in these absolutes from two different cultures. A naive approach to flatten the cultural horizons has engendered more confusion than has created a cultural harmony. Any cultural acceptance based on misconceptions is destined to fail and if we seek to ground cultural understanding, we have to acknowledge their underlying differences. This paper seeks to underscore the central difference in two cultures by examining their absolutes.

Keywords God · Īśvara · Brahman · Comparative theology · Hinduism · Vedanta

“The attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular.”

Santayana, *Reason in Religion* (p. 4).

In undertaking the challenge of comparative theology, we are first obliged to read the categories within their own cultural contexts before making any broader assumptions. This task is complicated by the fact that categories such as God or the Brahman are both multivalent and highly nuanced. The objective of this paper is to underscore these complexities while stressing both the individual differences and overlapping parameters of each category. Because it is not possible to address such a complex topic in a single paper without some limitations, I will make use of the classical Advaita position as the foundational basis for analysis. Comparative studies can provide a platform that facilitates mutual understanding, but it also runs the risk of blurring boundaries and creating further confusion. How can we map one culture onto another when the categories that seem similar in one reading appear very different in another? For example, what the category ‘God’ meant to the ancient Hebrew people is different from what it meant to Aquinas or Hegel. Likewise, what the category

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'Brahman' meant to Vedantins before Śaṅkara is something different from what it meant to Rāmānuja, or many other classical Sanskrit philosophers. The categories Īśvara and the Brahman are often uncritically translated as God. Although they are broadly used interchangeably within Hindu traditions such as Advaita, they also take on different meanings when comparing the philosophies of Patañjali and Śaṅkara, for example. If the task of a translator or a scholar comparing philosophical categories from two different cultures was to be absolutely precise, neither the project of translation nor that of comparative studies would be possible. This does not mean, however, that no rules should apply. By critically examining three central categories (God, Īśvara, and Brahman), my objective is to argue for a nuanced reading, inviting any critical analysis that considers categorical difference as a central premise to comparative studies.

A reevaluation of the comparative approach has become urgent for a number of reasons. To begin with, we are living in a global world wherein the cultural parameters that separate us are constantly shrinking. Our socio-political and economic realities set aside our cultural differences but when using a single language of communication, we run the risk of blurring categorical boundaries. One of the consequences of globalization is the colonization of indigenous cultures. Whether from the West to the East in the form of missionaries or from the East to the West in the form of *gurus*, both exploit this language deficiency to appropriate existing cultural forms and reinterpret categories to sway the masses to their own point of view. Even the scholarly world is not aloof of this cultural homogenization. Intermixing the categories, however, is not merely a product of cultural colonialism. A naïve perennialism swept the field of comparative studies in the early twentieth century, with leading scholars such as William James and religious leaders such as Swami Vivekananda seeking to ground the Absolute within their respective cultural frameworks. While constructivist arguments have demonstrated the flaws of perennialism, they fail to provide a vocabulary for the legitimate exchange of cultural categories. My response is nuanced. I propose the project of comparative studies with an underlying hermeneutical difference and hermeneutical identity. By grounding difference, this project not only supports intercultural communication, it also demands cultural sensitivity in the part of the communicators. At the same time, I also recognize the value of comparing categories by exploring similarity, as the comparative approach is subsumed within hermeneutical difference. Meaning, that this method rejects the assumption that we live in "separate cultural islands" (Hedges, 2014: 206), while at the same time it acknowledges 'cultural fence lines.' Scholars in the past have warned us about haphazard application of categories, yet scholarship in the field of comparative studies has failed to heed the suggestions. As a result, the global forces seeking to erase cultural boundaries have mostly prevailed in the last century. Even though we have scholars in the field of comparative studies such as Panikkar (1987: 2254) warning that, "*Brahman* is certainly not the one true and living God of the Abrahamic traditions. Nor can it be said that *Shang-ti* or *kami* are the same as *brahman*. And yet they are not totally unrelated," we nonetheless have book titles such as *How to Know God*, or *Against the Hindu God* that are commonplace. But outside of the scholarly world, the consumer market of spirituality seeks to fabricate a language that makes cultural commodities from different cultures appealing to the masses. And this is possible only by blurring the cultural boundaries. This process

creates a 'spiritual community' in search of 'God-realization' or 'spiritual awakening,' a vocabulary that is not meaningful in any specific cultural parameters but only in the fusion of cultures. In our case, statements such as 'I am God,' 'There is not one God but only God,' or 'Hinduism is a monotheistic religion,' are all meant to translate Hindu concepts into a global context that adopts categories uncritically. In this homogenized space the *gurus* become the 'saints' and are treated as the prophets, and we encounter books such as *Realizing God: Lectures on Vedanta* or *The Bhagavadgītā: Royal Science of God-Realization*.

We can pave our path by learning from the debates between advocates of perennialism and constructivism while acknowledging that there are multiple factors to determine our experiential horizon. On the one hand, our embodiment and ecology establishes the limits of our consciousness and our response to somatic stimuli, even if some experiences categorized as mystical are seen to be similar. On the other hand, culture and language are also some of the factors that deeply influence the way we react to certain stimuli, giving space to cultural constructivism. Categories such as God or the Brahman need to be read within these parameters or we risk moving from one extreme to the other. While it is true that there is a significant overlap in mystical accounts across cultures, there is no denying that these experiences are cultivated within different cultural and linguistic parameters. Even though some of the perennialist arguments appear to endorse the experiences of marginalized cultures by mapping them into the language and categories of the colonizing culture, this approach eventually results in rejecting their uniqueness and flattening the landscape of cultural horizons.

Returning to our topic, 'God' is the central theological category. There are two candidates for this category in Hinduism: Brahman and Īśvara. All three terms overlap in meaning but they also are very different, if we closely examine the categories. To further complicate the issue, there is no single monolithic understanding of either Brahman or Īśvara within Hinduism as a whole, as their application varies dramatically when examined in light of different schools of Hindu thought. For this analysis, I have relied on classical texts from the school of Śāṅkara, because almost every school within Hinduism defines these categories differently, and it is not possible to make an overarching assumption that would address all Hindu schools of thought. By illustrating the broad range of concepts and diversity of understanding even within a single school of the Advaita of Śāṅkara, we can familiarize ourselves with the challenges surrounding comparative theology.

God

It is not possible to address the category 'God' within the limited scope of a few pages. Despite the presence of similarities, what God means to philosophers such as Aristotle, Hegel, or Kant is not conceptually identical to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, there is some conceptual overlap with the Aristotelian description of God as the unmoved mover, but Aristotle, like other classical Greek philosophers, was a polytheist. By contrast, a dictionary definition of God from the Jewish perspective describes "the supreme Being, the Creator of the universe, the Judge and Ruler of history, the Supreme Lawgiver and object

of the religious attitudes of love, awe, reverence, obedience and worship”, and the Supreme Lawgiver of the Jewish nation” (Grossman & Sommer, 1997: 274). Likewise, the central premise within Christianity is that God is one, unsurpassable in power, knowledge, and goodness, and is the creator of the world out of nothing. From the Judeo-Christian perspective, God acts *in* history, meaning, every single historical event unfolds according to His plan. Furthermore, even within Judeo-Christian culture the category God can present an internal diversity comparable to the distance between the categories *Īśvara* and Brahman in Hindu thought. If we were to engage the dualistic philosophies of the Hindu world in relation to the category God, we might find even more similarities, but unfortunately the conversation on Hindu theology is primarily dominated by the Advaita reading. Rather than further complicating the issue and making comparative reading an impossible project, my intention here is to accept the common usage of the term God based on an extremely selective reading of Christianity and compare it to analogous concepts within the philosophy of Śaṅkara. Therefore, it is not within the purview of the current conversation to consider whether God has an anthropomorphic form or is endowed with desire and emotion. From among the main theological schools, I am therefore rarely engaging the positions of Rāmānuja and Madhvācārya, for instance. Accordingly, when comparing God to *Īśvara* and Brahman, I am not extending the scope of this study to incorporate deities from folk beliefs, as those are vastly different. The concepts of God, *Īśvara*, and Brahman all relate to non-localized entities, whereas autochthonous deities are mostly localized, meaning that they belong to a place. However, even this non-localization does not place the above three categories on an equal footing because the Judeo-Christian God is the ‘God of men,’ a personal deity. *Īśvara* and Brahman, through the lens of Advaita, are impersonal, and personal deities in the Hindu world are broadly localized. The following brief summary, primarily relying on Wierenga (1989) and Feser (2017), is being offered so that comparative analysis can be possible:

God is the initial mover.

This argument comes in various flavors, from Aristotle’s unmoved mover to its manifestation in the theology of Aquinas. From the Hindu world, the arguments of Udayana are closely comparable. The position states that change is possible, at least in its initial phase, on the basis of a pre-existent subject capable of effecting change. The Nyāya concept of *Īśvara* has several attributes that have an overlap with the ways God is recognized in Judaism and Christianity. For instance, *Īśvara* shares attributes such as oneness, immutability, eternality, incorporeality, perfection, omnipotence, and goodness. *Īśvara*, however, is one among nine substances (*dravya*) in this school. Furthermore, there is a difference between saying that God is the immovable mover and saying that God creates *ex nihilo*. The *Īśvara* in the school of Nyāya is an initial mover of pre-existing atoms (*paramāṇu*) that are considered permanent. Basically, the argument for God on the basis of change is:

Change is an actualization of potentials. No potential can be actualized unless something already actual actualizes it. On this ground, change is caused by

something already actual. This actualizer cannot be many, due to the lack of differentiating features. If this actualizer were material or corporeal, it would change and itself be subject to time. For it to be imperfect would imply that it has not fully actualized itself, which cannot be the case, and therefore it is perfect. All powers are derived from this actualizer (Feser, 2017: pp. 35-37).

The argument, accordingly, is that God is the basis for all that exists, or that God is the pure being wherein all that exists is subsumed. Rather than arguing for a cause, assuming God to be the initial cause rests on the assumption of change, that there must be an initial mover for change to occur. The above argument applies to the transcendence of God, and there is no law where the category causality cannot apply to a transcendental entity. The argument for a purely *actual* actualizer leads to the conclusion that God is an unmoving mover, that there are no potentials within God that are yet to be actualized.

- For all composite things to come into being, there must be a simple, non-composite One to cause the composites.

This Neo-Platonic argument rests on the assumption that the world is full of composites and that composites do not self-constitute. Therefore there must be something basic for composites to come into being. If, on the other hand, the most basic principle is also an effect, this would lead to infinite regress, with nothing being the primordial cause. The argument here is that this One is immutable or changeless, that only an entity with parts can change, and that anything that changes is not perfect. For the same reason, it is beginningless and endless. Furthermore, the understanding is that anything that changes cannot be perfect, and because this One is perfect, it therefore cannot change.

- Objects like universals or numbers must be true. These objects do not depend on material things for their existence, so God is the ultimate ground for their existence.

This Augustinian proof is also the one adopted by Leibniz.

- There must be pure existence that we can extract from the existence of entities in the world. This pure existence is God.
- There must be one necessary being, for the things that exist do so for reasons determined by this entity, God.

Of course, there are different schools within Christian theology, with some stressing absolute perfection and others focusing on God's personhood. The second camp focuses on God's desire to be in a dynamic relationship with humanity. As will become clear when we address the categories of the Brahman and Īśvara, this tension is not relevant in Advaita because the clear distinction between the Brahman and Īśvara makes it possible for the existence of both the immutable singularity of the absolute and the personal engagement with creation. If we are serious about reading Advaita, the categories of monism, pantheism, and panentheism are not

applicable, because the singularity of the Brahman is not that of ‘all in one.’ Advaita is a ‘non-duality’ where all distinctions are rejected, not a philosophy of ‘one’ (*eka*) but of ‘not twofold’ (*advaita*). Numeric one does not apply to Brahman because Brahman is not a countable entity. This singularity, following Advaita, is that of consciousness (*caitanya*) devoid of differentiation in terms of subject, object, and object-directed modalities. In this absolute, there lies nothing to differentiate consciousness from itself; it is recognized to be of the non-dual nature. As long as we are looking for consciousness in matter, we are not engaging Advaita, and if we are searching for materiality within consciousness, we are not understanding Advaita. It is therefore contextual that we engage the categories of Brahman and Īśvara before making broader assumptions.

Brahman and Īśvara

Before entering the Advaita paradigm to address the concepts of Brahman and Īśvara, let me offer a brief note from other Hindu schools of thought. If the Advaita perspective can help us contrast these concepts, some other interpretations beyond the parameters of Advaita may help us determine the conceptual overlap. A good number of comparative readings have been published in the past few decades with a focus on Rāmānuja, primarily to highlight the similarities between his thought and Christianity, but in actuality the most compelling arguments for this intersection can be drawn from the exposition of the Brahman and Īśvara according to the theology of Madhvācārya. He not only identifies Brahman with Viṣṇu, rejecting the differences between Brahman and Īśvara as has been maintained by the Advaitins, but he also attributes to Brahman the eightfold functions of creation, sustenance, dissolution, subduing, realization, ignorance, bondage, and liberation. Madhva’s Brahman is therefore the personal God who is solely responsible for creation or dissolution of the world and also the bestower of bondage as well as liberation. On the other hand, if we engage the concept of Īśvara from Patañjali, the founder of the Yoga school, he is portrayed as one individual among the rest of us, albeit eternally free of binding factors (*Yogasūtra* I.24). Patañjali does not identify Īśvara as creator God, but rather as the teacher of all teachers from the past (*Yogasūtra* I.26). Accordingly, Īśvara is not addressed as omnipotent but rather as omniscient (*Yogasūtra* I.25). Since the focus of this paper is the Advaita of Śāṅkara that centers around Brahman, and since the category Īśvara needs a separate treatment to compare and contrast among different Hindu schools of theology, this section will primarily address the category Brahman.

By applying the hermeneutics of identity and difference as I have outlined above, we can compare the overlapping categories without a blind misappropriation. The approach of identity, in the hermeneutics from the past generation, has fostered a semblance of cultural dialogue where the effect has been to erase fundamental differences. While engaging the hermeneutics of difference, we must be equally careful not to marginalize voices that are homogenous. Only by adopting both difference and identity can we ascertain the categories on their own terms and make a meaningful conversation without erasing cultural identities. A simplistic comparison, that both cultures consider the absolute as ineffable, does not lead to any meaningful conversation. It is difference, as a matter of fact, that constitutes the initial basis for dialogue and we can even ground this hermeneutic approach in

classical Advaita exegesis where exclusion and inclusion both play key roles in determining categories. Accordingly, exclusion (*vyāvartana*) is the first approach. In the case of Brahman, since nothing is excluded, this approach is not applicable. Advaitins broadly present two other definitions of the Brahman, natural and marginal:

- Definition based on extrinsic characteristics (*taṭastha-lakṣaṇa*): Brahman is the cause from which the world arises and is also its final substrate.
- Definition based on inherent characteristics (*svarūpalakṣaṇa*): ‘Brahman is the absolute truth, consciousness, and is boundless’ (*satyam jñānam anantaṃ brahma*). This definition has the target (*lakṣa*) as integral to the very source, the defining term (*lakṣaṇa*). The definition that Brahman is of the character of pure being, consciousness, and bliss (*saccidānanda*) falls in this category.

These two definitions have been widely used and mostly abused in broader Advaita conversations. The first relates to causality and identifies God as the initial mover or primordial cause. No Advaitin, however, accepts causality outside of the parameters of ‘false appearance’ (*vivartta*). The positive terms in the next definition have some overlap with the term God. But again, the impersonal Brahman and the personal God, consciousness as itself and as the conscious entity, are not to be confused. For this reason, before starting a comparative analysis, we need to determine categories such as Brahman or Īśvara in their own original contexts and explore both the factors that are overlapping as well as those that keep these categories apart. Yet again, if a cross-cultural hermeneutics were to ever take root, we cannot make it happen by erasing differences but only by means of recognizing conceptual limitations.

As it comes to God, it is both perfect and agentive, but the category Brahman has been analyzed in two strata since the Upaniṣadic times: *Para* Brahman, the absolute as it is, in its real form, with defining characteristics such as being, consciousness, and bliss merely applied to negate the opposites, and *Apara* Brahman or the absolute in its immanent form, better known in terms of Īśvara. It will be clear in the conversation below that there is not a single understanding with regard to Īśvara; nevertheless, broadly, Īśvara is the very Brahman that has as its limiting factor *māyā*, the elusive power that gives rise to agency. Only upon actualizing agency can Īśvara be confirmed as omniscient. The absolute form of Brahman is nothing but the very *Īśvara* when expunged of this limiting factor (*upādhi*). Brahman as such is therefore never the cause of the world, never enjoys agency, and lacks attributes such as being omniscient, for it is merely the basis for all beings. The parameters under which the causality of Īśvara is maintained are also nuanced among Advaitins. Nevertheless, we can conceive of this Īśvara as having no real beginning, temporally extended, but since nothing above and beyond Brahman is permanent, we cannot say the same for Īśvara that manifests only due to the conditioning of the limiting factor of *māyā*. There is also a debate among Advaitins regarding the category *māyā*, as some consider this identical with *avidyā* or ignorance, but most classical Advaitins make a distinction. When differentiated, *māyā* is the power that projects what is not there as it is projected and *avidyā* is the power that conceals the reality. Accordingly, living selves (*jīva*) are considered as the very Brahman covered by the concealing power

of *avidyā* whereas Brahman conditioned by the projecting power of *māyā* is called Īśvara and acknowledged as the cause of the world.

Dharmarāja Adhvarīndra explains the above concept in the context of the stratification of observer-consciousness (*sākṣin*). From the Advaita standpoint, consciousness as it is does not observe or lack agency because agency, in this reading, is a relational concept, contingent upon the presence of entities to be observed. And there are two types of objects: Īśvara or the creator of the world, and mental modifications (*vr̥ttis*). There is no real beginning for the rise of the observing consciousness that makes Īśvara its intentional object and therefore, this mode of consciousness is considered beginningless. The same observing consciousness is temporal with regard to other entities, specifically mental modifications (*vr̥ttis*). With this background, Dharmarāja makes a distinction between Īśvara and the higher-order observing consciousness (*Īśvara-sākṣin*). This observer can therefore be called the pure observer, as it has no higher observer to make it an object. This observing consciousness, when corresponding to the embodied state, has as its determining limiting factors the internal instruments of consciousness or the mind (*antaḥkaraṇa*). In contrast, the lived or embodied aspect of consciousness (*jīva*) is defined as consciousness that is delimited by the mind (*antaḥkaraṇa*). The difference between lived consciousness and the lower order observer (*sākṣin*) is that, in the first case, the mind functions as its intrinsic characterizing feature or a qualifier (*viśeṣaṇa*). On the other hand, the mind is not considered an intrinsic feature of the observing consciousness but rather, an external feature or intermittent attribute (*upalakṣaṇa*) that confirms the observing consciousness by means of implication. What Dharmarāja means by *Īśvara-sākṣin* is the consciousness that has *māyā* as its determining factor. What this means is that the higher order consciousness that makes Īśvara its object is pure consciousness that has as its intermittent determining feature the projecting faculty of *māyā*. Likewise, consciousness that is conditioned by (*avaccinna*) *māyā* is considered Īśvara here.

If this account confirms that there is no fundamental difference between Īśvara and Brahman because Īśvara is merely a condition of the very absolute with some factors determining its distinctness, the same applies to embodied selves. What we call embodied self is not categorically distinct from the absolute. On the contrary, the embodied state is due to delimitation by ignorance (*avidyā*). Again, the scope of *avidyā* varies within scholastic Advaita and it is not possible to address all the differences. Suffice to say that there is not a single Advaita author who does not adopt the hierarchy of Īśvara and Brahman, and all Advaitins agree to the thesis that embodied being is the very Brahman in reality. Now if our objective is to draw a parallel between the category God with any of these categories, we need to be mindful of distinguishing features and save ourselves from a haphazard comparison. If comparisons are to be made, we need to know whether God is being compared with Brahman or Īśvara, and for this, we need to explore further what the category Brahman means in the Advaita of Śāṅkara.

We need to be clear beforehand that Brahman as found in Advaita is devoid of all attributes and is therefore called “expunged of qualities” (*nirguṇa*) and “lacking any distinctive form” (*nirākāra*). These two terms define the parameters of Brahman in Advaita, in contrast to the ways the category is recognized in the dualistic schools. When defending Brahman as expunged of any determining properties, Advaitins

such as Maṇḍana argue that there is no objection to Brahman having negative *dhar-mas*, such as being the substrate for the negation of qualities. This is in response to those who argue that if Brahman lacks properties, this deficiency becomes the property. When the texts describe Brahman as having compassion, this can only be referring to *Īśvara*, as any alternative reading would lead to a confusion of categories. Meaning, Brahman in Rāmānuja's or Madhvācārya's theologies accommodates the attributes such as having compassion, in contrast to Śāṅkara's Advaita where Brahman in its absolute form is expunged of all properties, while *Īśvara* is defined by attributes such as 'always being there' or 'being compassionate.'

One can argue that if Brahman is described in terms of consciousness, we cannot identify Brahman as lacking properties, because consciousness is its property. But this objection is due merely to not understanding the concept of Brahman: the assertion is that Brahman *is* consciousness and not that Brahman *has* consciousness. One can also come across properties that are relative to the degree of realization, for instance, that identify Brahman in temporal terms such as permanence, but this also reflects in part the mistake of the subject making this assumption. Every single word gives rise to some determinate mode of consciousness and a corresponding object. For this reason, words can only relate to the conditioned state of consciousness (*vṛtti-jñāna*). As a consequence, there are no words to describe the absolute Brahman, as it is ineffable.

All Advaitins agree that meditative practices help clear the mind so that Brahman in its pristine form can be reflected in the intellect and mentally grasped. But this is yet another 'reflection,' and not the Brahman as it is. Some Advaitins such as Vācaspati Mīśra maintain the primacy of reflective practices (*nididhyāsana*) whereas the others, particularly those following Padmapāda, maintain the primacy of hearing the instructions (*śruti*). Even though some Advaitins such as Madhusūdana have reconciled devotional practices with meditative reflection within Advaita, the manifestation of Brahman is spontaneous, as there can be no instruments in objectifying and revealing it. All that the instruments can do is remove adverse mental conditioning. Brahman, in essence, is not to be invented or discovered; realization does not originate, nor does it ever cease to exist. From the perspective of the Advaitins, dedication to Apara Brahman or *Īśvara* is not free of error, as it is guided by limited consciousness. By all accounts, self-realization is not to be given by *Īśvara* or to be taken away for some reason. Some Advaitins such as Madhusūdana make a distinction between meditative practices dedicated to *Īśvara* and Brahman, claiming that meditative practices dedicated to the formless absolute have the potential to bear the fruit of self-realization even while being erroneous: Madhusūdana cites a passage from Kumārila to make a case:

There is no particularity in the erroneous cognition of two persons rushing towards [the object], one having the notion of the gems on the gleam of a gemstone and the other having the notion of a gemstone on the gleam of a lamp; there lies a particularity with regard to causal efficacy. While being erroneous, if one corresponds to reality (*samvādin*), it bears positive result. The meditative practices dedicated to the Brahman likewise grant the fruit of liberation.

Madhusūdana's defense of meditative practices dedicated to the formless absolute is that there is no specific object in this type of meditation and is therefore not erroneous, while maintaining that all object-consciousness, even if Brahman is the object, is within the domain of ignorance. From the Advaita perspective, the only means for liberation is the direct encounter with the absolute that is devoid of all qualities in the meditative mode that is expunged of all conceptualizations.

One can argue that Brahman is described in terms of bliss (*ānanda*) and it is therefore untrue that there are no positive qualifying attributes to describe Brahman. Advaitins respond to this objection by saying that bliss is not an attribute or a qualifier of Brahman but that Brahman itself is bliss, that bliss constitutes its intrinsic nature. Now a question arises: Advaitins describe Brahman not only in terms of bliss but also in terms of consciousness. There would be no point in utilizing two different terms if not to denote two different aspects. As a consequence, Brahman appears to have multiple aspects, contradicting the argument that Brahman is devoid of attributes. Just as consciousness cannot be collapsed into bliss and vice versa, so also is it the case with Brahman and bliss or consciousness, for doing so would also result in collapsing the categories of consciousness and bliss. If consciousness and bliss are aspects of Brahman, then they are distinct from Brahman itself. Upon this objection, Advaitins respond that, since the core of what constitutes consciousness and bliss is absolutely the same with no difference conceivable, the issue of one collapsing into the other does not even arise in conversation. It is only during descriptive modes that we find these two different terms, and our imposition of difference is based on judgmental modes of consciousness that determine consciousness and bliss separately.

One can argue further that if consciousness and bliss are identical, even consciousness of suffering should be of the character of bliss. But if this consciousness can be distinguished separate from bliss, Brahman would not be devoid of all forms of differentiation. Madhusūdana responds to this objection by saying that consciousness of suffering is of the character of mental modification, and by definition, it is transitory, whereas the nondifferentiated bliss of the character of Brahman is identical to consciousness and therefore they cannot be the same.

When considering Brahman as devoid of all attributes, this negation should not be interpreted in affirmative terms, that Brahman is the substrate of negation. The negation here is not confirmation of lack. On the contrary, this is only negation of what is superimposed. For, when we impose the tropes of silver onto a piece of shell, the shell is given to consciousness with its minimum tropes of 'being this' or being 'something,' but Brahman does not manifest even with these minimal tropes because it is considered devoid of all qualities (*nirguṇa*). As a consequence, no conversation applies, even that pertaining to rejection of qualifying features in Brahman. In all negations, something is being hypothesized, as negation is possible only when there is something such as a thesis to negate. And since Brahman is described by Advaitins as lacking any attributes, there is no Brahman to be objectified wherein attributes could be negated. Madhusūdana responds to this objection by saying that, when we impose 'this' or 'something' upon the entity that is projected otherwise, it is not mandatory that these minimal tropes are actually there. One can impose properties due to misconception even in the substrate devoid of any tropes.

We can now examine the category Īśvara. To begin with, when we confront the vocabulary of Īśvara, Advaitins never blur the lines between Īśvara and Brahman. As has been addressed above, Īśvara is defined as consciousness having *māyā* as its *upādhi*, a secondary qualifier that does not constitute a permanent feature of what is being defined. Madhusūdāna identifies the difference between embodied beings (*jīva*) and Īśvara on the basis that for Īśvara, *māyā* functions as its determining property whereas for living beings, *māyā* determines and delimits consciousness, making different subjectivities possible. Madhusūdāna rejects the idea that Īśvara has a discrete form, contradicting the dualistic models that consider Īśvara as having a specific image (*vigraha*). He argues further that Īśvara is only the substrate where all *saṃskāras* reside during the mode of dissolution, and does not have its own corporeality. From this account, Īśvara assumes a triadic form of corporeality by accommodating three *guṇas* during the cycle of creation, while during dissolution, it remains incorporeal.

There is another objection to the Advaita position. On the one hand, Advaitins describe Brahman as devoid of any forms. On the other hand, they also address it as having the character of consciousness (*jñānātmaka*), having the form of bliss (*ānandarūpa*), being single (*advītya*) and eternal (*nitya*), or being an observer (*sākṣin*). Each of these terms determines Brahman, demonstrating its particularity, and furthermore, each of these terms is relational, meaning that each of these qualifiers entails the being of something else. For example, if Brahman is of the character of consciousness, and if consciousness is determined as having the character of revealing objects, there cannot be a non-dual state of Brahman that is absolutely lacking objects to be revealed. Advaitins respond to this objection by saying that, first with regard to the reflexive nature of consciousness, the character of consciousness to reveal external objects (*arthaprakāśakatva*) is applicable only within the state of bondage, as the subject and object relation is not possible in the non-dual state of self-realization where there is no manifestation of objects.

A similar response is given to the objection that Brahman cannot be determined as having the character of bliss (*ānandarūpa*). This *ānanda* cannot be considered a universal (*jāti*), for if Brahman is devoid of all properties, it cannot be the substrate of a qualifying universal. And if by bliss what is meant is having an uplifting feeling or a positive sensation, this is not possible in the state of liberation since there lies nothing external to the self in relation to which the sensation of something being positive could arise. When all that exists is Brahman, there cannot be something as an object of which Brahman would be the subject of knowledge. If this bliss is determined as a positive sensation, the very terminology explains that there is something else in relation to which this experience appears to be positive. Furthermore, if this positivity corresponding to experiencing Brahman is not an internal property but rather an external limiting factor, this experience would not be positive in all occasions. Madhusūdāna responds to these objections by saying that the bliss that describes Brahman is devoid of an object to be its determining factor (*nirupādhika*). From the Advaita perspective, since absence is of the character of its counter-correlate (*prati-yogin*), the absence of suffering is considered to be of the character of bliss and therefore there is no objection to the state of liberation being determined as lacking suffering, as this would mean, from the Advaita standpoint, identical to being of the

character of bliss. From the Advaita perspective, there is no volition (*icchā*) at the state of liberation, but even then, since bliss is the intrinsic character of Brahman, it continues to exist whether it is determined as an intentional object or not.

As has been said above, there is no categorical difference between consciousness and bliss for Advaitins. Even then, the terms consciousness and bliss are applied not on the basis of their referent, as they both refer to the same Brahman, but instead on the basis of what they exclude: the term consciousness rejects inertia, whereas bliss rejects suffering. Advaitins maintain that, when consciousness is not directed towards objects, it is inherently of the character of bliss. There are also other qualifiers applied in addressing Brahman, such as being singular (*advītīya*) or eternal (*nitya*). These attributes are justified accordingly. When Advaitins describe Brahman as being singular in negative terms of ‘lacking the second,’ this negation is of the character of the substrate which is Brahman, and therefore it does not lead to Brahman being of the character of negation. The primary meaning of the negation of duality (*advaita*), therefore, needs to be understood as merely confirming the singularity of Brahman and not that it posits negation as a distinct category. The same applies also to the term ‘eternal’ (*nitya*). If by eternal, what is meant is Brahman enduring to all modes of time or determined as lacking by means of temporality, there are consequences in the category ignorance (*avidyā*) and temporality itself. For, one cannot say ignorance (*avidyā*) exists only to this instant and not in other modes of time. If the argument is that eternal (*nitya*) means that Brahman is not the opposite, or the “counter-correlate” (*pratiyogin*) of destruction (*dhvaṃsa*), then the definition will be too wide, as the very destruction (*dhvaṃsa*) cannot be its own counter-correlate and therefore would also be considered eternal, contradicting the singularity of the Brahman. Advaitins therefore reject these options and define eternity (*nityatva*) in terms of lacking the determinate modes of both past and future. Accordingly, what is meant by Brahman being eternal is not that it endures over time without ever ceasing to exist, but that it is not subject to temporal determination in terms of past or future. The dualists raise an objection that time, as such, is not temporally determined, and is therefore as eternal as Brahman. As a consequence, the nonduality of Brahman is rejected. However, according to Advaitins, time is a product of ignorance (*avidyā*) and therefore it comes to termination when ignorance ceases to exist, even though ignorance and time as its product are both beginningless as substrates.

Finally, even the description of Brahman as observing consciousness (*sākṣin*) is relational and not a description of what it is, but contingent upon the manifestation of object-consciousness. Brahman is not intrinsically ‘observing,’ for the act of observing requires intentionality or object-directedness. As has been outlined above, witnessing consciousness is in itself a reflection of pure consciousness, Brahman, that has made ignorance as its limiting factor. There are some internal differences within Advaita, particularly with regard to the scope of *avidyā* and the ways *avidyā* and *māyā* are understood. Even though some Advaitins do not differentiate between these two categories, others argue that *avidyā* refers to the concealing aspect, whereas *māyā* stands for the projection of what is not really there. The argument is, to not see a rope on the surface is one thing, but to identify it as a snake is something different. There is no disagreement that observing consciousness is not the absolute Brahman but a problem lies in recognizing observing consciousness as distinct from Brahman,

with it being conditioned by *avidyā* as its determining factor: that of circularity. If the category ignorance is established on the basis that it is presented to consciousness as in the statement ‘I do not know;’ from the perspective of Advaita, the very subjectivity is determined by ignorance. Advaitins argue that foundational consciousness is devoid of limitations in terms of subject and object, and it is due to ignorance that subjectivity emerges. They argue that some entities such as ignorance or subjectivity have no actual beginning, even though they can be terminated. However, not all Advaitins define observing consciousness the same way. Some follow the above definition that it is pure consciousness reflected on *māyā*, while Madhusūdana defines this as consciousness that is reflected in the object-directed mode (*avidyā*) conditioned by ignorance. Setting aside these minor scholastic observations, all Advaitins agree that observing consciousness is not Brahman as it is, neither is it the embodied self. The category ‘observer’ of Īśvara further complicates the equation of God with any of the Vedānta categories, for, Īśvara is not the final epistemic subject, even if he is the creator of the world. When it comes to Brahman being both the agent and material cause in giving rise to the world, all Advaitins agree that this causation is secondary; Brahman is merely superimposed as the cause because it is the substrate for events that occur within the domain of ignorance. All Advaitins following Śaṅkara agree that the only theory of causality is the doctrine of false projection (*vivartta*), that Brahman is as much the cause for the world as is the rope for the rise of the misconception of a snake. There is no confusion that Brahman does not mutate because there is no actual transformation (*pariṇāma*) as it comes to the manifestation of the world.

Different Understandings of Īśvara in Classical Advaita

The above description has brought light to the concept of Brahman and of course, there is really no basis for the God=Brahman equation. Now, since Īśvara in Vedānta is considered to be the omniscient, all-powerful, creator, it is likely that one would be tempted to make a new equation. Therefore, it is necessary that the spectra of understandings regarding Īśvara are addressed beforehand. The problem is, there is not a single understanding as it comes to the concept of Īśvara, even among the Advaitins. I would therefore like to summarize the most crucial positions regarding Īśvara among the Advaitins. To limit the scope of this conversation, I will synthesize three distinctive positions from the gloss of Appayadīkṣita, the *Siddhāntaleśasaṅgraha* (SLS):

- Anubhūtiśvarūpa maintains that *māyā*, the cause for the rise of the world, is beginningless and cannot be determined in terms of existing or non-existing, that it relates only to consciousness, and that the reflection of pure consciousness in this *māyā* is called Īśvara. Embodied selves, on the other hand, are the reflection of the very pure consciousness projected onto ignorance (*avidyā*) which is nothing but the very *māyā* determined in different locales and endowed with the powers of projection and concealment (SLS 99). This interpretation stems from a distinction made by the later classical Advaitins, that there are two distinct factors in delimiting pure consciousness: if *avidyā* simply covers its self-luminous

nature, *māyā* on the contrary projects what is not there in the pristine state of consciousness. If omniscience, agency, or compassion are not factors in Brahman as such, it is *māyā* that imposes these attributes on Īśvara. Following this interpretation, the role of *avidyā* is covering and our individuation that gives us the consciousness of difference is due to this very covering factor that suspends our boundless luminosity and unconstrained bliss.

- Vidyāraṇya maintains that Īśvara is the reflection of consciousness in *māyā*, whereas embodied selves are reflections of consciousness in *avidyā*, defining *māyā* as having the primacy of *sattva* that subordinates *rajas* and *tamas*, while *avidyā* has the primacy of *rajas* and *tamas* that subordinate *sattva*. Essentially, both *māyā* and *avidyā* comprise the very singular *prakṛti* and are given different names due to the primacy of different tendencies (SLS 102).
- Sarvajñātman, on the other hand, maintains that when pure consciousness reflects on ignorance (*avidyā*), it is determined as Īśvara, while when the same pure consciousness reflects on the mind or the inner instruments of cognition (*antaḥkaraṇa*), it is determined as the embodied being (*jīva*).

In all accounts, the difference among Brahman, Īśvara, the embodied self, and observing consciousness is marginal, as they all are the very pure consciousness, boundless and luminous. However, when we call it Brahman, we are referring to pure consciousness, devoid of modifications. Following Vidyāraṇya's categorization, when an embodied consciousness becomes the support for any of the physical, subtle, or mental bodies, it resides in the background, becoming an observer, and is therefore called the observing (*sākṣin*) or changeless (*kūṭastha*) self. This very consciousness in the form of changeless observer becomes the support for projection of the mind or internal instrument of cognition (*antaḥkaraṇa*), which in turn becomes the embodied self (*jīva*). From this account, Īśvara is consciousness reflected in the minds of all embodied beings that rests on the veil of *māyā* that in turn rests on Brahman. Following Appayya's gloss, Īśvara is consciousness that rests on the habits (*vāsanā*) of all sentient beings collectively, and these habits are located within *māyā*. On the other hand, Brahman is the substrate for *māyā*. In all accounts, Īśvara is a limited expression of pure consciousness, itself a product of *māyā*, the elusive power that projects externality and delimits consciousness.

In the above position, there is no contradiction with the notion that Īśvara circumscribes all individuated egos that are in the deep sleep state, an understanding based on *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. In both accounts, Īśvara is located in the habits of embodied beings, thus making it possible for him to govern the ego in the state of deep sleep. The argument is that since Īśvara is the totality of all our individuated modes of consciousness, all our habits and modes of creativity collectively belong to Īśvara. Since it is conceived of as the totality of what we can think of and what we can do, Īśvara is considered omniscient and the creator of our collectively shared world. Saying that Īśvara knows all that is, is to say that Īśvara is the collective ego of all, and the knowledge found in every individual ego is subsumed within Īśvara. Since embodied states are a consequence of the habits (*vāsanās*) of past actions and since Īśvara governs this state as a singular agent, Īśvara is also considered the agent

for the creation of the world. Now, is this difference among the categories Brahman and Īśvara etc., real? The response is:

When ignorance that gives rise to distinctness ceases to exist, what would cause the difference between the *ātman* and *Brahman* does not exist in reality.

From the Advaita perspective, all these categories are introduced only to be rejected in the end so that the singularity of the Brahman is confirmed by means of negation.

Comparative Analysis

Some scholars such as Hartshorne and Reese (1953) have outlined the categories of being eternal (E), temporal (T), conscious (C), knower (K), and include the world (W) to compare the absolute in different cultures. Diller (2021) makes a case that the absolute in Śaṅkara's understanding meets four of the above criteria, except for being temporal. Diller's (2021) assumption is that Brahman is eternal. However, in the above conversation, we have clarified that the word eternity can be applied to Brahman only in the sense that it is not determined by the past or the future modes of time. This means that the word 'eternal' in this context does not mean something constant, but only something that is not temporal. Brahman does not posit itself as an entity; it cannot be negated in any mode of time. The same applies to other positive attributes imposed on Brahman. Some (for instance, Diller, 2021) are confused by seeing the term "consciousness" (*caitanya*) used to describe Brahman and then make the assessment that Brahman is all-knowing. The problem is that Brahman is not a 'conscious' subject, but rather consciousness in itself, and does not possess any subjectivity. For the sake of comparison, some have argued that Brahman includes the world. This position also does not make sense from the Advaita perspective. When Advaitins say that Brahman alone exists, they are not suggesting that the world exists within Brahman, just like the stars in the sky. Brahman is not a class, with the world being its particular. The world is not a quality of the Brahman.

One may then be tempted to compare God with Īśvara because several of the categories addressed above are indeed applicable to Īśvara, who is the omniscient and all-powerful creator of the world. Accordingly, the category theocosm, used to describe the world as identical to Brahman (Long, 2007), underscores positive attributes used to describe Brahman but fails to address the higher teachings where any conversation, particularly an affirming description, is a moot point. If someone says that the snake is but a rope, that does not confirm identity between the rope and snake. In the same way, if an Advaitin says the world is but Brahman, this does not lead to the concept of a 'theocosm.'

The theological approach that identifies Brahman with God likewise leads to a misconception. Rambachan (2015), for instance, in describing the category Advaita in terms that "not-two is not one," he is arguing in defense of Advaita as a form of panentheism and describing Brahman as both the material and efficient cause of the world. The idea of the 'world within Brahman,' with Brahman having both transcendent and immanent modes, might be appealing for the project of comparative theology, but the

fact of the matter is, this is not the Advaita of Śāṅkara. If our objective is to make an honest comparison, we have to first not impose the ideas that we like upon classical philosophers. As I have outlined above, the causality superimposed on Brahman is based solely on *vivartta*, an erroneous projection, and therefore Brahman is not a material cause like clay for pots or an efficient cause like a potter in making pots. And this is not even following Ajāti or Dṛṣṭisrṣṭi, the Advaita models that reject any form of causality. There is not a single model of Advaita that describes Brahman as being the material and efficient cause in the literal sense, for the category *vivartta* or false projection is unequivocally adopted by all Advaitins within the school of Śāṅkara. The mother of all misconceptions is to read Advaita along the lines that the Brahman intentionally self-multiplies to make the cosmos. What this entails is that Brahman has both intentionality and a possibility of multiplication, that is, it is spatio-temporally determined, for only entities that are spatio-temporally determined can multiply, and the sky therefore cannot multiply. This also entails that Brahman has subjectivity. In contrast, Advaita texts constantly repeat that *māyā/avidyā*, sometimes considered as identical and other times as different, is the material cause of the world. All narratives of creation are, in the absolute sense, mere metaphors to describe that all that exists is Brahman alone. Therefore, neither the identification that Brahman is 'full' or 'perfect,' or the statement that Brahman creates the world, are anything more than an interpretive device to instruct the singularity of Brahman. On the other hand, we can adopt the Sṛṣṭidṛṣṭi model and consider what is the real causation of the world, and in that case, we will have Īśvara as the cause for the world, albeit Īśvara does not create the world out of nothing, as he only allows the activation of *karmas* in the beginning of the creation cycle so that embodied beings can experience their corporeal presence and engage in the world accordingly.

If God is an initial mover, Brahman is not, for the already stated reasons that Brahman lacks subjectivity and is motionless. If we want to consider Īśvara as an initial mover, there is nothing "initial" in the Hindu paradigm, as creation is cyclical and beginningless. For Śāṅkara, there is no real creation. For other Hindu theologians, creation and dissolution are a constant process. Even when Īśvara is all-powerful, it is not perfect, for it becomes possibly contingent upon *māyā*, and its projection suspends; basically its reality collapses at the event of self-recognition. In the ultimate sense, Advaita rejects any possibility of motion, for the perfection of Brahman rests not just in being changeless, a category also applicable to God, but also in being non-agentive and non-temporal. If the argument is that Brahman is the most simple, non-composite One that causes all composite forms, we are imposing attributes applicable to material objects to Brahman. The simplicity of Brahman is comparable to that of the sky, and the sky is not the simple substance that aggregates in giving rise to complex forms. Accordingly, Brahman is not a class, a universal, of which the world would be a particular.

From the perspectives of pure existence and pure necessity, we can make an argument for the equation of God with Brahman. If the existence of things is to be derived from the pure basis of existence as Brahman, Advaitins would have no objection to this argument, given that this is only for a conventional understanding. In the absolute sense, the positive attribute of the existence of Brahman is only in order to negate the positive presentation of negation, as would have been maintained

by the Mādhyamika philosophers. But even the criteria of being “for itself” does not apply to Brahman, as Brahman is not a reason for the being of Brahman, neither does Brahman create the world for its purposes. Furthermore, if Brahman were to create the world for its purposes, this would make Brahman imperfect. Even in the case of Īśvara, his causality rests on *karma*, as he is agentive only in activating *kar-mas* and not in determining the fate of embodied beings.

Now one may wonder, how can we advance the project of comparative theology by delineating the incompatibility of categories? The response is simple: just like an entity can be defined by positive attributes by means of affirmation, or by negative attributes by means of negation, our comparison does not require a common ground, a common understanding. If we initiate our discourse on the basis of difference, we already accept originality in each culture. Social harmony is not the product of flattening our differences. Advaita never teaches that differences need to be expunged at the level of our conventional reality. Actually, conventional reality rests on the ground of difference. Our social co-existence depends on our ability to recognize our differences so that in the quest of finding universality, we stop imposing our perspectives onto the others. We can learn, modify, and refine our cultural categories, and for that, our cultural dialogues need to rest on the parameters of difference.

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