

Free Will,  
Agency, and  
Selfhood in  
Indian  
Philosophy

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## Self, Causation, and Agency in the Advaita of Śaṅkara

Sthaneswar Timalina

*[Brahman is] similar to the fire that has consumed the fuel. [It is] devoid of parts, free from actions, motionless, stainless, tranquil, and [is] the highest bridge to immortality.*

—ŚVETĀŚVATARA UPANIṢAD 6.19

*Arjuna! Even when in the body, this supreme and changeless self neither acts nor is attached [to the results of actions], because it has neither a beginning nor any guṇas.<sup>1</sup>*

—BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ 13.31

WHETHER SUBJECTS ARE autonomous in determining their own course of action is a thorny question with a range of different and often contradictory answers. This volume makes it clear that there is not one way to address this question, even within the schools of Indian philosophy. This essay examines the issue through the lens of Advaita Vedānta, the exegetical tradition that rests primarily on the Upaniṣadic literature. This essay also

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1. *anāditvān nirguṇatvāt paramātmāyam avyayaḥ [śarīraṣtho 'pi kaunteya na karoti na lipyate || Bhagavadgītā 13.31. Although I have translated the term nirguṇa here as "devoid of guṇas," I will be generally translating it as "devoid of properties," following Śaṅkara's understanding.*

illustrates that there is not one Advaita, as even Śaṅkara's school (710 CE)<sup>2</sup> develops multiple sub-schools that address the issue of agency in different ways. What readers need to keep in mind is that the historical context in which the issue of agency emerges in Advaita is different from the contemporary discourse on agency and free will. Although some arguments may reflect the contemporary Western debate, the pivotal arguments in Advaita arise from different and multiple cultural and philosophical contexts. To introduce the issue without a discussion of this background results in breaching multiple hermeneutic barriers. I will, therefore, provide such contextualization as a precursor for the specific consideration of agency. I cannot claim that this essay does full justice to the school of Śaṅkara; rather, it is a modest attempt to engage Advaita upon the issue of agency.

An agent endowed with free will may freely choose to shoot an arrow, but his freedom does not extend to determining the exact course of that arrow after it has been launched. Persons, for Śaṅkara, are placed in a chain of cause and effect that constitutes the world wherein the embodied subject undergoes the consequences of his previous actions while being autonomous in creating a new chain of events. Most schools of Indian philosophy accept this law of karma, and while doing so, they do not equate the experience of a karmic flow with a lack of agency. The concept of karma, either as actions and their consequences in general or as the acts prescribed by the Vedas, relies on an agent that is autonomous in determining whether or not to conduct such an act. Śaṅkara agrees that a cause exists behind every effect, but whether the events experienced in this life are the consequence of past actions or are determined by a free agent acting in the present time is a complex issue. If current actions are determined by the past ones, this leads to infinite regress, as those actions will also rely on previous ones. The problem becomes explicit when we realize that there are infinite previous lives and no primordial life that has initiated action. Advaitins therefore do not take this theory too seriously because following Advaita, this whole action-and-consequence paradigm becomes a moot point, since this philosophy challenges the absolute reality of both the transmigrating self and the phenomenal world that relies on actions and their effects.

2. I am not making any original claims regarding the dates of the scholars discussed in this paper. I am primarily relying on Potter 2011, Sastri 1984, and Thrasher 1993.

Similar to the Mādhyamika Buddhists (see Garfield in this volume), Śaṅkara adopts the model of describing reality in two tiers, consisting of the conventional (*vyāvahārika*) reality that corresponds to our phenomenal experiences and the absolute (*pāramārthika*) reality of the Brahman. The issue of agency arises in Śaṅkara's philosophy when he discusses phenomenal reality. However, he rejects the paradigm of agent and action when postulating the absolute viewpoint. This being the case, the dialectical context is crucial to understand Śaṅkara's arguments. On the one hand, when he engages the Mīmāṃsakas, he may appear to be rejecting the entire karmic complex that relies on the triad of agent, action, and effect, while, on the other hand, when he confronts the Buddhist philosophers, he will be defending the foundational consciousness whereby or wherein the chain of events manifests. Śaṅkara thus places himself in the middle. From the perspective of absolute reality, when establishing oneness of the phenomenal self and the absolute reality, the Brahman, he maintains that the self is devoid of agency. When engaging in his relative perspective, however, his is not a case of either free will or determinism: it is a compromise between free will and a mild determinism that is based on the karmic residue of an agent's previous actions that were effected with his own free will.

The philosophical background in which this issue evolves contains both ontological and soteriological aspects. At the ontological level, we will find Śaṅkara closer to his predecessor Gauḍapāda (600 CE) who proposed the doctrine of "non-origination" (*ajāti*) that reflects in some respects the position of the Mādhyamikas.<sup>3</sup> With an analogy of a dream, Gauḍapāda maintains that there is no actual origination in the Brahman that is free from any mutation. One needs to nonetheless be aware that Gauḍapāda's position of non-origination (*ajāti*) is not identical to the Mādhyamika position of absolute emptiness (*śūnyatā*). While accepting Gauḍapāda's teachings of non-origination at the absolute level, Śaṅkara is interested in engaging Advaita in the phenomenal level, and in addition to establishing the philosophical foundation, he is keen to address soteriological issues. In Gauḍapāda's philosophy (which is adopted by Śaṅkara as well), there is neither karma nor is there its applicability for liberation. This shift in understanding the role of karma in liberation clearly differentiates Śaṅkara's philosophy from the position of early Advaitins such as

3. For non-origination in Gauḍapāda's philosophy, see King 1995: 119–140.

Brahmadatta (660 CE) and Bhartṛprapañca (550 CE).<sup>4</sup> Śaṅkara maintains that the wisdom imparted by the Upaniṣadic sentences such as "you are that"<sup>5</sup> suffices to grant liberation independent of performing rituals or any other actions for that matter. For him, the self is devoid of action, and action and wisdom are as contradictory as light and darkness. On the contrary, the early Advaitins such as Bhartṛprapañca maintained that while the Upaniṣadic passages direct one toward some form of self-realization, one cannot dissociate from actions and actualize liberation. This position relies on the meta-thesis that the individual self is intrinsically dynamic, and the self qua Brahman emanates the world that is as real as the diversity of the branches of a tree or the waves of an ocean. These Advaitins therefore prescribe a course of contemplative practice that is generally identified as *prasāṅkhyāna*.<sup>6</sup> The heart of the problem is whether the self is dynamic or devoid of action: if the self is essentially dynamic, certain actions reveal its intrinsic nature and the agent is free to determine the course of action in a compromised way; if the self is static and devoid of action, no action can reveal its intrinsic nature. This issue will be further explored in the section on Sureśvara (740 CE).

Any discussion of agency is not possible without addressing action. If agents act, in other words if there exists any action, the question arises whether the agents are autonomous in such actions. On the other hand, if the self is devoid of action (as Śaṅkara maintains in the absolute sense), the issues of agent and the will to act are irrelevant. This absolute position of Śaṅkara reflects the philosophy of Gauḍapāda who maintains that there is no origination as such to ground the theory of cause and effect. The chain of events that we perceive in the world, following this paradigm, is a grand misconception, either defined in terms of a metaphysical illusion (*māyā*) or described in terms of subjective ignorance (*avidyā*). What exists in reality is just Brahman or the self. This self, due to forgetting its real nature, imagines itself both as agent and effects. The phenomenal world, or the reality as we see it, is the creation or imagination of this self.

4. For the philosophy of Bhartṛprapañca, see Nakamura 2004: 128–152; Timalina 2006: 156–169.

5. The hermeneutic distinction can be drawn from the Advaitins interpreting *tat tvam asi* (*Chāndogya* 6.8.7) independently of the initial sentence that can be interpreted as injunction.

6. *Prasāṅkhyāna* refers to the contemplative practice in Advaita where the specific thought, such as "I am Brahman" is repeated silently to actualize a deeper conviction. For discussion on this method, see Alston 1997: 187–191.

This imagination is twofold: at the subjective level, the self imagines itself as an agent engaged in action and as the locus of sensation; on the objective level, it constitutes the external reality that accommodates its own fancies. In this picture, behind every action and effect is desire, and behind desire exists a separation of the self from its original nature, the Brahman. The self distanced from its primordial nature, or confined due to ignorance that results in it having subjectivity, is identified by the term *jīva*. Just like a man covered in mud is still a man, the individual self is nonetheless always the Brahman. The defining characteristics of the Brahman are *sac-cid-ānanda*, "being, awareness, and bliss," and while the blissful nature is covered with the metaphoric mud of ignorance, being and awareness are constantly experienced even when the self undergoes bondage.

We first need to decide how to engage with the Advaita of Śaṅkara. On the phenomenal level, most of the categories acceptable to the Mīmāṃsakas (between the two sub-schools, I am keeping the Bhāṭṭas in mind here) are also acceptable to the Advaitins: they do not deny the subject-object duality and the actions and agencies that occur as a consequence of agency when immersed in common-sense experience. But leaving the categories of ordinary experience to the Naiyāyikas and the Mīmāṃsakas, Advaitins instead explore what lies beneath. If we address the issue of agency and free will while somehow bracketing this distinction between the ultimate and conventional levels of reality, we will be violating the fundamental premise of the philosophical system.

So when engaging the absolute perspective, we need to begin with what constitutes a person in Advaita. From the absolute viewpoint, the self qua Brahman is all that is there, and the issue of agency arises due to ignorance. Although there is no creation in this sense, if the absolute perspective is engaged to describe phenomenal reality, the entire manifestation is the projection of the self, independent of anything other than the self itself. When engaging the conventional perspective, agents are bound due to ignorance, and what these agents undergo is largely determined by their earlier actions. Even this determinism is relative, as these agents are endowed with the latent potential of self-realization and liberation. Due to self-imposed bondage, the phenomenal self undergoes karmic flux. There are two ways to understand karma: initial acts, where the acts of an agent will have certain consequences, and residual karma from previous lives that conditions current situations. *Avidyā* is a precondition for both to exist. Noteworthy, however, is that when addressing the efficacy

of karma, Advaitins mean the first. The scope of Advaita is not to explain why we are bound in the first place. Although they accept the law of karma and its consequences, they also maintain that there is no first beginning of the world. They engage the concept of karma only to explain the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Like the character Gregory Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the real quest of an agent is to be emancipated from bondage. And at this conventional level, the Advaita of Śaṅkara accepts agency and free will.

The fundamental issue, then, is how to understand creation so that we can engage the concept of being an agent in the world to examine the scope of determinism. Yet again, when considering the absolute Advaita viewpoint, no creation has ever occurred, while from the conventional viewpoint, creation has no first beginning. The notion that creation is circular without a first beginning is shared by most Indian philosophical systems. Relying on two different perspectives, Advaitins, on one hand, maintain that creation springs forth from the Brahman, while on the other hand, they also claim that there is no origination. In order to explore the Advaita position regarding causality, I will briefly summarize the pertinent issues addressed by Śaṅkara in his commentary upon the *Brahmasūtra* (BS).

### Śaṅkara on Causality

The issue of agency cannot be relevant if there is no causation as such, which, when engaged from the absolute viewpoint, is the case with Advaita. Whether the events are predetermined or whether agents are free is not an issue if there are no events or agents to begin with. Gauḍapāda adopts this absolute perspective that resonates with the Mādhyamikas. There is, however, no compromise among the Advaitins as far as the metaphysical foundation for the manifestation of subject-object duality is concerned. The self or Brahman is the precondition for any speculation, any being. No negation can nullify the Brahman, as even this act of negation relies on the negating subject. Expanding the scope of Advaita from the position of Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara attempts to provide a coherent picture of the world at the conventional level. There are a number of reasons that lead Śaṅkara to adopt this practical approach in addressing Advaita. If only the absolute viewpoint is maintained, there is no need of teachings since there is neither creation nor bondage. Furthermore, he could not engage in the classical philosophical battle and at the same time explore a rational approach

to the non-dual experience of Brahman without speaking of experience at the phenomenal level. Rather than the teachings in the absolute sense, it is this conventional position that provides a better platform for our discussion on topics such as agency.

When Śaṅkara states that the very Brahman is the cause of the world, comparing the world to the show of a magician, we should not conclude that he is describing creation. What we need to keep in mind is that the model of causality where the Brahman or the deep self gives rise to manifoldness without going through an actual transformation, addressed in terms of *vivartta*, is distinct from the actual causation where the effect has been transformed from its original state, addressed in Indian philosophy as *satkāryavāda* (if any original state existed). This is relevant only to the extent that something is phenomenally felt or experienced, although what is supposed to be felt is not ultimately ontologically “there” in Advaita. Even when terms such as “transformation” (*pariṇāma*) or “creation” (*śṛṣṭi*) are used, these philosophers do not accept ontological transformation. The first exegetical battle of Śaṅkara is therefore against the Sāṃkhya philosophers. For the Sāṃkhyas, as clearly explicated in Bryant’s essay in this volume, although the self or *puruṣa* is not an agent, it nonetheless is the enjoyer (*bhoktr*), and the insentient *prakṛti* causes a real mutation, *satkārya*. Therefore, the first challenge Śaṅkara faces is to reconcile the Upaniṣadic passages that contradict the doctrine of “non-origination” (*ajāti*), as many of them can be read as describing creation.<sup>7</sup>

Keeping this in mind, Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Brahmasūtra (BS) (2.2.1–10) counters the Sāṃkhya account of creation, rejecting their theory of actual transformation. While it is not necessary to address all these arguments here, it is noteworthy that his objections respond to the Sāṃkhya positions that accept (1) real causation and (2) insentient *prakṛti* as the cause of the world. Śaṅkara argues, what possible motives could insentient *prakṛti* have behind creation? *Prakṛti* is nothing but the three *guṇas*, none of which have any purpose of its own. Śaṅkara fundamentally disagrees with the premise that something insentient can act, since any “act” is directed toward achieving a goal and is carried out by a conscious agent. While Sāṃkhya does accept a proximity of the conscious self in initiating the chain of creation, Śaṅkara rejects this idea by saying that events are not

7. Śaṅkara’s first attempt is to demonstrate that, just like there are texts describing the Sāṃkhya model of causality, there also are texts proposing the monistic model where Brahman itself is the cause (BSbh 2.1.1–2).

caused by the mere proximity of an agent. If proximity could cause action and effect, coming close to a snake could poison an individual, and mere proximity could lead to conception. The Sāṃkhya strategy—keeping the self isolated from being actively engaged in causation while accepting a real transformation—is not acceptable to Śaṅkara, who carries the premise to its logical fallacy when he argues that *prakṛti* causing creation would be similar to grass turning into milk (without a cow or in proximity of a cow). While the rejection of the model of transformation could lead to a monistic paradigm of the early Advaitins wherein the Brahman emanates in the form of the real world just like gold in different forms of ornaments, Śaṅkara maintains that there is no actual transformation at all in the first place.

The problem for the Advaitins, then, is to describe everyday experience where there is causation, there are agents, and events happen in the world that do not seem to be erroneous. Śaṅkara first attempts to describe causation by maintaining that the Brahman is metaphysical source or ground of all causal relations. When this position is adopted, since the self is nothing but Brahman in reality, the self is autonomous in giving rise to the world of common-sense experience. In order to defend this monistic model, Śaṅkara has to justify the contrast between the insentient world and the Brahman that is also identified in terms of pure consciousness. This is because nothing that is radically different originates from something dissimilar: chickens do not lay mangos but eggs. Śaṅkara responds to this problem by saying that insentient effects originate from a sentient cause and vice versa: “It indeed is witnessed in the world that the insentient [effects] such as hair or nails originate out of persons established as sentient and the beetles et cetera [come out] of cow-dung, which is established as insentient.”<sup>8</sup> The opponent can argue, however, that the above example cannot describe the relation of the Brahman and the world because the examples of cause and effect share common properties while this is not the case here. Advaitins respond to this objection by saying that both the Brahman and the world share the fundamental constituent of “being” (*sattā*). Here, the opponent can argue further by saying that the Brahman is consciousness and the world is insentient, and if the insentient entities return back to the Brahman, this will pose a contradiction. Śaṅkara responds to this objection by saying that entities that are

8. *dṛśyate hi loke cetanatvena prasiddhebhyaḥ puruṣādibhyo vilakṣaṇānām keśanakhādīmām utpattir acetanatvena ca prasiddhebhyo gomayādibhyo vṛścikādīmām* | BSbh 2.1.6.

considered distinct from their cause, for example a pot, which is different from the soil that comprises it, are recycled back into the primordial substance without maintaining their individual identities. Brahmasūtra (2.1.21) utilizes the metaphor of a cloth to describe the distinction between cause and effect, comparing the Brahman to the wrapped cloth and the world to the spread cloth. This example describes the difference only in form and not in essence.

Since the arguments above lead to a monistic picture of the world that is identical to the Brahman, one can surmise that Śaṅkara does adopt some form of causality. However, a close reading of other passages provides a different picture. In the section entitled “The Beginning” (BS 2.1.14–20), Śaṅkara expands in great detail the theory that Brahman and its effects are identical. Some of the passages in this context are noteworthy for our discussion on agency. For example:

Plurality is displayed by false cognition.<sup>9</sup>

Just like the transaction in a dream is established as real before awakening, so also are all transactions, prior to the awareness of [the self] as the Brahman.<sup>10</sup>

The one bitten by a rope snake does not die. Neither are the purposes of drinking or plunging [into water] fulfilled by the mirage of water.<sup>11</sup>

This rejection of creation underlies the Advaita concept of the non-agency of the self. As Śaṅkara has addressed in BS (2.2.1–10), something insentient cannot be the cause, and if the self is considered the cause, it will have to undergo transformation. Advaitins maintain that Brahman and the phenomenal self are identical in essence. This being the case, if there were any creation, the phenomenal self could then be considered the autonomous personal creator of the world (BS 2.1.21). To prevent this conclusion, Śaṅkara responds that the Brahman transcends individuality because it is eternally pure, constantly free, and always in the state of

9. *mithyājñānavijrmbhitam ca nānātvam* | BSbh 2.1.14.

10. *sarvavyavahārāṅām eva prāgbrahmātmatāvijñānāt satyatopapatteḥ, svapnavyavahārasyeva prākprabodhāt* | BSbh 2.1.14.

11. *na hi rajjusarpeṇa daṣṭo mriyate | nāpi mṛgatṛṣṇikāmbhasā pānāvagāhanādirayojanam kriyāta iti* | BSbh 2.1.14.

liberation (*Brahmasūtraśāṅkarabhāṣyam* [BSbh] 2.1.22). One can further argue that the self is the creator with regard to the person who has realized the identity of the self and the Brahman. Śaṅkara counter-argues, “in that state, what is creation [there:]”<sup>12</sup>

The conversation above regarding causality is noteworthy for the argument that if by the term “self” (*ātman*) we mean the Brahman, then it is eternally free (and has no agency); but if this term is referring to the phenomenal self, then it is bound due to the karma generated by its own acts. Either way, there is no entity extrinsic to the self that determines its agency. A common Advaita metaphor is that of a silkworm that is caged inside its own cocoon. One needs to nonetheless keep in mind that the conversation regarding creation applies only on the phenomenal level. Śaṅkara reminds us repeatedly that the instances where creation is discussed are not meant to describe or endorse the notion of a real creation as such, but only to affirm the oneness of the Brahman and the world. For instance:

When we hear [the Vedas] as [describing] creation, one should also not forget that [this] is not [to propound creation] as an absolute object, because the [worldly] transaction is [just] the name and the form assumed due to ignorance, and [these passages are in fact] directed to establish identity with the Brahman.<sup>13</sup>

One can, then, say that this position is tantamount to accepting that the cognitive faculty (*buddhi*) is the cause of the world. The Advaitins would then be accepting that the mind is the sole cause of creation. If we read texts such as the *Yogavāsīṣṭha*, we encounter a similar position. This position in essence attributes to the mind its own agency. Śaṅkara is not willing to accept this position. In the section on “Agent” (BS 2.3.33–39), he expands upon the concept that a cognitive faculty cannot be the agent and gives the following reasons:

1. The injunctive sentences in the Vedas presuppose an agent that is distinct from the cognitive faculty to act on what has been enjoined.

12. *tatra kuta eva sṛṣṭiḥ?* BSbh 2.1.22.

13. *na ceyam paramārthaviṣayā sṛṣṭiśrutir avidyākālpitanāmarūpavyavahāragocarativāt, brah-mātmabhāvaprati-pādanaparativāc cety etad api naiva vismartavyam* | BSbh 2.1.33.

2. Accepting an agent that is other than the cognitive faculty is congruent with the Vedic passages that describe that the agent strolls out when in dream.<sup>14</sup>
3. The phenomenal self is described as the agent that retains information processed through the cognitive faculty.
4. There is a separation between agency and instrumentality, and if the cognitive faculty is considered the agent, this will contradict the above distinction.
5. The *samādhi* experience, which describes the state devoid of cognitive functioning, will not be established, if the phenomenal self is not considered distinct from the cognitive faculty.

The above discussion demonstrates Śaṅkara's willingness to engage his philosophy at the phenomenal level. Śaṅkara alludes to his position regarding agency with a brief statement pertaining to the phenomenal self: "There is no absolute autonomy of the self in carrying out actions, because [actions are] contingent upon space, time, and particular instruments. However, it is not [the case] that an agent will not have agency if it is dependent upon the accessories. A cook is still a cook even when he relies on wood, water, et cetera."<sup>15</sup> This position echoes that of the Grammarians, as Cardona has pointed out in this volume.<sup>16</sup> Here, instruments are distinguished from the agent in terms of his autonomy, although an agent cannot in practice carry out something in absence of the instruments. Returning to our discourse on the cognitive faculty, in which the independence of an agent similarly relies on instruments, the phenomenal self is autonomous, although it relies on its cognitive faculty.

In conclusion, according to Śaṅkara, the conventional agent is autonomous, albeit only at the conventional level of reality. The meta-narrative of Advaita, that all that exists is the Brahman alone and there exists no action

14. The analysis of dream to analyze reality comes frequently in the Upaniṣadic literature itself but receives prominence with Gauḍapāda. Noteworthy is the fact that the dream analogy leads the Mādhymikas to absolute emptiness, the Yogācārinś to the doctrine of momentary instances of cognition, and the Advaitins to the undifferentiated consciousness that has never come to any defilement.

15. *api cārthakriyāyām nātyantam ātmanah svātantryam asti, deśakālanimittaviśeṣāpekṣatvāt | na ca sahāyāpekṣasya kartuḥ kartṛtvam nivartate | bhavati hy edhodakādyapekṣasyāpi paktuḥ pakṛtvam* | BSbh 2.3.37.

16. Particularly the *sūtra* of Pāṇini, *svatantraḥ kartā (Aṣṭādhyāyī 1.4.54)*, is noteworthy for this discussion.

or agency at the absolute level, nonetheless remains untouched, as this statement supersedes all other statements. At the level of the Brahman, Śaṅkara wastes no time in discarding this "autonomous" agent, as the very concept of agency is a product of ignorance (*avidyā*) that needs to be shunned. The paradox generated by this view is apparent: when you are free (i.e., self-realized) you have no will to act, and when you have the will, your autonomy is compromised by *avidyā* and karma. As an agent in the form of the phenomenal self (*jīvātman*), the subject is under its own spell and its powers are limited, while, from the position of the Brahman, there is just the non-dual awareness that does not retain any agency or action. When we see creation and causality, we are bound and our actions are somewhat determined, but when we are liberated, there exists neither act nor agency. Advaitins therefore describe liberation in terms of an awakening, compared to waking up from a perpetual dream. From the Advaita standpoint, the discourse on the autonomy of an agent is a quest to alter one's own dreams, and the Advaitins are interested not in changing the dream but in waking up. In light of the higher awakening, there exists no agent or action and the issue of free will is a moot point.

### *Sureśvara on "Non-action" (naiṣkarmya)*

In the interests of brevity, I will address in this section only the arguments on agency that Sureśvara discusses in his "Establishment of Non-action" *Naiṣkarmyasiddhi* (NS). The focal point of this text is to establish that the comprehension of Vedic passages alone is sufficient for liberation. In his opinion, no meditative practice (or any action for that matter that relies on agency) stands between the understanding of sentences such as *tat tvam asi*, "you are that," and attaining liberation. This position emerges from the broader metaphysical position that the self qua Brahman is devoid of action, free from qualities and parts, and also that Brahman cannot be an effect of any action, as it cannot be originated, altered, reached, or transformed.

Various Advaitins prior to Śaṅkara, however, maintained that Brahman is active and the world is its modification. Brahmadatta, for instance, held that sentences such as *tat tvam asi* are to be interpreted in light of other Upaniṣadic passages such as "one should meditate upon the self."<sup>17</sup> If we

17. *ātmety evopāsīta* (Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad (BĀU) I.iv.7). For discussion, see Hiriyanna 1928: 1-9; Hiriyanna 1980: xxiii.

read sentences such as “you are that” as injunctions, this requires an agent with the will to act on them. Accordingly, the philosophers that maintain agency of the self hold that one has to act on the knowledge of the deep self to attain liberation. They argue that just as a mere understanding of the commands such as “one should offer *soma*” does not translate into acquiring virtue, so also is it with these Upaniṣadic passages. Action, in their opinion, is the only means to virtue. Congruent with this position, Bhartṛprapañca maintains that an infusion of knowledge and action (*jñāna-karma-samuccaya*) is mandatory for liberation.

Maṇḍana (690 CE) advocates a modified version of this position. The difference in Maṇḍana’s position is that he maintains that meditation gives rise to a different type of knowledge, a deeper knowledge compared to that of a mere linguistic comprehension. He thus accepts wisdom as the absolute means but also holds that this wisdom is a consequence of contemplation and not merely of comprehending the Vedic passages. The main argument of Sureśvara against this position is that all the means of veridical awareness (*pramāṇas*) are independent in giving rise to awareness. For instance, we do not rely on inference to confirm what has been directly apprehended; or, we do not need to touch the object to verify its smell when we receive the sensory information through our olfactory system. Along the same lines, if verbal testimony is accepted as a valid means of cognition, and this is the case with all these Advaita philosophers, then *śruti* should suffice in generating the corresponding awareness independent of any other means.

Mīmāṃsakas give a linguistic turn to this issue of Advaita soteriology, arguing that there is always an injunction in the Vedic texts, even in the context of declarative sentences such as “you are that.” This position is not acceptable to the Advaitins, and their response is that, while there are Vedic sentences that enjoin actions, the scope of the Upaniṣads is different; they are primarily meant to provide knowledge of Brahman. The sentences that establish the identity between the phenomenal self and Brahman are ones that just describe the facts, such as the sentence, “this is Mr. Fox.”

If there is a gap between knowing the deep self and being liberated from *saṃsāra*, this would suggest that something else is required for liberation besides simply knowing the self. While this is the case for Brahmadata, Sureśvara rejects this position. Simply put, Sureśvara argues that you do not meditate upon a rope once you realize that what you conceived of as a snake is in fact a rope. The liberation from fear of a snake does not

require meditation, as it is instantaneous to the realization that the object is just a rope. Sureśvara has no shortage of examples. He says that one does not make an extra effort to find the necklace that was lost once one realizes that it was right on the neck all along (NS 1.31), nor does the individual make an extra effort to remove the demon, once the person realizes that it is his own shadow (NS 1.32). Actions are similar to a child conceiving of a mascot as a real elephant (NS 1.59), or thinking of a stump as a thief (NS 1.60). For Sureśvara, both the duality in the form of subject and object, and the problems that arise from our misconceptions regarding the subject (thinking that I am the agent of such an act) and objects (desiring to acquire or avoid something) vanish once ignorance (*avidyā*) is removed: “Since liberation is only the removal of ignorance, action cannot be an instrument. Action does not remove ignorance, just as darkness [cannot remove the superimposed object] manifest in the dark” (NS 1.24).

Sureśvara argues that actions create, achieve, reform, or transform something. The liberated state is not something that you can create, alter, or transform. Actions thus cannot grant liberation (NS 1.52). When one is liberated, no ontological change has occurred. The removal of misconception only requires knowledge of the reality and not doing something about it. For Sureśvara, there is not even room for the fusion of action and wisdom as the means for liberation. In his opinion, this union is like that of darkness and light (NS 1.56, 66), completely incompatible.

Appealing to the example that fire cannot burn itself, Sureśvara rejects any agency in self-realization. His general point is that one cannot simultaneously be the agent and object of the same action. This argument stems from a refutation of the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsakas (NS 2.23–24).<sup>18</sup> One can argue that there is a fallacy in Sureśvara’s position, since counterexamples are available: one directly apprehends that “I am aware of myself.” Sureśvara argues that this mode of awareness is manifest in *buddhi* and therefore is a property of *buddhi* and not of the witnessing self. According to Sureśvara, what has been grasped when one objectifies the self is merely the inner modalities collectively identified as the “internal cognitive faculties” (*antaḥ-karāṇa*)<sup>19</sup>. The ego that has been objectified is thus a property,

18. Prābhākaras had already pointed out this particular objection against the Bhāṭṭas. For discussion, see Freschi’s chapter in this volume.

19. The term *antaḥ-karāṇa* collectively refers to *manas*, *buddhi*, *citta*, and *ahaṃkāra* that describe all the internal cognitive modalities. Mind, intellect, and egoity are its primary expressions.



and it belongs to the substrate wherein it appears. This ego is manifest in the internal cognitive faculty, and this faculty is not the phenomenal self. Therefore what is manifest to the experience, "I know myself," is not the self since it cannot be objectified, but rather the ego that is witnessed by the self in the background of the internal cognitive modality.<sup>20</sup> Sureśvara also does not accept the idea that the very self divides itself into two parts as the agent and object of cognition. If this position is accepted, Sureśvara points out that this will establish identity between the subject and the object (NS 2.26). Furthermore, if the self were to manifest as subject and object in different modes of time, there would be no subject to cognize it when it manifests as an object. Something cannot be called an "object of cognition" in the absence of an agent that cognizes it.<sup>21</sup>

One can argue that the ego (*ahaṃkāra*) is the property of the self, since even in realizing the Brahman, one states, "I am Brahman." Advaitins maintain that this identity is nothing more than the identity of the ego and the body superimposed on the *ātman* as is the case in the statement "I am slim." Sureśvara compares the sentence "I am Brahman" with the sentence "the stump is [in fact] a person" (NS 2.29). When one realizes that what one saw as a stump in the distance was in fact a person, this realization does not confirm the stump's presence. Along the same lines, what is mistakenly construed as an agent, when truly realized, is nothing but the non-agential Brahman. Sureśvara gives an additional reason to reject that the ego is the property of the self, saying that the ego would be then eternal, just like the self, if it were its property. And since its removal would not be possible, liberation would then be impossible (liberation being construed in all Indic soteriological traditions as freedom from the ego; NS 2.33).<sup>22</sup> Nor can one argue that the phenomenal self transforms into the Brahman just like a sour mango turns into a ripe and sweet mango, because the self is free from transformation (NS 2.34). Furthermore, the agency imposed upon the self is not permanent, as one can see its absence in the deep sleep state, and if the self were composed of impermanent properties, this would lead to the impermanence of the self.

For the Advaitins, then, the properties imposed on the self are similar to the property of fire imposed on a hot iron rod, when one says, "this rod

20. NS 2.25, and the *Candrikā* commentary thereon.

21. NS 2.27, and the *Candrikā* commentary thereon.

22. For discussion of the self having properties, see Bryant in this volume.

burns." In this example, although the rod is not fire, the property of burning inherent to fire has been superimposed (*adhyasta*) on the rod. In essence, the phenomenal agent finds himself with different subjective identities, having external properties superimposed on him. The deep self, on the other hand, transcends these changing identities. The soteriological aspect of this removal of agency lies in the elimination of attachment that arises from the ego being linked with objects. This leads in consequence to the rejection of the phenomenal self in Advaita. As Ram-Prasad (2011: 229) points out, "the 'I' itself is part of egoity; everything about it is made up. The 'I' simply does not pick out *ātman*." Whether arguing that the true self cannot act or following the rejection of the "I," the issues of agency and free will do not occupy a relevant space within the domain of Advaita metaphysics from its perspective of ultimate reality.

One of the central Advaita premises is that the deep self, identical to consciousness, is immediately given in every mode of experience. Whether or not concepts exist in ultimate reality, the self that is witnessing the being or nonbeing of concepts is always there. Relying on this premise, Sureśvara argues that the phenomenal world that comprises agents, acts, and objects of cognition—and indeed, cognition itself—rests on the ignorance of the true self. The manifestation of this ignorance is a consequence of the self not being aware of itself. This being the case, the phenomenal world manifests in the very platform of the self qua consciousness.<sup>23</sup> For Sureśvara, the self is transcendent to the triad of the subject, object, and act of cognition, and while it is witnessing the events of cognition, it does not in itself undergo these events (NS 2.108).

According to Sureśvara, both the body and the agent are contingent upon higher cognitive mechanisms to be affirmed as phenomenally existing. Just as experiencing the body entails the existence of sense organs, so also does the experience of oneself as the subject necessitate the deep self (NS 3.56). This experience is the superimposition of the ego upon the deep self—the superimposition which constitutes agency—akin to the superimposed properties between fire and the iron rod (NS 3.59). One can argue that if the ego is placed among external objects, why do we not say "I am experienced" instead of "I experience"? Sureśvara responds to this question by saying that the concept of agency arises being contingent upon external objects that are to be

23. Synthesized from NS 2.96 and Sureśvara's auto-commentary thereon.

grasped by the internal cognitive complex (*antaḥ-karaṇa*).<sup>24</sup> To the question, why does this ego not appear equivalent to the external objects?, Sureśvara responds that there is no subject anticipating the act of objectifying the ego (NS 3.60–61). In other words, the transcendent self does not act or objectify anything, and there is no other higher mechanism to cognize this ego and make it as its object. In fact, it is not even the nature of the self to witness entities, as there are no entities to be witnessed in reality. One may then ask, “how is the internal cognitive modality cognized?” Sureśvara responds to this by proposing two tiers, where the deep self is conditioned by the concept of “I” and this phenomenal self is what grasps the internal cognitive modality.

It is due to ignorance (*avidyā*) that agency is perceived and has been witnessed by the self. In the deep sleep state, although there is latent ignorance, it is not active, and so there is no subject or object to be witnessed. Since there never is an absence of the self, the Upaniṣadic sentences only affirm what is already there. This can be compared to the statement, “you are the tenth.”<sup>25</sup> A common example in Advaita, this sentence epitomizes the narrative of ten people crossing the river and counting heads to make sure that all have crossed the river alive. Coincidentally as everyone counts only the others and not themselves, they come up with only nine. Seeing the group of quizzical travelers, the wise man points out that the counting subject had forgotten to include himself in the total. In another example, if a prince is raised by a hunter since early childhood, he will assume himself to be a hunter. The sentence, “you are the prince” does not create a prince out of a hunter, but only helps to remove the misconception of the prince regarding himself and allows him to regain his lost identity. Just like there is no action sought in the case of the prince believing himself to be a hunter, actions are inconsequential with regard to liberation.

### *Alternate Models of Causation in Advaita*

Setting aside the issue of agency and action as a precondition for liberation, the issue of causation and an allied question of the possible scope of the self’s creative potential warrant deeper analysis. If we closely read

24. *evam tāvad avidyotthasyāntaḥkaraṇasya bāhyaviṣayanimittarūpāvacchedāyāhanvrttir vyāprijate* | NS 3.59, auto-commentary of Sureśvara.

25. This example is common in Advaita literature after Śaṅkara. Sureśvara, for instance, uses this example in *Taittirīyavārttika* 2.8.77; 2.1.39; *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣadbhāṣyavārttika* 1.1.208; 1.4.602; and NS 3.64.

various Advaita texts on these issues, we come to realize that there is not one single philosophy that we can call Advaita. Relying on some common categories, Advaitins develop distinct models that respond to different challenges raised by different schools of Indian philosophy. I will offer a brief treatment of the alternate models of causation given by Advaitins so that we can contextualize the issue of agency in a broader sense.

The Advaitins subsequent to Śaṅkara respond in multiple ways to the question “what level of agency do the subjects (*jīvas*) enjoy in giving rise to the phenomenal world?” This diversity stems from their positions regarding ignorance (*avidyā*). Although all the Advaitins maintain that individuality is due to *avidyā*, not all explain its scope the same way. Maṇḍana, who most likely was a senior contemporary to Śaṅkara,<sup>26</sup> maintains that the substrate of ignorance (*avidyā*) is the individual self and not the Brahman. The very Brahman is perceived as conditioned and in the form of the world by the subjects undergoing *avidyā*. It needs to be noted at this point that the term *avidyā* refers both to misperception and non-perception. So, due to *avidyā*, persons not only do not see the way things are (as the singular Brahman) but also perceive them otherwise (as the phenomenal world), thus sustaining a grand illusion of cause and effect. The plurality of the phenomenal selves, following the model of Maṇḍana and Vācaspati, is due to multiple *avidyās*, with each person being confined by her own *avidyā*. Although this model will not settle the issue of whether subjects enjoy free will, it nonetheless gives scope to the notion of subjects who construct their own reality. The reality as we see it is either a causation of an individual self (one understanding of the Advaita model that there exists a single phenomenal self) that projects its own world like in a dream or hallucination, or a collective causation, a transaction in the world. Just as subjects are diverse with distinct interests, so also is the world manifold. The world as we see it is thus our own collective creation, constructed by our responses to particular events, our embodied states, and our active engagement in the world.

Even when this perspective that provides some apparent agency and creative initiative to the self that projects a world of experience is adopted, the agent still undergoes the consequences of his previous karma. Following Advaita, people are miserable, simply put, because they put themselves in misery. According to this perspective, the material cause behind the

26. For the time of Maṇḍana, see Sastri 1984. For the philosophy of Maṇḍana, see Thrasher 1993; Acharya 2006.

world, *avidyā*, is the power inherent to the Brahman. Brahman, as previously identified, is consciousness in itself. Following Maṇḍana, the self or the Brahman is also capable of being ignorant of itself or of knowing itself other than what it really is. This, however, does not require that Maṇḍana accepts real causation as understood in the world of common experience. The noteworthy element in this position is that there is no ultimate causation, and the world of common-sense perception is collectively *construed* as such by the *jīvas*. On the other hand, following Padmapāda (740 CE) and Prakāśātman (975 CE), the founders of the Vivaraṇa sub-school of Advaita, the Brahman is the locus of *avidyā*, and not the individual selves. However, if by agency we mean the subjectivity imposed upon the phenomenal selves, the above model of Advaita proposed by Maṇḍana provides a higher autonomy, since these subjects collectively construe their own reality.

Besides the phenomenal selves that experience agency, Advaitins identify another category, that of Īśvara (or Hiranyagarbha), broadly interpreted as the collective ego. This collective subject enjoys the highest level of autonomy, as it is the free will of this agent that gives rise to the phenomenal world. However, this collective self is not the agent whose free will is under consideration. In order for us to address the agency of the phenomenal self, we need to bracket this meta-agent or Īśvara from the discourse.

In order to contextualize agency in Advaita, it is essential for us to comprehend the relation of the phenomenal self to the collective self identified as Īśvara. For the Advaitins, Brahman does not have selfhood or agency of any sort. When this transcendent category assumes selfhood, it experiences itself as Īśvara. Advaitins have a varied response to how this collective self is related to individual agents. According to Sureśvara, the very Brahman when conditioned by *avidyā* assumes the collective subjectivity of Īśvara and when conditioned by *buddhi* becomes the phenomenal self. This position, however, is not acceptable to many other Advaitins. Sarvajñātman (1027 CE), for instance, rejects the idea that Īśvara is pure consciousness delimited by *avidyā*. Pure consciousness, for him, is like the surface, where what is reflected due to *avidyā* is Īśvara. In his opinion, Brahman or pure consciousness is both the substrate and the object of *avidyā*. Following this model, the plurality of the phenomenal self is due to the plurality of the cognitive faculty and not *avidyā*. On the other hand, Prakāśātman maintains that the phenomenal self is consciousness reflected upon ignorance that is conditioned by the internal cognitive modalities. The varied scope of the phenomenal self within Advaita

demonstrates the problem in identifying one Advaita position regarding agency as definitive.<sup>27</sup>

One of the reasons for introducing the Advaita concept of Īśvara (or Hiranyagarbha) here is that some Advaitins maintain that this Īśvara is actually the single phenomenal self (*jīva*), and what maintains individuality and agency is the individual's mind (*antaḥ-karaṇa* to be precise). This means that what we have considered to be the self is merely a reflection of the self (the mirror image of the self in our mind), where what is meant by the self is the individuated state of Brahman. Noteworthy is the fact that the mind is not a beginningless entity, in contrast to the phenomenal self. Although Advaitins maintain that individuality is a consequence of *avidyā* conditioning the Brahman, they consider the relation between Brahman and *avidyā* as beginningless. This makes the agency underlying the phenomenal self as beginningless. However, this is not the case if agency is linked merely with the mind. This position of Advaita heads to the direction of the more radical form of subjective idealism.

This gloss does not sufficiently detail the nature of the phenomenal self in Advaita, nor is this the place for that. What is explicit, nonetheless, is that not all Advaitins agree upon what constitutes a person. While these differences appear to be minor exegetical divergences, a closer study reveals that they give rise to different epistemologies. The following statements are very distinct: (1) a person is the mirror image of the Brahman, similar to the sun reflected in multiple puddles and (2) a person is the very Brahman conditioned by ignorance, similar to the space conditioned by the walls inside the house. In all contexts, Advaitins maintain that subjectivity is phenomenal and also that, in whatsoever form, *avidyā* does play a role in constituting this subjectivity. It is not necessary that the subject is whatever he believes himself to be. Just because the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi dreamt of himself as a butterfly does not make him a butterfly, even if that is what he believed himself to be while in the dream.

There are ample examples in texts such as the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* that resonate with the dream of Zhuangzi. But the characters in this text do not just simply "have" a dream; instead, through some spell or their own yogic abilities, they actually enter those states. If we consider the example of Gādhī,<sup>28</sup> the protagonist does not simply find himself in his alternate subjective state,

27. For discussion of the different models of Advaita, see Timalisina 2006: 20–42.

28. *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, Upaśama Prakaraṇa, chapters 44–50.

but this parallel existence is subsequently affirmed even when the character returns to his previous identity. In this narrative, Gādhī wishes to experience the illusive power (*māyā*) of Viṣṇu, and he soon finds himself in a strange situation. When he entered the waters to take a bath, he experiences his death and a rebirth in a lower-caste family. When grown up, this alternate Gādhī becomes the king and eventually gets rejected when the people learn about his bloodlines. When he immolates himself upon finding this turn unbearable, he wakes up to his previous identity. While recovering from this dreamlike experience, a guest verifies the narrative of an actual kingdom ruled by a lower-caste individual where the king kills himself. Further puzzled by this affirmation, Gādhī embarks upon an adventure to explore that kingdom. The narrative comes to the climax with the protagonist finding his abandoned home and the forsaken kingdom. In the narrative of Līlā,<sup>29</sup> the protagonist goes to the parallel world to meet her deceased husband only to find him as a king engaged in battle. The narrative takes a turn with the protagonist finding her identical twin in this parallel world. She convinces the king and another Līlā to join her in her homecoming. This utterly fictional nature of reality that maintains equal status to the common-sense experience is what gives rise to the Advaita model of “creation as seeing” (*dr̥ṣṭisr̥ṣṭivāda*).<sup>30</sup> Creation, following this model, is identical to awareness, or alternatively, perceptual modes. Although this model of Advaita accommodates both single and multiple agents,<sup>31</sup> if a single phenomenal self is considered, all events are merely the manifestation of the will of this agent. This model can accommodate the highest degree of autonomy as far as phenomenal reality is concerned. The consequence of adopting this model of Advaita is that there will be no categorical difference between dreams and

29. *Yogavāsīṣṭha*, Utpatti Prakaraṇa, chapters 15–68.

30. One way of understanding this model of Advaita is that creation is coincidental to perception (*dr̥ṣṭisamakālīnā sr̥ṣṭih*). When this position is adopted, the term *dr̥ṣṭi* is interpreted as perception and not pure consciousness. Following another interpretation, pure consciousness itself is creation (or the reality beneath whatever is assumed to be creation). Following the second model, the term *dr̥ṣṭi* is understood as pure consciousness (“seeing in itself”). When the Advaitins utilize the analogy of a dream to demonstrate creation, it appears at the first glance that they are describing the first model of *dr̥ṣṭisr̥ṣṭi*. However, they often add a note that whatever is considered to be a dream (both the dreaming subject and the dream entities) is nothing but consciousness in itself, manifest as both subject and object. Even when adopting *dr̥ṣṭisr̥ṣṭi*, Advaitins do not compromise their grand narrative of Brahman as the absolute reality, and this is what keeps them distinct from their Yogācāra counterparts. For an extensive treatment of this model of Advaita, see Timalina 2006.

31. For discussions regarding the single-*jīva* model of Advaita, see Timalina 2009: 34–49.

these kinds of creations, as both have the same subjective validity. The subjects are nevertheless autonomous in their imagination, and the scope of this fancy includes bondage and liberation, subjects experiencing collective and individual egos (*īśvara* and *jīva*), and subjects and objects. When adopting this position, the entire phenomenal manifestation crumbles when ignorance is removed, that is, when the daydream has finished.

### Conclusion

It is not possible to limit the scope of agency in the varied landscape of Advaita to one single model. According to the early Advaitins, some of whom also authored Mīmāṃsā literature, the self is active, liberation<sup>32</sup> is a consequence of action (in the sense of both everyday and ritual acts) as much as knowing, and the world is one mode of Brahman, just like a gold necklace consists of gold. On the other hand, according to Gauḍapāda, the self that is identical to the absolute is inactive, and there never has been any origination—all forms of causation or creation are illusory. While Śaṅkara attempts to negotiate between these two viewpoints, the commentarial literature maintains some of these early divergences. Keeping Gauḍapāda’s teachings in the background, Śaṅkara reconciles with the realists by introducing the concept of conventional reality (*vyāvahārika*). Within this scope, there is an agent, and although mediated, this agent is nonetheless autonomous in determining his action. If the reality of convention is a fiction, the role is negotiated between the collective (*Hiraṇyagarbha*) and the individual selves. If individuals are merely dream objects, their autonomy is inconsequential. On the other hand, if the individuals are the authors of their fiction (one way of reading *dr̥ṣṭisr̥ṣṭi*), they enjoy a negotiated autonomy (as creation is each individual’s imagination and these are shared). On the other hand, following the doctrine of *ekajīva*, the agent is absolutely autonomous, if a single ego is considered to be the agent. In the absolute sense, the single agent or these agents are autonomous only to the extent that their creation is perceived to actually exist; as far as the absolute reality is concerned, Brahman does not undergo any creation. Just like the protagonist in Borges’s *The Circular Ruins*, the agent

32. The early Mīmāṃsakas were not focused on the issue of liberation. Their concept of *niḥśreyas* concerns going to *svarga* rather than realizing the self and being liberated from the chain of karma. The Advaitins, with an influence of Mīmāṃsā, incorporate karma while accepting the concept of liberation.

here finds his autonomy in constructive dreaming. There nonetheless is the moment of realization. The subject that considered himself to be the agent now realizes as the self undivided in the modes of subject and object. In this moment uninterrupted by any rupture, there lies just pure consciousness, undifferentiated, self-aware, and blissful.

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