

Rebutting Differences: A Non-dual Endeavour

Anupam Chowdhury

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Dept. of Philosophy,
Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India
Email: anupam.juphil@gmail.com

Abstract: The non-dualists of the Vedāntic tradition of Indian Philosophy put forward an infrangible *abheda* or non-difference between *brahman*, the absolute consciousness and *jīva*, the individual consciousness. But this goes against one's mundane experience. The individual sentient beings necessarily do not experience themselves as the absolute. Moreover, other schools of the Vedānta do not subscribe to this view and for them, the relation between *jīva* and *brahman* happens to be that of part and whole. Some also opine *brahman* to be the controller and the *jīva* to be the controlled. Whatever be their individual standpoint, they unanimously refuse and refute the non-dualistic notion of non-difference between the *brahman* and the *jīva*. At the root of this, lies various apparently contradicting śruti-vākyas. At some places, the śruti denotes identity of *jīva* and *brahman* and at other places, it directly speaks of their difference. This discourse aims at an analysis and logical establishment of the Advaitin's viewpoint that just as an object and its reflection are not different from each other, so are *brahman* and *jīva*.

Keywords: abheda, advaita, bimba, brahman, jīva, pratibimba.

Introduction

Considering this world of duality as *mithyā* or illusory, the śruti considers *brahman* to be the one and absolute reality. And the *mahāvākyas* like “*tat tvam asi*” (*Chāndogyopanishad* 6.8.7), “*aham brahmāsmī*” (*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 1.4.10) etc. explicitly resonate the fact that *jīva* or the individual sentient beings are, by nature, non-different with the absolute *brahman*. But there are śruti-vākyas which directly imply that both the entities are quite different from each other. For instance, śruti might be taken to clearly depict *bheda* between *jīva* and *brahman* when it emphasizes that *ātman* or *brahman* alone is to be known, “*ātmā vai are draṣṭavyah!*” (*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 2.4.5), thereby distinguishing the *jīva* as the knower and the *brahman* as the known. Even the *smṛtiśāstra* too goes upto the extent of avowing that the individuals and the absolute are distinct in such a way that the individuals are parts of the absolute – “*mamaivāṁśo jīvaloke jīvabhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ*” (*Śrīmadbhāgavadgītā* 15.7).

Thus, due to the presence of contradicting scriptural statements, there arises a doubt as to whether *jīva* and *brahman* are identical with each other or not. Also, the mundane experience of the individual sentient beings contradicts the assertion that they are non-different from the absolute consciousness *brahman*. No *jīva* necessarily considers oneself as identical with any absolute whatsoever, as their experience itself makes them believe that they are stipulated beings. Moreover, although the advaita vedāntins opt for an inviolable *abheda* between *jīva* and *brahman*, the two sects of it define and analyze the nature of that *abheda* in distinct ways. The bhāmati faction define the nature of that *abheda* by *avacchedavāda*, considering the *jīva* to be like the space enclosed by a pitcher and the *brahman* to be like the unstipulated all-pervading ether where both the spaces are *abhinna* or non-different but they appear to be different due to the presence of *avacchedaka* or delineator.

On the other hand, the vivaraṇa faction explain the nature of the *abheda* through *bimbapratibimbavāda*, where the *brahman* is that actuality which gets reflected, and the reflection is the *jīva*. As the reflection is devoid of any distinct reality apart from that which is being reflected, *bimbapratibimbavāda* too depicts the nature of the *abheda* quite convincingly.

Yet the doubts do not get ruled out completely, firstly regarding the issue whether both the identities are non-different or not and secondly, if they are considered to be non-different, what must be the nature of the non-difference. This philosophical problem has been analyzed gradually in the upcoming sections of this paper.

Resolving the Problem of Stochasticity

Due to the presence of such contradicting scriptural statements, the *pūrvapakṣī* or the opponents might try to establish that there exists no consistent relation between *jīva* and *brahman*. To this, Saṅkarācārya replies that the relation of *upakārya-upakāraka* or propagated and propagator persists between the two by saying that, “*jīveśvarayoh upakāryopakārakabhāvah iti uktah*” (Saṅkarācārya 689). It might be excogitated that such relation can be usually seen in two cases – firstly between retainer and master, where the retainer is aided, subordinate and slave to the master who is the aider and secondly between spark and fire, where spark is a part and fire is the whole. Question arises as to alike which of the aforementioned two, is the relation between *jīva* and *brahman* to be understood. To this one might say that the relation between *jīva* and *brahman* can be understood to be alike the relation between retainer and master where the former is aided and governed by the latter, which is the aider and the governor, in both the cases.

Such ratiocination might get strongly refuted by the advaitins as it demands the acceptance of an actual *bheda* between both the entities. If such actual *bheda* is admitted, it would lead to a direct refutation of the *abhedapratipādikā śrutivākyas*, and that happens to be wholly unacceptable. Advaitins rather accentuate the relation between *jīva* and *brahman* to be alike spark and fire, considering the *jīva* to be part of *brahman*, the whole. In this regard, Saṅkarācārya says “*jīvah īśvarasya amśah bhavitumarhati, yathā agneh visphuliṅgah*” (Saṅkarācārya 690). It might still be objected that *brahman*, unlike fire, is *niravayava* or formless and it might be quite imbecilic for the advaitins to think of parts of a formless entity. To such remonstrance, Saṅkarācārya says “*amśah iva amśah*” (Saṅkarācārya 690). That is to say, *jīva* must be understood as an imaginary or notional part of *brahman*, just as to the space enclosed by a pitcher is a notional part of the greater space. As the space enclosed by the pitcher is non-different with the greater space and their part-whole relation is imaginary, so is the *jīva* non-different with the *brahman* and their part-whole relation too is imaginary.

Establishing *Jīva* as a Notional Part by *Śrutivākyavicāra*

The formless all-pervading *brahman* cannot itself be *jīva* by nature, as *śruti* speaks of their difference too – “*amśo nānāvyapadeśāt*” (Vādārāyaṇa 688). *Śruti* distinctly depicts the difference when it says “*sah anveṣtavyah sah vi-jījñāsitavyah*” (Chāndogyopanishad 8.7.1), that is, *brahman* must be sought for and questioned for very specifically, or when it says “*evam eva vidiτva munirbhavati*” (Brhadāranyakopaniṣad 4.4.22), that is, knowing the *brahman*, one becomes a sage, etc. and such *bhedapratipādikā śrutivākyas* would fall futile and otiose if there had not been some difference between the two entities. But it might be objected that the *advaita-siddhānta* would not stand as the differences stated here

imply actual difference, as in the case of a retainer and the master, and not any imaginary or notional difference devoid of actuality – “*ayam nānāvyapadeśah sutarām svāmibhṛtyasārūpye yujyate itt*” (Saṅkarācārya 690-691).

Envisioning such opposition, Vādarāyana says that *śruti* also speaks of the non-difference of the two entities by saying “*anyathā cāpi*” (Vādarāyana 688). The *Brahmasūkta* of the *Atharva Veda* avers the *dāśakitavādibhāva* of *brahman* where the non-difference between *jīva* and *brahman* has been denotatively explicated by maintaining that the emperors, slaves and gamblers, all are *brahman* – “*brahma dāśāḥ brahma dāśāḥ brahmaiva ime kitavāḥ*” (*Brahmasūkta* of *Atharvaveda* as mentioned in Saṅkarācārya 691). By speaking of all such categories of beings and asserting them to be *brahman*, the *śruti* surely speaks of an *abhedā* or non-difference between *jīva* and *brahman* as it does when it asserts that there is no other *drāṣṭā* or perceiver other than *brahman* – “*na anyah atah asti drāṣṭā*” (*Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 3.7.23).

Now, it is to be understood that although the *śruti* speaks about both difference and non-difference between *jīva* and *brahman*, yet both the entities cannot be logically different as well as non-different from each other. But denying either of the assertions would lead to violation of *śrutivākyas* and that would be undesirable on the part of any *vedavādins*. Therefore, in order to protect the authority of the *vedas*, either of the assertions needs to be analyzed and explained alternatively.

Debates arise again on the issue that which of the two assertions is to be analyzed alternatively, and the *advaitins* hold that *bhedā* or difference between the two is grasped in our mundane experience itself. *Śruti* happens to be *ajñātāpratipādikā* or corroborator of the subject matters that are not experienceable. Espousing this feature of *śruti*, the non-difference of the two entities must be understood in its actual sense. And therefore, alternatively analyzing the scriptural assertions concerning the difference between the two entities, it must be construed that the difference is merely imaginary and *jīva* happens to be notional part of *brahman*.

A Logical Endorsement

The notion part-whole relation or absence of any actual and extreme difference between *jīva* and *brahman* can also be logically proved. Grounded on the *hetu* that both *jīva* and *brahman* are *cidrūpa* or by nature consciousness, it might be asserted that both are devoid of extreme difference from each other. The inference might be formed like - *jīvobrahmaṇaḥ nātyantam bhidyate cidrūpatvāt brahmavat*. The apparent difference between the two lies in the name and the form which the *jīva* possesses and which the *brahman* is devoid of. The difference between spark and fire lies in their particular names and forms. Keeping them apart, spark is nothing separate from fire, as both are characterized by hotness or warmth. In the same way, just as spark is a (notional) part of fire and is yet not extremely different from it, so is *jīva* an imaginary part of *brahman*, lacking any actual distinction from it. The inference can be structured as – *jīvabrahmabhayacaitanye abhinne amśāmśibhāvāpannasvabhāvatvāt agnivisphulingayoh uṣnatāvat*.

An Unenviable Outcome and Its Solution

Considering a (notional) part-whole relation between *jīva* and *brahman* has its own drawbacks. The objection might be raised that if individual sentient beings are considered to be parts of the absolute consciousness *brahman*, then the absolute would lose its nature of bliss and get inflicted by the sorrows and sufferings of every individual and thereby become *mahadduhkhī* or victimized by greater sor-

rows. If a man's toes ache, the man himself gets bothered by the pain and suffering and this happens because those hurting toes are parts of him. In the same manner, if individual sentient beings are considered to be distinct parts of *brahman*, then *brahman* would obtain the totality of sorrows and sufferings of all of its distinct parts and become subject to greater agonies. It can be inferred that – *īśvarah svāmīśaduhkhaiḥ duḥkhīḥ amśitvāt devadattavat*.

Sincere attempts have been made by the advaitins to solve this issue by establishing that individual sentient beings are *aupādhika* parts of *brahman*. The *upādhis* of mind, intellect etc. are effects of ignorance and those cause suffering on the *upahita* only, i.e. the *jīva*. The *jīva* being a notional part of the *brahman*, it cannot be objected that *brahman* too obtains the sorrows of the individuals. From the *pāramārthika* point of view, even the *jīvas* cannot be subject to sorrows and sufferings as they suffer as a result of ignorance and not as a result of part-whole relation with various body parts.

At this place, a *sāṅkaryya* or overlapping of individual beings' deeds and *karmaphala* might be warranted as all the beings have been established as imaginary parts of the same absolute consciousness. The advaitins resolve that issue by stating that each individual might be identical in that aspect, but from the aspect of the distinct *avacchedaka* or delimiters, all individuals are surely distinct. The mind and intellect of all individuals vary and that is what makes every individual *avacchinna* or stipulated. Therefore, there remains no room for any sort of overlapping.

Brief Account of the *Bimbapratibimbavāda*

The account of *avacchedavāda* might seem quite dissatisfying and therefore, for the purpose of an all-round explication and settlement of the philosophical problem, Vādarāyaṇa says “*ābhāsa evaca*” (Vādarāyaṇa 709). That is to say, *jīvas* are necessarily the reflections of one absolute consciousness, *brahman*. The śruti asserts the alikeness of *brahman* in every *jīva* – “*rūpam rūpam pratirūpah babhūva*” (Kathopaniṣad 2.2.9). This might be aptly grasped when individuals are considered to be reflections of the absolute and not parts of it. One moon that gets reflected in millions of water-bodies, forms similar reflections in all of it. Similarly, one absolute consciousness, *brahman*, gets reflected in multiple *antahkarana* and appears as many and yet, it is that same consciousness which shines in every being – “*eka eva tu bhūtātmā bhūte bhūte vyavasthitah, ekadhā bahudhācaiva drśyate jalacandrapat*” (Brahmabindu Upaniṣad 12).

The reflections, although they appear distinctly, do not have a separate entity other than that which is being reflected. The reflection is never perceived in the absence of what is being reflected. This shows that the reflection is devoid any actuality apart from the original object. Thus is the nature of the relation between *jīva* and *brahman*.

Abhedasiddhi* through *Bimbapratibimbavāda

It might be said that face and its reflection are non-different on the ground of their *bimbapratibimbabhāva*, and therefore on the same ground, the non-difference of *jīva* and *brahman* can be established. The inference can be structured as *jīvabrahmanoḥ bimbapratibimbavat aikyatvat mukhapratimukhavat*, or, *jīvabrahmanoḥ na bhidyate bimbapratibimbavat mukhapratimukhavat*. To this one might say that, the instance of face and its reflection being non-different from each other is fallacious because clear-cut distinction can be drawn between a person and his reflection both by himself and other persons.

To such objections, it is replied that they may apparently seem to be distinct

from each other but on logical analysis, their non-difference would be revealed. When a person sees another person inattentively on the streets and sees the same person again inside the house, he might at first doubt whether it is the same person or a different one. On a closer look at the features of the other person, the seer recognizes him. In the same way, the body that is seen in actuality is recognized in the mirror with the help of its features.

It might be repugned that, reflections do not always prove identity of the two as in the case of an unclear reflecting medium where the reflection is too hazy to recognize. Such objections are dealt with by stating that “*sarvatrāpratītāvapi nirmaladarpanādāveva tatsiddhayā drṣṭāntasiddheḥ*” (Madhusūdanasarasvatī 1191). That is to say, the instances do comply with reflecting mediums which are able to produce cognizable images and not the ones incapable of doing so.

Further contentions might be raised on the issue that recognition presupposes cognition, as for without cognition there is no recognition. Now, one never cognizes one's face and forehead except through reflection. In that case, how might one recognize the reflected face as one's own. To this, it might be answered that at the first moment the reflection is grasped as a cognition of one's face and from the second moment recognition can occur without any issue. What appears beside the setting sun when seen from the seashore is not a second sun but the reflection of that sun itself. But as the reflector is not identified distinctly, both are misapprehended to be different. Even a child misapprehends his/her own reflection as another child due to lack of clear and distinct identification of the reflector. On the contrary, when standing in front of a mirror while clearly and distinctly identifying the reflector, that makes it possible for one to say that it is his/her own face reflected in the mirror. The distinct identification of the reflector paves the path for *abhedasiddhi*.

The recognition which might occur in the form *yallakṣaṇakam mukham tallakṣaṇakamidam* would prove the identity of the *bimba* and *pratibimba* by identifying the characteristics of the *bimba* in *pratibimba*. That is the reason why one recognizes oneself in the mirror even when his left hand appears as the right and vice versa.

Objection is raised again by saying that *bhedasākṣātkāra* ought to be admitted as without doing so, nothing can be regarded as the misapprehension. Just because the original and the reflection are different, *vyāvahāra* of the reflection as the original is a result of the misapprehension. The absolute consciousness reflected in *avidyā* is *jīva*. Taking that reflection as oneself is the misapprehension and as a result of that, the characteristics of the reflection are mistakenly considered to reside in the *atmasvarūpa*. Such *vyāvahāra* or usage is wrong in the advaitins' view and for establishing that, the original and the reflection ought to be considered as different from each other. Taking up the classical instance of the misapprehension of snake in a rope, the snake is verily different from the rope on which it is superimposed. In the same way, *jīva* must also be different from the absolute consciousness on which the *jīvabhāva* is superimposed. It is never to be seen that even after knowing the *bheda* and the *bhedakadharma*, *abhedasākṣātkāra* occurs. In this regard, Vyāsatīrtha says, “*na ca bhedaṁ bhedakam ca sākṣātkurvannabhedamapi sākṣātkurvan drṣṭah*” (Vyāsatīrtha 1193). Perception of the *bheda* and the *bhedaka* here obstacles the path of *abhedasiddhi*.

To this, the advaitins might answer that just as in the case of a conch shell which is always known to be white, might be experienced as yellow due to the

presence of *doṣa* like excess of bile etc., the one who perceives *bheda* due to the presence of *upādhi*, can perceive *abhedā* too – “śvāityavyāpya śāṅkhat-vasākṣātkāre pūtasākṣātkāravād upādhibimāhātmyādabhedam sākṣātkurvāṇo bhedam sākṣātkarotītyaṅgikriyate” (Madhusūdan Sarasvatī 1193). The *aikyājñāna* of the *upādāna* also gets annihilated by *aikyājñāna*, but in case of *sopādhika bhrama*, removal of the *upādhi* is also necessitated – “tannivartane upādhivirahasyāpi sahakārītvāt” (Madhusūdan Sarasvatī 1193).

Such ratiocination gets further questioned on the issue that advaitins themselves admit that *jñāna* itself annihilates *ajñāna* without any assistance just as it destroys *jñānaprāgabhaṭṭa* without any assistance. Then, on what ground the advaitins are speaking about removal of *upādhi* for *abhedasākṣātkāra* in this case.

In a reply to the above objection, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī says that although *aikyājñāna* destroys the *aikyājñāna* to some extent, yet the *upādhi* stands and functions as an obstacle for *abhedasākṣātkāra*. That can also be cited in the lives of the *jīvanamukta* or persons who are liberated while living. Therefore, *abhedasākṣātkāra* conditioned by the removal of *upādhi* wholly annihilates the *ajñāna* causing the misapprehension.

For the purpose of *abhedasiddhi* of *bimba* and *pratibimba*, inferences can also be brought into context. Firstly, it can be said that *pratibimba* and *bimba* are not different from each other as they are extremely similar to each other. That is to say, it can be inferred that *pratibimbo bimbāt na bhidyate atyantasadṛśatvāt*. But it might be objected that this extreme similarity is present in case of one's left and right hands and yet they are not non-different from each other. Thus this inference goes fallacious.

Since the previous inference could do no good, the advaitins bring into context another inference as – “pratibimbo bimbābhinnah tadviruddhadharmānadhi-karaṇatvāt” (Madhusūdan Sarasvatī 1193). That is to say, *pratibimba* is not different from the *bimba* as it is not the substratum of contradicting features of the *bimba*. This inference too goes fallacious as when the *bimba* faces the east, the *pratibimba* faces the west and thereby becomes the substratum of the contradicting feature of the *bimba*. As a reply to this objection, it might be said that such *viruddhadharmādhikaraṇatva* is not natural and is actually under the influence of the *upādhi*.

Conclusion

From the aforementioned arguments, it seems quite sensible to hold that be it through *avacchedavāda* or *bimbapratibimbavāda*, *jīva* and *brahman* are infrangibly non-different. The apparent difference in the transactional level of reality has been so explicated by the Advaitins that they have reduced all the differences to mere appearance. Although the highest culmination of non-dualism lies in the theory of a singular sentient being which is numerically identical with *brahman* yet, from the transactional level of reality, the non-dualists have logically arrived at such a conclusion where the multiple sentient beings are considered as reflection of the supreme consciousness *brahman* in the effects of *avidyā*, i.e. *buddhi*.

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