

The status of the World from the perspective of Śaṅkara

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Abstract

Abstract- Śaṅkara's philosophy is called Advaita, in the sense that it looks for the non-dual character of the Ultimate Reality, Brahman. The main purpose of the Advaita of Śaṅkara is the realization of the identity of the soul with Brahman, which is also the means of liberation. Brahman and the world – the relationship between the two is a matter to be explained in the philosophy of Śaṅkara because in Śaṅkara's Vedānta system Ultimate Reality Brahman is explained as one without second. Brahman being one without second is non-relational also as there is nothing to relate with. In this connection question arises that, if Brahman is the only reality then what the status of the world is. Moreover, if there is only one reality then how the cause-effect relation is to be explained. Thus in this paper an inquiry is to be made regarding the status of the world being an effect in relation to Brahman, the cause from the standpoint of Śaṅkara.

Key words: Brahman, world, māyā, cause, effect.

Introduction:

Śaṅkara's Vedānta system is known as Advaita Vedānta as he believes that Brahman is the Ultimate Reality which is one without a second, on the basis that the existence of any other conscious being apart from Brahman is denied in the scriptures. Moreover, the variety of phenomenal manifestation is also denied to exist separately from Brahman. Thus Brahman is the Ultimate Reality as there is nothing which is higher than Brahman. However, Śaṅkara's philosophy is generally expressed through the following verse, '*Brahma satyam jaganmithyā jīva brahmaiva nā-parah*' – Brahman is the only reality, the world is false and there is no difference between individual and the universal soul. This entails that for him, reality is Brahman and Ātman and Brahman are identical. As the reality is one so he conceives the world to be unreal, in the sense that it is the apparent modification of Brahman which is known as *Brahmavivartavāda* which he explains with the help of the 'rope-snake' illusion and this illusion is there because of māyā, for Śaṅkara. The Ultimate Reality Brahman is one but when He manifests Himself in the phenomenal ground appears as the world or *jagat*, individual self or *jīva* and God or *Īśvara*.

World:

Swāmi Paramānanda Bhāratī holds that according to Śaṅkara, this world or *jagat* is a complex which represents multiplicity though multiplicity is not the inherent nature of the world¹ but through this world of multiplicity only the inherent nature of the world can be known which Brahman Itself is. Thus it is said that the whole universe is nothing but Brahman – *Brahma-eva-idam-viśhvam*.² Although it is seen that Śaṅkara has posited empirical reality to the world which is a combination of space, time, and causality, Śaṅkara holds that the external objects of the world exists as they can be perceived and as everybody perceives the same object so what is perceived is actually a thing which reveals itself externally. As such, these are not mere perception as maintained by the *viññānavādins*.

It is observed by A. G. Krishna Warriar that for Śaṅkara the world is an empirical objective world as he gives the constituents of the world an objective treatment.³ This world is the basis of all the waking experiences which is regarded as phenomenal.⁴

The phenomenal world is regarded as *māyā* by Śaṅkara as it is neither real nor unreal. In so far as it is known, it is not unreal. Again it cannot be real because it depends upon Brahman. As it is neither true nor untrue thus Motilal Pandit holds that for Śaṅkara it is *sadasadvilakṣaṇa*. It is unreal only in the sense that world is not eternal and immutable which the Reality is. In this regard Radhakrishnan also holds that it is a misleading notion that the world is an illusion rather Śaṅkara traces the whole plurality of appearances, including that of *Īśvara*, to *avidyā*.⁵ Moreover, according to Śaṅkara, the world has empirical significance and importance as the world not only provides the empirical experiences but also provides the scope for the realization of Brahman, as in this world itself *jīvas* reap the fruits of their actions and can attain the knowledge of the oneness of the Ātman and Brahman. Śaṅkara's concept of *mokṣa* also confirms the status of the world and as such it is not meaningless. In fact Radhakrishnan observes that Śaṅkara in his commentary on *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* asserts that, "The material world is called *kṣetra*, since it is the environment where the individual souls can act, realising their desires and fruits of their past karma."⁶

Moreover, from the empirical standpoint which is the domain of *avidyā*, Śaṅkara considers that the world is an empirical category and as such it must have a cause to come into existence as the world cannot be originated spontaneously. Thus, Śaṅkara affirms that the cause of the world possessing the qualifications of omniscience and omnipotence is Brahman that is by nature eternal, pure, and free and who is the material and efficient cause of the world.

But, it seems difficult to understand that how an infinite Brahman can create the finite world. Thus question may arise regarding the possibility of the relation between the infinite Brahman and the finite world. According to Śaṅkara, if there be absolute equality between the two, the relation between cause and effect would be annihilated. However, the problem of creation of a finite world by Infinite Brahman is reconciled by Śaṅkara with the help of the concept of *māyā*. *Māyā* is the link between the world and Brahman. It is seen that Brahman is omniscient, as such he is subject to manifest the name and form. These names and forms which is the seed of world is non-different from God and are neither real nor unreal as it is indeterminate and as such they are called the power of omniscient God or *māyā* or *prakṛti* (primordial nature) by Śaṅkara with which Brahman creates the world.

For Śaṅkara the difference between the cause and effect i.e., the world and Brahman exists only in common life owing to limiting adjuncts, but in reality, the cause and effect are non-different, so the creation which have originated from Brahman i.e., the world is non-different from Brahman in reality. However, the non-difference between cause and effect can also be induced on the ground of the fact that the existence is one. But, it is to be said that though cause and effect i.e., Brahman and the world are non-different but it is seen that in Śaṅkara's philosophy, during continuance the effect has nature of the cause but not vice versa. As such the characteristic of the cause i.e., Brahman is seen to exist in the effect i.e., the world, is the characteristic of existence of Brahman which exists in case of every being.

Śaṅkara tries to show that the effect pre-exist in its cause before creation not only on the ground of scriptures but also on perception because it is seen that a particular effect can come out of a particular cause only and a particular cause have potency of producing a particular effect only. Thus the potency is the essence of the cause and the effect must be involved in that potency. Śaṅkara holds that the acts of causal agents become purposeful in transforming the cause into effect but if the

effect does not pre-exist in the cause then effect cannot be produced. Thus Śaṅkara admits that there is a relation of non-difference between the cause and effect i.e., between the Brahman and world which means that the world i.e., the effect is ever existing non-differently from its cause. It also entails that the world has no existence apart from Brahman i.e., the existence of the universe is not independent of Brahman, as the former exists only in name and form.

The whole creation of the world including its origination and dissolution, for Śaṅkara, is only an apparent manifestation of Brahman and not its real transformation. In this regard Radhakrishnan holds that, that is why may be Śaṅkara suggests the theory of reflection in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, where the Absolute Brahman is the original or *bimba* and the world is the reflection or *pratibimba*. Thus Śaṅkara supports *vivartavāda*. The world is superimposed on Brahman. Here Brahman is the ground or *adhiṣṭhāna* and the world is the appearance or *vivarta* on it just as the rope appears as snake due to lack of light.⁷ This may be the reason why Śaṅkara rejects the Sāṃkhya's view of *satkāryavāda* because it believes in the real transformation of the cause into the effect, whereas Śaṅkara believes that the effect is just the projection of a new name and form but keeping its essence unchanged. Thus, causality is only empirically real for Śaṅkara because reality which is one is changelessly eternal. This also confirms that Brahman as the creator of the world is relevant only so long as the empirical world is held to be real.

Conclusion:

Thus it may be said that for Śaṅkara, the world is only empirically real and Brahman as the cause of the world is also only empirically real. In this regard Govind Chandra Pande remarks that "Śaṅkara, indeed, clearly says that cosmological descriptions are merely hyperboles or mythical stories."⁸ However, the purpose of the description of the creation of the world, for Śaṅkara, is for showing that there is no difference between the cause and effect and there is perfect oneness. Moreover, when Brahman is realized in his true nature, there arises no question of Brahman as the creator of the world.⁹ For, after realization of truth all the sense of pluralities diminishes and there remains only one Brahman. Swami Mukhyananda holds that for Śaṅkara "...when one has realized one's true nature as Ātman or Brahman, no universe is cognized in Brahman and no personality in Ātman, there is only Pure Awareness (*Prajñānaṁ Brahma*)."¹⁰ Thus what is being given importance in Śaṅkara metaphysics is the Self-knowledge or the knowledge of the oneness of Brahman and Ātman and this Self-knowledge is possible to attain only in this world itself. But it is to be mentioned that after the attainment of the realization of the Ātman or Brahman the world does not disappear but only its real nature is revealed i.e., there remains perfect oneness which is Brahman. In the words of Radhakrishnan, for Śaṅkara, "Mokṣa is thus not the dissolution of the world but only the disappearance of a false outlook."¹¹ Furthermore, this concept of the world, for Śaṅkara, is also described for the purpose of providing scope to attain the fruit of the knowledge of Brahman i.e., that thou art, which enables to know the non-transmigrating nature of the Self and also enables to realize that there is one without second, which is nothing but the realization of Brahman or *mokṣa* or liberation.

References:

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