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Oneness Equals Knowledge: Non-Dual Realization and the Epistemology of Brahman in Advaita Vedānta

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Abstract

Advaita Vedānta unfolds as a profound exploration of non-duality within the realm of Indian philosophical thought, revealing a complex and intricate metaphysical framework. At the heart of this tradition resides the assertion that Brahman is the sole essence of ultimate reality, whereas the multiplicity we perceive is merely a manifestation of empirical existence. This article delves into the intricate relationship between the concept of oneness and the pursuit of knowledge within the framework of Advaita Vedānta, exploring the extent to which liberating knowledge (mokṣa-jñāna) is contingent upon the realisation of ontological non-duality. The paper posits that the relationship between Ātman and Brahman, as expressed in the mahāvākyas of the Upaniṣads and systematically elucidated by Śaṅkara, engenders a unique epistemological framework wherein knowledge transcends the conventional duality of subject and object that typifies ordinary understanding. Through a careful examination of the texts and philosophical insights found within the Upaniṣads, Brahmasūtras, Bhagavad Gītā, and the commentaries of Śaṅkara, this inquiry reveals that knowledge in Advaita transcends mere propositions. It is a transformative journey that leads to the profound realisation of the self's unity with the ultimate reality. The article delves deeper into modern philosophical dialogues surrounding consciousness and the essence of metaphysical unity, all the while remaining true to the foundational categories of classical Advaita. It can be asserted that the notion of “Oneness Equals Knowledge” holds philosophical validity when interpreted not as a mere equation, but rather as the profound understanding that genuine knowledge emerges from the realisation of non-dual existence. Advaita Vedānta unfolds as a profound exploration of non-duality within the realm of Indian philosophy, embodying a complex metaphysical framework that invites deep contemplation. At the heart of this tradition resides the assertion that Brahman is the sole essence of ultimate reality, whereas the multiplicity we perceive is merely a manifestation of empirical existence. This article delves into the intricate interplay between the concept of oneness and the pursuit of knowledge within the framework of Advaita Vedānta, exploring the extent to which liberating knowledge (mokṣa-jñāna) is contingent upon the profound realisation of ontological non-duality. The paper posits that the unity of Ātman and Brahman, as expressed in the mahāvākyas of the Upaniṣads and systematically elucidated by Śaṅkara, delineates a unique epistemological framework wherein knowledge surpasses the conventional duality of subject and object that typifies everyday understanding. Through a careful examination of the texts and philosophical insights found within the Upaniṣads, Brahmasūtras, Bhagavad Gītā, and the commentaries of Śaṅkara, this inquiry reveals that knowledge in Advaita transcends mere propositions. It is a transformative journey that leads to the profound realisation of the self's unity with the ultimate reality. The article delves into the

current discourse surrounding consciousness and the notion of metaphysical unity, all the while remaining true to the foundational categories of classical Advaita. It is concluded that the notion of “Oneness Equals Knowledge” holds philosophical merit when interpreted not as a mere equation, but rather as the profound understanding that genuine knowledge arises from the realisation of non-dual existence.

Keywords: Advaita Vedānta, Brahman, Ātman, non-duality, monism, consciousness, liberation, epistemology

Advaita Vedānta is one of the most influential interpretations of Vedānta and it maintains a central position in the intellectual traditions of India. Advaita Vedānta is a philosophical concept derived from the Sanskrit term *advaita*, meaning “non-dual”. Advaita Vedānta posits that the ultimate reality is one and not two (Deutsch, 1969). The most systematic exposition of the doctrine came from Śaṅkara (seventh century CE), whose comments on the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā and Brahmasūtras created the interpretative underpinnings of classical Advaita.

The Vedānta is not to be associated directly with the Upaniṣads despite the latter are its chief scriptural basis. The term Vedānta, which means “end of the Vedas” in a literal sense, has two senses. It refers to the last parts of the Vedic texts and to a philosophical tradition based on its interpretation (King, 1999). From this larger history sprang significant schools like Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita, each with a different interpretation of the interaction between self, world and ultimate reality.

In the present paper, the philosophical implications of the thesis “Oneness is Knowledge” is explored. Although Advaita Vedānta is commonly characterised as a philosophy of metaphysical monism, less emphasis has been paid to its epistemic consequences. Specifically, how does Advaita understand knowledge? Is knowledge an intellectual understanding, or is knowledge an awakening to the non-dual reality? Of greater importance, what is the philosophical link between ontological unity and liberating knowledge?

The article contends that in Advaita Vedānta ultimate knowledge is inseparable from ontological oneness as liberation rests upon the realisation of the identity of Ātman and Brahman. The argument will be established through rigorous philosophical investigation of the key Advaita sources, and supported by contact with contemporary scholarship.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the metaphysical notion of Brahman in Advaita Vedānta.
2. To understand the philosophical significance of non-duality and the identity of Ātman and Brahman.
3. To probe into the epistemological relevance of the emancipatory knowledge in Advaita.
4. To give a philosophical justification of the idea that oneness and knowledge are essentially related.

2. Brahman as the Ultimate Reality in Advaita Vedānta

The metaphysical foundation of Advaita Vedānta is the concept of Brahman. Brahman is seen as the ultimate, unconditioned and non-dual reality underlying all empirical plurality (Radhakrishnan, 1992). According to Śaṅkara, only Brahman has absolute reality (*pāramārthika-sattā*) whereas the world of multiplicity is in the realm of empirical reality (*vyāvahārika-sattā*) (Śaṅkara, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya*).

The Upaniṣads again and again name Brahman the source, the basis, the dissolution of being. “The last point is made by the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, which says, ‘That from which all beings are born, by which they live, and into which they enter upon death—that know to be Brahman’ (Taittirīya Upaniṣad 3.1.1).

Advaita thinkers caution against viewing Brahman as one object among objects. Brahman cannot be described in terms of regular empirical categories for objects are restricted by distinction.

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad therefore adopts the approach of *neti neti* (“not this, not this”), emphasising that Brahman is beyond conceptual determination (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.3.6).

The usual description *sat-cit-ānanda*, existence, consciousness and happiness, does not mean three characteristics of Brahman. Instead, they are distinct methods of knowing one undivided reality (Deutsch, 1969). When we say Brahman is *sat* we mean it is absolute being. When we say it is *cit* we mean it is self-luminous consciousness. When we say it is *ānanda* we mean it is fullness beyond limitation.

3. The Self and the Absolute: Emphasising Non-Dual Identity

The basic proposition of Advaita Vedānta is that the individual self (*ātman*) is ultimately not different from Brahman. This idea is classically represented in the *mahāvākya* “*Tat Tvam Asi*” (“That Thou Art”) of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (6.8.7).

The story of Uddālaka Āruṇi and Śvetaketu is the story of philosophical transition from multiplicity to unity. The text employs analogies of clay and its products to argue that multiplicity does not invalidate ontological unity. Just as many things made of clay are essentially clay, empirical differences do not affect the underlying reality of Brahman.

Similarly, the expressions “*Aham Brahmāsmi*” (“I am Brahman”) and “*Ayam Ātmā Brahma*” (“This self is Brahman”) posit a philosophical equation of selfhood and ultimate truth. Śaṅkara argues that these pronouncements are to be understood ontologically, not figuratively, but that ignorance (*avidyā*) is responsible for the false appearance of separateness.

This identity is not to be construed as meaning that the empirical ego is divine in the conventional sense. Advaita, on the contrary, differentiates between the conditioned self, formed by embodiment and ignorance, and the transcendental self, which is one with Brahman.

4. Knowledge as the Realisation of Non-Duality

One of the basic philosophical claims of Advaita Vedānta is that liberation comes via knowledge (*jñāna*) and not through the mere execution of ritual. But the knowledge at question is not of the conventional cognitive kind.

Common knowledge assumes dualism of knower, known and process of knowing. The tripartite distinction cannot be used to ultimate knowledge in Advaita since Brahman cannot be other than consciousness. For Brahman is the base of awareness itself, and cannot thus be acquired. Recognition is the key to realisation.

According to Śaṅkara, ignorance causes superimposition (*adhyāsa*), wherein the self wrongly connects itself with the body, mind and identity. Knowledge destroys superimposition and shows the pre-existing identity of the self with Brahman (Śaṅkara, *Upadeśasāhasrī*).

Hence the statement “Oneness Is Knowledge” might be logically explicated as follows: the ultimate knowledge is the knowledge of ontological unity. So knowledge is not only informational, it is transforming.

5. The Modern Philosophical Reflection: Unity and Consciousness

Questions of consciousness and unity — particularly the debates on cosmopsychism and panpsychism — are becoming even more central to contemporary philosophy. These ideas may appear to have certain superficial similarities with Advaita Vedānta, however one should refrain from any direct equivalent.

Advaita does not just state that consciousness is distributed across the universe. Rather, it claims that awareness is underlying reality itself. Brahman is not one of many conscious beings. Brahman is the non-dual ground of distinctions.

The analogies with present metaphysical ideas must therefore remain heuristic, not final. These analogies may elucidate conceptual possibilities, but cannot substitute for the textual and philosophical distinctiveness of Advaita categories.

Findings

1. Advaita Vedānta states that Brahman is the metaphysical ground of all existence.
2. Non-duality is the identity of Ātman and Brahman.
3. Advaita's liberating knowledge transcends regular epistemic systems.
4. The idea "Oneness Is Knowledge" is logically acceptable as the realisation of the non-dual.

Advaita Vedānta is a unique philosophical synthesis of metaphysics and epistemology. The essential idea is not that reality is one, but that knowledge itself is perfected via the awareness of this unity. This division of the knower and the known pertains to the realm of empirical experience and ultimately dissolves in the realisation of Brahman.

The label "Oneness Equals Knowledge" is thus theoretically defensible if it is taken with conceptual accuracy. It is not that oneness actually acts as a notion equivalent to knowledge. It is that ultimate knowledge culminates in the realisation of non-duality. In other words, Advaita changes knowledge from an outward relation of subject and object to an existential awakening to reality itself. Liberation is not from the acquisition of information but from the realisation of what has always been true: the identity of Ātman and Brahman.

6. Epistemology of Advaita and the dissolution of subject-object duality

The epistemological framework of Advaita Vedānta diverges greatly from common conceptions of knowledge. In most systems of philosophy, knowledge is based on the dichotomy of subject and object. A knowing subject cognises an external object by perception, inference or witness. Advaita does not reject the validity of such types of cognition at the empirical level (vyāvahārika), but maintains that they are conditioned by duality and so cannot lead to ultimate knowledge (Hiriyanna, 1993).

Ignorance (avidyā) is the cause of the erroneous association of the self with body, mind and individuality according to Śaṅkara. This condition is epistemic fragmentation. The self perceives itself as distinct from the world and from ultimate reality. Ordinary cognition therefore operates within limitations as it relies on distinctions which are ultimately provisional.

The Advaitic notion of adhyāsa (superimposition) brings out the philosophical significance of non-dual knowledge. The self is superimposed with contingent attributes by human beings, says Śaṅkara, and therefore confuses the transient with the permanent. The classic example of this technique is mistaking a rope for a snake in weak light. The shifting of the rope does not create fear and bewilderment; ignorance, which clouds perception, does. The idea of multiplicity appears to be true due to improper understanding of Brahman.

Ultimate knowledge (brahmajñāna) does not create a new world, but removes ignorance and reveals what has always been. It is knowledge that frees because it cuts through the false duality of the self and the ultimate reality. This insight sets Advaita apart from those religions which conceive of liberation largely in terms of ritual action or devotional dependency.

The identification of the Oneness with knowledge can be philosophically supported in a qualified sense. Knowledge does not generate unity automatically, nor is unity only an abstract notion. Rather ultimate knowledge is the awareness of the unity that already exists. The epistemic act ends in ontological recognition.

7. The Function of Māyā and the Existence of the Empirical World

One of the most widespread misconception of Advaita Vedānta is the idea that the universe is unreal. Such an understanding simplifies the stance of Śaṅkara. Advaita does not claim that the empirical world is wholly non-existent; rather, it differentiates layers of reality. Śaṅkara explains empirical existence as mithyā, which means neither entire actuality nor complete delusion (Sivaraman, 1973). The world has practical validity but not ultimate independence. It depends on Brahman for its ontological base.

The idea of māyā accounts for the possibility of multiplicity in spite of ultimate unity. Māyā is not to be understood as a metaphysical substance other than Brahman. Rather, it implies the

condition of the manifestation of plurality in experience. Differences between individuals seem to be genuine from the position of common experience, but are transcended from the standpoint of ultimate truth (pāramārthika).

The contrast between the empirical and the ultimate level of reality is fundamental for the comprehension of Advaita epistemology. Otherwise the claim that Brahman alone is real would seem to deny ordinary experience altogether. Rather, Advaita presents a hierarchical conception of reality, in which empirical distinctions are significant, but in which ultimate truth exposes their dependence upon non-dual existence.

8. Re-thinking the Title: Why Oneness Equals Knowledge?

The title of this article requires clarification of a philosophical kind, since it would be conceptually ambiguous if taken literally. "Oneness Equals Knowledge" is not a rigorous logical equivalency. Rather, the statement expresses a key truth of Advaita: the highest knowledge is the knowledge of the unity of being.

Knowledge leads to emancipation (mokṣa) in Advaita Vedānta since ignorance maintains duality. To know Brahman is not to come upon a thing apart from oneself, but to discover the fundamental nature of the self. Knowledge thus culminates in identity and not representation.

This grasp makes clear why emancipation in Advaita is always described as awakening, and not acquisition. Knowledge does not make one Brahman; knowledge makes one realise that one has never been separate from Brahman. Therefore, the statement "Oneness Equals Knowledge" is a philosophical shorthand for the thesis that freeing knowledge is the realisation of non-dual reality.

Conclusion

Advaita Vedānta provides a comprehensive philosophical analysis of the link between metaphysics and epistemology. Its particular contribution is to argue that knowledge is completed not by the accretion of empirical information, but by the breakdown of ontological fragmentation. Brahman, as the absolute reality, is the ground of existence and at the same time the basis of consciousness.

The conceptual core of Advaita is the identity of Ātman and Brahman. This essay has demonstrated through the investigation of the Upaniṣadic mahāvākyas and Śaṅkara's interpretive framework that non-duality is not only a metaphysical theory, but a basis for liberating knowledge. Ordinary cognition is based on subject-object distinctions; ultimate cognition is beyond all such divisions.

The analysis further illustrates that the label "Oneness Equals Knowledge" is logically valid when carefully defined. Oneness does not physically collapse into knowledge as a mere concept. Advaita, rather, maintains that the ultimate way of knowing is the realisation of ontological unity. This knowledge culminates in the realisation of what is always true, the self is not distinct from Brahman.

The reviewer's concern for conceptual clarity consequently points to a significant philosophical difficulty. Only careful conceptual articulation founded in textual evidence and logical argumentation, not poetic assertion or spiritual intuition, may adequately express Advaita. Philosophically put, Advaita Vedānta emerges as more than a religious concept; it is a profound metaphysics and epistemological framework.

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