

Interpretations of the Self in Hindu Philosophy: Advaita vs. Dvaita

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Abstract

This paper examines the contrasting interpretations of the self (ātman) in two major schools of Hindu philosophy: Advaita Vedanta and Dvaita Vedanta. Advaita, founded by Adi Shankara, posits a non-dualistic view where the individual self is ultimately identical with the universal consciousness (Brahman). In contrast, Dvaita, propounded by Madhvacharya, maintains a dualistic stance, asserting the eternal distinction between the individual self and the supreme being.

The study explores the metaphysical foundations, scriptural interpretations, and logical arguments employed by both schools in formulating their respective views of selfhood. It analyzes key concepts such as māyā (illusion), moksha (liberation), and the nature of reality as understood within each philosophical framework. The paper also investigates the practical and ethical implications of these divergent perspectives on self-identity for spiritual practice and daily life.

By juxtaposing these two influential philosophical traditions, this research aims to illuminate the depth and diversity of Hindu thought on the nature of selfhood and consciousness. It concludes by reflecting on the relevance of these ancient debates to contemporary discussions in philosophy of mind and consciousness studies.

Keywords: Hinduism, Vedanta, Advaita, Dvaita, Self, Consciousness, Indian Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Interpretations of the Self in Hindu Philosophy: Advaita vs. Dvaita

The concept of the self, or atman, lies at the heart of Hindu philosophy, serving as a fundamental principle in understanding the nature of reality, consciousness, and the human experience. Within the vast tapestry of Hindu thought, two prominent schools of Vedanta philosophy—Advaita and Dvaita—offer contrasting interpretations of the self that have profoundly influenced Indian metaphysics, epistemology, and spiritual practices for centuries.

Advaita Vedanta, primarily associated with the 8th-century philosopher Adi Shankara, posits a non-dualistic view of reality. In this framework, the individual self (atman) is ultimately identical with the universal consciousness (Brahman), and the perception of multiplicity in the world is considered an illusion (maya). Conversely, Dvaita Vedanta, propounded by the 13th-century philosopher Madhvacharya, advocates a dualistic perspective, maintaining a fundamental distinction between the individual self, God, and the material world.

This research paper aims to explore and compare these two interpretations of the self within Hindu philosophy, examining their ontological foundations, epistemological approaches, and practical implications for spiritual seekers. By analysing key texts, philosophical arguments, and historical developments, we will investigate how these divergent views have shaped Hindu thought and practice, as well as their relevance in contemporary discussions of consciousness, identity, and the nature of reality.

The exploration of Advaita and Dvaita perspectives on the self not only illuminates the rich diversity within Hindu philosophy but also offers valuable insights into perennial questions of human existence that continue to engage philosophers, theologians, and scientists across cultures. Through this comparative study, we seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances surrounding the concept of self in Hindu thought and its broader implications for philosophical and religious inquiry.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach, primarily focusing on textual analysis and comparative methods to examine the interpretations of the self in Advaita and Dvaita Vedanta philosophies. The research methodology encompasses the following steps:

1. Literature Selection

1.1 Advaita Vedanta Texts

A comprehensive analysis of Adi Shankaracharya's works will be conducted, with special emphasis on:

- Soundarya Lahiri
- Atma Bodh
- Nirguna Manas

Additional texts by Shankara, such as his commentaries on the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras, will also be consulted to provide a holistic understanding of his philosophy.

1.2 Dvaita Vedanta Texts

For Madhvacharya's philosophy, the following key texts will be analysed:

- Gita Bhashya
- Brahma Sutra Bhashya
- Vishnu Tattva Nirnaya

2. Textual Analysis

2.1 Close reading and critical analysis of the selected texts will be performed, focusing on passages that directly address the concept of self (atman).

2.2 Key terms and concepts related to the self will be identified and their usage within each philosophical system will be examined.

2.3 The contextual and historical background of each text will be considered to ensure accurate interpretation.

3. Comparative Analysis

3.1 A systematic comparison of the interpretations of self in Advaita and Dvaita philosophies will be conducted, identifying similarities and differences.

3.2 The philosophical arguments and logical structures used in each tradition to support their respective views on the self will be analysed and compared.

3.3 The implications of each interpretation for understanding consciousness, reality, and spiritual practice will be explored.

4. Secondary Sources

4.1 Contemporary scholarly works on Advaita and Dvaita Vedanta will be consulted to provide additional context and interpretations.

4.2 Critiques and debates surrounding these philosophies will be reviewed to ensure a balanced analysis.

5. Synthesis and Interpretation

5.1 The findings from the textual and comparative analyses will be synthesized to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the self is interpreted in each philosophical system.

5.2 The broader implications of these interpretations for Hindu philosophy and their relevance to contemporary philosophical discussions will be examined.

6. Limitations

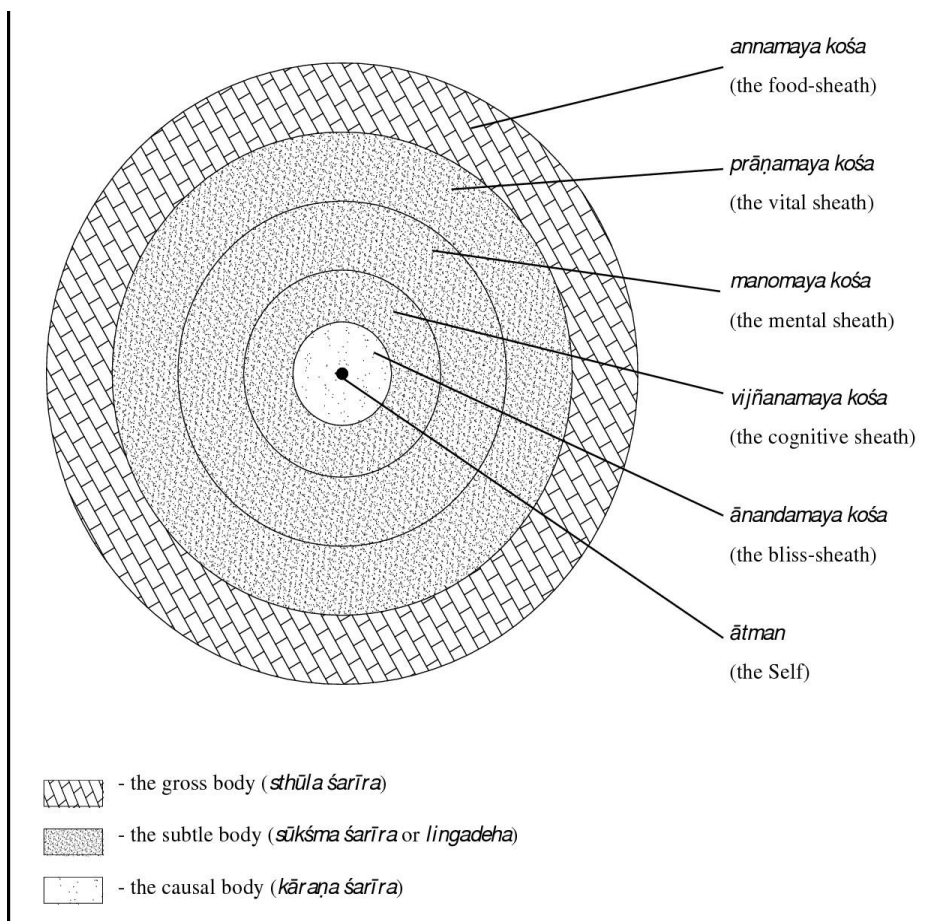
The limitations of this study, including potential biases in translation and interpretation, will be acknowledged. The challenge of studying ancient texts through a contemporary lens will be addressed. This methodological approach aims to provide a comparison of the concept of self in Advaita and Dvaita Vedanta, grounded in careful analysis of primary texts and informed by relevant secondary scholarship.

DISCUSSION

1 ADVAITA PHILOSOPHY

1.1 THE ILLUSION OF DUALITY

The illusion of duality refers to the mistaken belief that the universe consists of separate entities, such as individual selves (jīvas) and an external world distinct from the ultimate reality, Brahman. In Advaita Vedanta, duality is seen as an illusory perception created by **Māyā (ignorance or illusion)**, which conceals the true nature of Brahman. According to Advaita, Brahman is the only reality, and everything else—individuals, objects, and the material world—are transient and ultimately unreal. This illusion is a product of **Avidya(ignorance)**, which causes individuals to identify themselves with their body, mind, and ego, rather than with the pure consciousness that is their true essence.



How Duality Arises:

1. **Māyā:** The veil of ignorance (Māyā) obscures the non-dual reality of Brahman. Under the influence of Māyā, Brahman appears as a manifold universe of forms, objects, and individual beings. This creates the perception of subject and object, knower and known, and a world filled with dualities like joy and sorrow, good and bad, birth and death.
2. **Jīva:** The individual self, or Jīva, perceives itself as separate from the rest of existence due to identification with the body and mind. The individual self, conditioned by names, forms, and mental constructs, experiences the world as a dualistic entity, divided between itself and everything external to it.
3. **Perception of Reality:** At the empirical level, the world seems real and independent. However, from the standpoint of the ultimate truth, the world is mithyā (neither real nor unreal), existing only as long as ignorance persists.

How Advaita Counters the Illusion of Duality:

Advaita Vedanta counters duality by asserting the non-duality (Advaita) of Brahman. It emphasizes the oneness of existence, stating that Brahman alone is the sole, unchanging reality, while everything else is an appearance within that reality.

1. **Brahman as the Only Reality:** Advaita declares that Brahman is the infinite, formless, and indivisible consciousness, beyond all attributes. This consciousness is the substratum of all existence, and the apparent multiplicity of the world is simply a superimposition upon this non-dual reality. The Upanishads express this through statements like "**Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma**" (All this is Brahman) and "**Ekam eva advitīyam**" (The One without a second).
2. **Two-Level Reality:** Shankara, the proponent of Advaita, introduced the concept of two levels of reality to explain the coexistence of Brahman and the apparent world. These are:
 - **Pāramārthika** (Absolute Reality): The non-dual state of Brahman, where no distinctions or dualities exist.
 - **Vyāvahārika** (Empirical Reality): The relative, transactional world in which duality and diversity appear real due to Māyā. This is the reality experienced in everyday life but is considered illusory in the ultimate sense.
3. **Ajñāna (Ignorance):** The root cause of duality is ignorance or Ajñāna, which conceals the true knowledge of Brahman. Ajñāna leads to the identification of the self with the body and mind, fostering the illusion of separation. The removal of this ignorance **through Jñāna (Self-knowledge)** dissolves duality.
4. **Self-Knowledge (Ātma-Jñāna):** The path to overcoming duality is through Self-realization. By understanding that the true self is not the body or mind but the infinite, unchanging Brahman, individuals transcend the illusion of separateness. The famous Upanishadic phrase
5. **Tat Tvam Asi (That Thou Art)** affirms the identity of the **individual self (Ātman)** with Brahman.
6. **Neti-Neti (Not This, Not This):** Advaita uses the method of negation to dismantle false identifications. Through the practice of Neti-Neti, one negates everything that is not the true self—body, thoughts, emotions—until only the pure awareness of Brahman remains.
7. **Samādhi:** In advanced stages of spiritual practice, the seeker enters a state of **nirvikalpa samādhi (non-dual absorption)**, where the mind becomes completely still, and the individual self merges with Brahman, realizing the oneness of all existence.

Conclusion:

The illusion of duality is dispelled through the knowledge of Brahman as the one, non-dual reality. Advaita philosophy teaches that once ignorance is removed, the individual realizes that the self is none other than Brahman, and the apparent divisions of the world dissolve. Duality is understood to be a mere appearance, and the experience of Advaita (non-duality) brings the ultimate liberation (moksha) from the cycle of birth, death, and suffering.

1.2 NON DUALITY OF KNOWLEDGE

In Advaita Vedanta, the **non-duality of knowledge** is a fundamental concept that emphasizes the unity and indivisibility of consciousness, which is the essence of all knowledge. According to Advaita, **knowledge** (Jñāna) is not a property or function of the mind or brain, but the very nature of **Brahman**, the ultimate reality. In this view, consciousness or knowledge is one, undivided, and self-existent. It transcends dualistic distinctions such as subject and object, knower and known, or the self and the world.

Key Aspects of Non-Duality of Knowledge in Advaita:**1. Knowledge as Pure Consciousness :**

- In Advaita, pure knowledge is synonymous with **Cit**, which is the essence of Brahman. This knowledge is not an intellectual or conceptual understanding but the direct realization of the self's unity with Brahman. Knowledge in its purest form is self-luminous, independent, and requires no external object or medium to exist.
- Pure consciousness is not something one "has" but rather what one **is**. It is unconditioned, non-objective, and unmediated awareness that is the foundation of all experiences and perceptions.

2. Advaita's Rejection of Subject-Object Duality:

- In the realm of empirical knowledge, there is always a division between the **subject** (the knower) and the **object** (the known). However, Advaita rejects this dualistic perception at the highest level of reality. According to Advaita, the subject and object distinction is a product of **Ajñāna** (ignorance) and does not exist in the state of **Pāramārthika** (absolute reality). At this level, knowledge, the knower, and the known are not distinct; they are all manifestations of the same non-dual consciousness, Brahman.

3. Self-Knowledge (Ātma-Jñāna):

- The highest form of knowledge in Advaita Vedanta is **Ātma-Jñāna**, the knowledge of the Self as non-different from Brahman. This knowledge reveals that the individual self (**Ātman**) is not separate from the ultimate reality (**Brahman**).
- **Ātma-Jñāna** transcends the empirical distinctions between the knower and the known. When a person realizes their true nature as Brahman, they recognize that there is no duality in existence; everything is one undivided consciousness.

2 DVAITA PHILOSOPHY

Dvaita Philosophy is a school of Vedanta founded by the philosopher Madhvacharya (1238-1317 CE), which presents a strong contrast to the nondualistic Advaita Vedanta propounded by Shankaracharya. Dvaita means "duality," and its core teaching asserts the eternal and absolute distinction between the individual self (Jīva) and the ultimate reality, Brahman (often identified with the personal God, Vishnu or Narayana). This philosophy emphasizes the relationship of dependence between the soul and God, with the soul being eternally distinct from the Supreme Being.

2.1 Dualism (Tattvavāda):

- The central tenet of Dvaita is that God (Brahman) and individual souls (Jīvas) are fundamentally and

eternally different. Unlike Advaita, which posits that the Jīva is identical to Brahman upon the removal of ignorance, Dvaita maintains that the soul is always distinct from God.

- Madhvacharya teaches that the difference between Jīva and Brahman is real and eternal, and that the relationship between the two is one of dependent dualism. The soul depends on God for its existence and liberation, but it never becomes one with God.

2.2 Fivefold Differences (Panchabheda)

Madhvacharya outlined five eternal differences that form the basis of reality, known as **Panchabheda**:

- A. **Difference between God (Brahman) and the individual soul (Jīva).**
- B. **Difference between God and matter (Prakriti).**
- C. **Difference between individual souls.**
- D. **Difference between individual souls and matter.**
- E. **Difference between different forms of matter.** These differences are considered real and eternal. Madhvacharya rejects the Advaitic notion that such distinctions are illusory or temporary.

2.3 Supremacy of God (Vishnu/Narayana):

- In Dvaita, Vishnu or Narayana is regarded as the supreme, independent, and ultimate reality. He is the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the universe. Vishnu is all-powerful, omniscient, and omnipresent, but remains distinct from His creation.
- The relationship between God and the individual soul is described as that of master and servant. The soul is eternally subservient to God and can attain liberation only through His grace.

2.4 Individual Souls (Jīvas):

- Madhvacharya emphasized that individual souls are not identical to God, nor to each other. Each soul is unique, with its own distinct nature, destiny, and relationship with God.
- According to Dvaita, there are different types of souls, some destined for liberation (Mukti), others for eternal damnation (Tamas), and others still for continuous rebirth. This is based on their innate qualities and their relationship with Vishnu.

2.5 Bhakti as the Path to Liberation:

- For Madhvacharya, Bhakti (devotion to God) is the primary means of attaining liberation. Knowledge (Jñāna) and action (Karma) are important but must be accompanied by unwavering devotion to Vishnu. Liberation is achieved by the soul's complete surrender to God and receiving His grace.
- Unlike Advaita, which emphasizes knowledge of one's identity with Brahman for liberation, Dvaita insists that the soul remains separate from God even in the state of liberation. The liberated soul experiences bliss in the presence of God, but never merges with Him.

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2.7 Role of Grace (Prapatti):

- Madhvacharya introduced the concept of **Prapatti**, or total surrender to God, as a vital aspect of Bhakti. He stressed that human effort alone is insufficient for liberation. It is through God's grace that the soul can achieve salvation and be freed from the cycle of birth and death.

2.8 Scriptural Basis:

- Dvaita philosophy, like other Vedantic schools, bases its teachings on the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhaga-

vad Gita, and Brahma Sutras. Madhvacharya provided commentaries on these texts, interpreting them in a dualistic framework.

- He emphasized a literal and theistic interpretation of these scriptures, where God is seen as a personal deity, and liberation is achieved through devotion and submission to His will.

CONCLUSION

Madhvacharya's Dvaita philosophy presents a theistic and dualistic approach to Vedanta, where God and the soul are eternally distinct, and liberation is achieved through devotion to a personal deity, Vishnu. Dvaita offers a clear alternative to the non-dualism of Advaita, emphasizing the reality of the world, the individuality of souls, and the necessity of divine grace for salvation. This dualistic outlook has had a lasting impact on Indian philosophy and devotional practices, particularly in the Vaishnava tradition.

Results

The analysis of key texts from Advaita and Dvaita Vedanta traditions revealed significant differences in their interpretations of the self (atman). Here are the main findings:

1. Advaita Vedanta Interpretation

1.1 Nature of the Self:

- In Adi Shankaracharya's "Atma Bodh", the self is described as identical with Brahman, the ultimate reality.
- The text states: "That which pervades all, which nothing transcends, and which, like the universal space around us, fills everything completely from within and without, that Supreme non-dual Brahman—that thou art." (Verse 26)

1.2 Illusion of Individuality:

- "Soundarya Lahiri" emphasizes the illusory nature of individual existence.
- *girāmāhurdevīm druhiṇagrhiṇīmāgamavido hareḥ patnīm padmaṁ harasahacarīmadritanayām | turiyā kāpi tvam duradhigama nissīmamahimā mahāmāyā viśvaṁ bhramayasi parabrahmamahiṣi ||*
- Verse 97 suggests that the apparent duality between the individual self and the divine is a product of maya (illusion).

1.3 Transcendence of Attributes:

- "Nirguna Manas" expounds on the concept of the attribute less self.
- It describes the self as beyond all qualities, transcending both the manifest and unmanifest realms.

2. Dvaita Vedanta Interpretation

2.1 Distinction between Self and Supreme Being:

- Madhvacharya's "Gita Bhashya" maintains a clear distinction between the individual self and God (Vishnu).
- In his commentary on Bhagavad Gita 15.7, Madhvacharya states that the jiva (individual self) is an eternal fragment of the Divine, distinct yet dependent.

2.2 Hierarchy of Existence:

- "Vishnu Tattva Nirnaya" outlines a hierarchical ontology where selves occupy different levels of existence.
- The text categorizes souls into three types: mukti-yogyā (fit for liberation), nitya-samsarin (eternally in bondage), and tamo-yogyā (fit for darkness).

2.3 Reality of the World:

- In "Brahma Sutra Bhashya", Madhvacharya argues for the reality of the world and the plurality of selves.
- He interprets Brahma Sutra 2.1.14 to mean that the world is real and not illusory, contrary to Advaita interpretation.

3. Comparative Analysis

3.1 Ontological Status of the Self:

- Advaita: The individual self is ultimately non-different from Brahman.
- Dvaita: The self is a distinct entity, eternally separate from but dependent on God.

3.2 Perception of Duality:

- Advaita: Duality is an illusion (maya) to be transcended through knowledge.
- Dvaita: Duality is an inherent feature of reality, to be understood and accepted.

3.3 Path to Liberation:

- Advaita: Liberation comes through the realization of one's identity with Brahman.
- Dvaita: Liberation involves eternal service and devotion to Vishnu, maintaining the distinction.

3.4 Nature of Consciousness:

- Advaita: Consciousness is singular and universal, appearing as individual due to limiting adjuncts.
- Dvaita: Consciousness is plural, with each self possessing its own individual consciousness.

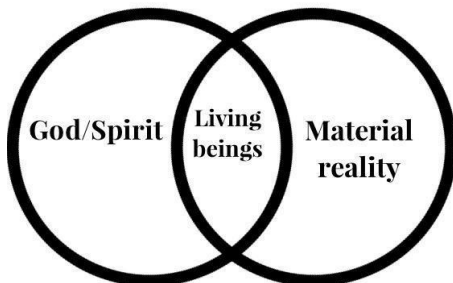
These results highlight the fundamental philosophical divergence between Advaita and Dvaita Vedanta in their conception of the self, despite both traditions drawing from similar scriptural sources. The findings demonstrate how different interpretative frameworks lead to vastly different conclusions about the nature of reality and the human condition.

Aspect	Advaita Vedânta	Vishishtadvaita Vedânta	Dvaita Vedânta
Nature of Mâyâ	Illusory power causing material manifestation	Dependent reality representing material nature	Power showing distinctions, wielded by God
Relation with Îúvara	Separate but inherent power	Subservient to the divine will of Îúvara	A tool under the complete control of Îúvara
Impact on Jiva	Creates a veil obscuring Brahman's nature	Facilitates cosmic order & souls' karmic results	Shows Jiva's distinctness from God and other Jivas
Approach to Overcome Mâyâ	Jnana (knowledge)	Bhakti (devotion) and surrender to Îúvara	Devotion to God and understanding one's distinct identity

Hindu Metaphysics

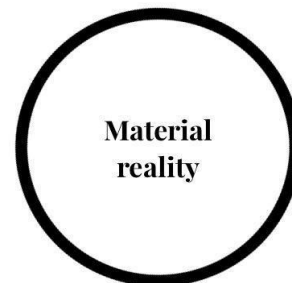
Samkhya

Matter and consciousness are independent of each other



Living beings are part soul/part body. The soul is part of a whole essence and the body apart of a whole material experience.

Nastika (heterodox) philosophies (ie. Buddhism)

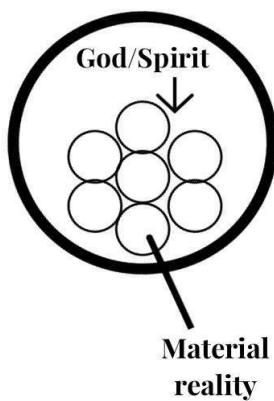


There are no souls, consciousness is a function of matter

Vedanta

Conscious essence is the efficient cause for matter

Vishishtadvaita



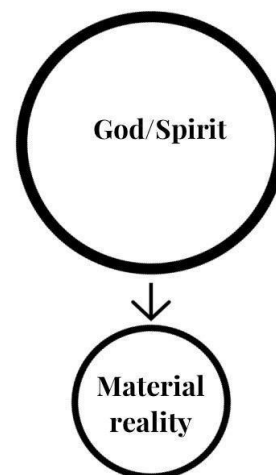
The individual soul is qualified, but also a part of a whole.

Advaita



There is only one encompassing soul. Individual souls are not real.

Dvaita



Individual souls are real and separate from God

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