

Appearance and Reality in Śaṅkara's Advaita Philosophy

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Abstract:

Appearance and reality is a prime concept in philosophical discourse both in Eastern and Western tradition. Starting from Monistic Idealism to Dualistic Realism the fundamental problem of philosophy is undoubtedly the problem of Reality. Two famous views are found regarding the reality of the appeared world – one is Idealism and another is Realism. As per the view of Idealism there is one spiritual principle underlying, evolving and sustaining the universe and the world of appearance is unreal. On the other hand Realism holds that the world of appearance is as real as it appears to us. But, if it is considered that there are two ultimate reality opposed to each other one is physical and other is spiritual then this is the view of Dualistic Realism. In Indian tradition most of the thinkers holds that Appearance is relative, bound by duality whereas Reality is only one and absolute. In this regard the view of Śaṅkarachārya, the great Vedantist philosopher gained attention in both Eastern- Western discourse. In this paper a humble attempt has been made to explain the idea of reality and appearance in Śaṅkaracharya's Advaita Philosophy.

Keywords: Absolute, Reality, Appearance, Empirical, Transcendental

Introduction:

Upanisads are the last part of the Vedas (Vedānta) and that is why the advocates of the Upanisada are called Vedantist Philosopher and their school is known as Vedanta school of Indian Philosophy. Adi Shankaracharya, the principal proponent of Advaita Vedanta school of Indian Philosophy, influenced by the Upanisadic teachings, took up the problem of Reality and Appearance in his journey for the quest of truth. In an attempt to provide a befitted understanding of the problem, he developed his non – Dualistic philosophy which is known as Advaita Vedanta. He mainly emphasised on a framework for understanding the nature of appearance which he referred as *Māyā* and the nature of Reality which he referred as *Brahman*. His illustration of *Māyā* and *Brahman* can be regarded as the journey from ignorance to knowledge or from appearance to reality, where he deeply emphasised the non-dualistic nature of the ultimate reality. Ultimate Reality is Pure Consciousness or Consciousness of the Pure Self, which is devoid of all attributes and forms. It is characterised by *sat-chit-ānanda* (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss). Thus depending on the conceptualisation and categorisation of the idea of Reality various philosophical trends in Indian Philosophy have been developed, like Realism, Idealism and Materialism. Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Jaina, and Sāṃkhya school of Indian philosophy advocate realism and Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara and Buddhism advocate Idealism. On the other hand Cārvaka is the only school of Indian philosophy which advocates Materialism.

Objective of the study:

1. To study the Advaita concept of Appearance
2. To study the Advaita concept of Reality
3. To study the difference between Appearance and Reality in Advaita Philosophy

Data Source and Methodology:

This work is based on secondary data collected from different sources including various books, journal, contemporary records etc., mainly descriptive and analytical method is adopted.

Discussion:

The primary question explored in the Upanishads and Vedānta School of Indian Philosophy is, ‘What is the true essence of human beings?’ To find a suitable answer to this question various philosophical doctrines have been sprouted from the Upanishads. The Famous Vedantin philosophers like Śaṅkara and Ramanuja accepted the view imparted in the Upanishads and taught that human being has no existence apart from God. According to Śaṅkara Brahman is the only Reality, the world is ultimately false and the individual soul is non-different from Brahman- ‘*Brahma satyam jagat mithyā jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ*’¹. This statement is regarded as the heart of Advaita Vedanta school. For him the individual selves are non – different from the ultimate self, which is Brahman or the Absolute. But due to ignorance individual souls feel the apparent difference between Brahman and them. This is the effect of Māyā. For Śaṅkara, the world of plurality is the creation of Māyā, the power of Brahman. Māyā is the cosmic power of projection. The distinction between Māyā or appearance and Brahman or Reality is the cornerstone of Śaṅkara’s metaphysical conjecture. Māyā is an illusory power which not only projects the appearance of the world but also at the same time superimposed the unreal as real. This superimposition of unreal on real is called *Adhyāsa*² in Advaita Vedanta philosophy, because of which individual souls perceive multiplicity and duality in this empirical world. *Adhyāsa* involves attributing some characteristics to something that they do not actually belong to. It is defined as the appearance of a thing where it is not, for example, perceiving double light or mistaking a rope for a snake are instances of *Adhyāsa*. In empirical world, the differentiate between appearance and reality is the struggle to know the difference between ‘what is real and what is not real or what is true and what is false’. But the problem is that reality is always explained in terms of something other than the reality. As quoted by Radhakrishnan, ‘The real is neither true nor false. It simply is. But in our knowledge we refer this or that characteristic to it. All knowledge, whether perceptual or conceptual, attempts to reveal reality or the ultimate spirit. While perception is an event in time, non-existent both before it happens and after, it is still the manifestation of a reality which is not in time, though it falls short of the real which it attempts to manifest’³.

Appearance of the world as the product of Māyā:

In Advaitism the appearance of the world is due to the imposition of names (*nama*) and forms (*rupa*) on the ultimate reality. For example, when we mistakenly perceive a snake in a rope is the superimposition of the attributes of snake on rope, similarly the manifoldness of the world and its objects are superimposed on Brahman. Ignorance (*avidya*) is the root cause of *maya*. It is this ignorance that makes us see the phenomenal world as separate and distinct from the transcendental world. *Vyavaharika sattva* (empirical reality) is mistakenly termed as *Paramarthika Sattva* (transcendental reality). The world is a mere appearance like an object in dream or illusion. Even in *R̥gveda* and *Śvetāśvataropaniṣad* accept the fact

that one God appears many by creating illusion (maya) and the origin of the world lies in the magical power of the God⁴ for the ignorant the world of appearance is real and the reality is plural, but for the wise reality is one and that is God. The world of appearances for the ignorant people is like snake -rope illusion. In absence of proper light we see snake in a rope without much enquiring what was behind the appearance, but in presence of proper light we see rope as rope not as snake. In case of reality also when there is absence of right knowledge we see one ultimate reality as many, but in presence of right knowledge we see one ultimate reality behind all multiplicity and illusion. Māyā is regarded as the magical power of God, just as the magician never affected by his magical show which he creates to deceive others, God himself is not affected by the illusion of māyā. Māyā performs two actions for creating illusion- one is Āvarana or concealment of Real Nature and another is Vikṣepa or distortion of real nature of things⁵. Because of these two functions of maya one perceives something in something else. For Śankara to create the world of appearance God really doesn't undergo changes, the change is only apparent, not real. This is known as the theory of Vivartavada, the world is an unreal manifestation (Vivarta) of Brahma. The only reality is Brahman which is unchanging and devoid of any parts.

Now the multi billionaire question is that how can the unchanging Brahman which is devoid of parts appears many? Śankara at this point follow the Upanisadic order of manifestation and hold that objects of the world arise from Brahman by means of māyā. He mentioned, 'From Brahman, at first arise the five subtle elements, in the order- Ākāśa (ether), Vāyu (air), Agni (fire), Ap (water), Kṣiti (earth). These five are again mixed up together in five different ways to give rise to the five gross elements like Gross Ākāśa is produced by the combination of five subtle elements in the proportion, of ½ ākāśa and 1/8 of air, fire, water, earth. Similarly, each of the other four gross elements is produced by the combination of the subtle elements, in the proportion of half of that element and one-eighth of each of the other four. This process is known as combination of the five (pañcīkarana)⁶. The subtle body of man is made of the subtle elements, and the gross body, as well as all gross objects of nature, is produced out of the gross elements which arise by the mixture of the five subtle ones. Sankara, accepts this account of creation, but he understands the entire process in the light of his theory of vivarta or adhyasā'⁶.

Brahman as the Ultimate Reality:

Sankara emphasising on the non -dual nature of Brahman affirmed that it is absolute unchanging, infinite and eternal reality. There is no difference between Brahman and individual soul. Brahman is beyond space, time and causation of the empirical world, it is the highest level of reality known as *pāramārthikasattā*. The reality of the empirical world which is contingent and changing depends on the Ultimate reality that is Brahman. All empirical knowledge arise from the distinction between the knower and the known. The limitations of name and form(nam-rupa) are the root cause of all differences. Non-duality can be achieved by transcending these limitations. Just as in the snake-rope illusion the false perception of a snake vanishes when we perceive the rope as a rope. All illusory appearances will be dispelled by the correct knowledge.

Śankara emphasized the conception of Brahman from two point of views in two distinct forms - Saguna Brahman (Brahman with attributes) and Nirguna Brahman (Brahman without attributes). In Saguna aspect, Brahman is described as the creator, the sustainer, the destroyer of the world. He is Omnipotent and Omniscient Being. Again in Nirguna aspect, Brahman is viewed as devoid of all qualities and distinctions internal and external. It is absolutely indeterminate, indescribable, non-dual and unconditioned consciousness. The moment we try to bring Brahman within the categories of intellect it becomes

conditioned. Conditioned Brahman is named as Isvara through its Saguna aspect, which is also known as Apra Brahman or lower Brahman. Unconditioned Brahman is Para Brahman or higher Brahman which is the basis of all affirmations and denials. The best description of it is the negative formula ‘not this not this’ or *neti neti*. ‘The two ‘no’-es in the formula ‘*neti neti*’ are meant for emphasizing the fact that whatever can be presented as an object is ultimately unreal. They cover the entire field of objective existence and point out that it is not real. There is no better way of describing the Absolute than this negative method. But it should be never missed that all these negations pre-suppose and point towards the positive Brahman’⁷. Brahman is both transcendent and immanent, it is beyond and within everything. It embodies pure existence, consciousness and bliss, making up the very essence of the higher reality. It has no attributes, transcends time and is infinite. When Brahman is seen through the lens of cosmic ignorance (*māyā*), it becomes Isvara—the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the empirical world. Brahman is without any distinctions, yet it is complete, unified, and holds both diversity and unity within itself. ‘There is no other reality similar to it, from which it may differ. There is no other reality dissimilar to it, from which it may differ. There are no other realities within it, which differ from one another, as branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits differ from one another in a tree. Brahman is absolutely undifferentiated pure identity’⁸.

Conclusion:

Thus, from Śaṅkaracharya’s Advaita Vedanta perspective, the existence of the empirical world is a false reality—a mere illusion akin to a mirage, the mistaken perception of a rope as a snake, or the illusion of silver in a seashell. This phenomenal world is ultimately an illusory projection of Brahman, facilitated by *māyā*. While the empirical world may appear real to our senses, but it is indeed, no more substantial than a reflection in a mirror. In the ultimate sense, reality is singular and it is Brahman, which is one and without a second. The plurality we experience is simply Brahman seen through the veiling and distorting lens of *māyā*. However, this illusory projection dissolves when one attains true self-realization, recognizing that the individual self is non-different from Brahman. In this state of awareness all distinctions, forms and individual identities merge back into the oneness of Brahman. This realization leads to liberation from suffering and the endless cycle of birth and death, when one understands that Brahman alone is the true reality—unchanging, infinite, and non-dual. Brahman is pure existence, consciousness, and bliss (*sat-chit-ananda*). From the stance of Śaṅkara’s writings, it is evident that, for him all forms, distinctions and individualities are ultimately false and illusory, as they are merely transient reflections of the one eternal reality.

Reference:

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