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## Sankana Essay

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Sankana Essay

by Kevin Brewton

(Philosophy 1100)

*Part I*

*Question #3*

*Metaphorical Doodling, Where Necessary*

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A common *Expo* marker darted across the white expanse, leaving behind a short diagonal line of color. The erasable weapon came back, glancing off the glossy surface eight more times, until its red gashes formed a six-sided shape with an odd ‘Y’ in its center.

“Now,” said the owner of the hand holding the marker, “What do you see?”

His sole student stared at the white board for a few seconds, before nodding to herself. “I see a cube,” she stated calmly.

“Really?” the teacher asked, raising an eyebrow, “All I see is a hexagon with the letter ‘Y’ inside it.”

The student studied the board for a few moments, until her eyes widened in understanding. She looked back to her teacher with a frown on her face. “But it is supposed to be a three dimensional cube, is it not?”

Her teacher shook his head, holding a stern expression. “What it *is* and what you see it as are two completely separate things. Even now, you cannot tell me you are thinking of this image as what it truly is: some ink on a whiteboard. Instead, you have assigned it shapes, forms, and dimensions that this small bit of color simply does not possess.”

The student tilted her head in confusion, “I am simply looking at that drawing as we all do: a form of art. What it is made of does not detract from how I see it.”

The teacher simply shook his head. “What you fail to see is that this same error of perception exists all around us, in every minute atom of this world. What we ‘see’ is merely an illusion, just as intangible as the three-dimensional cube you claim exists in this two dimensional board. The *only* thing on that surface is ink, just as the *only* thing present in the universe is *Brahman*.”

“But,” the student asked, frowning, “how can there be only *Brahman* when I can clearly see you standing before me, the ink on this board, and the floor upon which we stand? You would say that all these tangible things do not exist?”

Her instructor sighed, pointing again to the shape emblazoned upon the board beside him. “Look at this drawing, is there anything truly *real* about the ‘cube’? Does the *cube* have color? Does it have form? Could you *feel* it?”

His student furrowed her brow, “Well, the cube is merely an illusion of the ink. But I still *see* it, it still exists as a drawing.”

“Wrong,” the master stated, “You are merely confusing the ink’s qualities with the cube’s. The *ink* is colorful, tangible, and has existence. The cube is *only* an illusion, and you know this, yet still, you defend it.”

“Whether or not the cube is made of ink,” the student replied, “it is still a cube. It is a concept that I can clearly see in my mind’s eye.”

The teacher scowled, “*That* is nescience. Your ignorance goes so far as to acknowledge itself! Your ‘mind’s eye’ is nothing but a further extension of *maya*, of the great illusion we all

experience. The qualities which you assign the *cube* are in fact those of the *ink*. And no matter how much you believe differently, the *cube* possesses none of them.” He paused, taking a breath as the student digested his wisdom. He chose to ignore the sour expression on her face as he began to speak once more.

“It is this same problem of superimposition, of giving the qualities which are *Brahman*’s alone to the things we ‘see’ or otherwise ‘experience’ through both our mind and our senses in this transmigratory existence, that plagues each and every soul caught in this cycle. Nothing exists, except for *Brahman*. And therefore when we say something has existence, we are superimposing a trait which is solely *Brahman*’s upon an unworthy thing.”

The student maintained her irritation as she spoke, “If what you say is true, why do we see the world as we do? How does *Brahman* become *everything*?”

“I’ve already revealed this to you,” the instructor responded, pointing once more to the drawing beside him, “You clearly see something other than the simple bit of ink that is present on this whiteboard. It is in that way that *Brahman* manifests itself as the universe. It begins as *Unevolved Name and Form*, before coalescing into the first of the five elements, Ether, and from there moving on to become Air, Fire, Water, and Earth. Just as the lines produced by this marker form together to create complex tapestries of images which grow off of each other with each successive addition.” He swiftly added five more lines to the board, giving the illusion of a second cube attached to the right of the first.

The learner looked at the drawing thoughtfully for a few more moments, before once more speaking. “If that is so, why do you say the world is an illusion? Even if it is entirely *Brahman*, it is still ‘evolved name and form’ and thus still existent.”

“Do you not see?” her teacher said, “There *are* no cubes on this board, no drawings. There is *only* ink, and until you comprehend that you will forever see a lie. The world around us is just as false as this image is. There is no ‘Earth,’ no ‘you’ or ‘me.’ There is simply *Brahman*. When you at last come to this understanding you will be set free of the Transmigratory existence, free from this illusion of individuality and nescience.”

The clock on the wall chimed thrice, causing the student and her teacher to let out sighs. “Thank you, instructor,” she said, as she rose from her desk, “But it seems I will have to stay trapped in this beautiful world a while yet.”

*Part I*  
*Question #4*  
*Questions and Ethics*

“...And in his works, Sankara encourages his students to participate in certain ‘ethical and moral actions.’ You can find the list on page eighty-eight of Mayeda’s commentary,” the lecturer droned, standing at his podium before a small group of learners. “The first is the observation of abstention, which means abstaining from injury, falsehood, theft, incontinence, possession of things, and—”

The elder glanced up from his notes as the frantic waving of a hand caught his attention. “Yes?” he asked tiredly.

“Sir!” the young student exclaimed, “How can Sankara advise his followers to perform *actions* when he clearly says, on page eighty-five, that all ‘action should be renounced by a seeker after final release’? When we attain enlightenment, are we not becoming one with *Brahman* and thus no longer participating in the action and reaction of the Transmigratory existence?”

The professor blinked, adjusting his spectacles as he processed the rapid-fire speech. “Very true, young one,” he said after a moment, “This is, in fact, a topic on which the Philosopher contradicts himself multiple times throughout his writings.”

The same child who had questioned him spoke up once more, “Why would he do that? Didn’t he realize he was asking us to do two completely opposite things?”

The teacher smiled, quickly rearranging the structure of his lecture as he responded. “Yes, it would have been difficult for him to *not* have realized that. Sankara’s reasons for this contradiction could be any number of things, one of which is the fact that anyone studying under him during his time period would have had to be of the Brahmin, or ‘priest’ caste, of society, and thus already possess an abundant amount of ‘good’ karma and most likely a fairly strict code of ethics as well.” He paused, checking to make sure the ten or so pupils present were paying attention.

“However, the reason that Sankara touched upon ethics at all in his writings was most likely to help those reading his works get to a point in their brief life where they could more easily attain final release from the cycle. As Mayeda says, on page ninety-four, ‘Sankara’s view of ethics may be vague or self-contradictory, but this is because its real aim is the highest possible effectiveness in leading his pupils to the final goal’. So,” the instructor continued, “the contradiction of ethics is used merely as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Sankara only wishes you to follow his advice in order to further your climb to enlightenment, and then abandon it once you no longer require moral, karmic actions to prepare you for the renunciation of the illusory world.”

The students pondered that for a few moments as the professor read over his notes. Before long, a different hand was thoughtfully raised in the air. The teacher nodded towards the inquirer, and the student asked, “If that is true, then what kinds of things should we do to get to the final release? Would they not also give us *karman* if we performed them?”

The master nodded sagely, “Very good questions. What Sankara encourages in terms of actions and behaviors that could lead us to the final release are, as I said before, abstention in life from many different and negative actions; austerity, or sternness, in life; improving the concentration of the mind; allowing the emaciation of the body; and performing regular permanent rites. There are also things that, while not truly a part of ethics, might benefit you in your climb to escape the cycle. *Parisamkhyana* meditation, for instance, is to help you destroy your acquired merit and demerit. Furthermore, if you have not done so already, a good idea would be to read the *Sruti* and *Smriti* scriptures, and also learn to distance yourself from your body. All of these would help you to clear your head so that your mind becomes pure until, at long last, you break free of the fallacy of perception that is the transmigratory existence. However, as you asked, these actions do grant you *karman*, and thus force you to participate in the illusion.”

A younger student spoke up as the teacher’s wisdom echoed away in the large hall. “So why should we do these things? Why would we heap more and more karma onto ourselves if all we are trying to do is escape the transmigratory existence?”

The teacher frowned at the interruption, but a glance at the clock quickly forced him to answer it before his learners were left to ponder such things for another week. “As I have said before, these actions are a means of preparation for the final release. It does not matter if they are ethical or unethical; after all, many would view life after the final release as ‘unethical’ once the seeker leaves his family and duties behind. You must use these suggestions as you would a ladder, and climb ever upwards with such actions until you at last reach salvation. When you have attained your release, you simply cease all participation in the cycle and knock down the ladder of preparation, as it is no longer necessary. Actions and behavior are indispensable before one achieves the final release, but once it is attained they are cast aside in the light of the knowledge that ‘thou art that’ and thus not a part of any caste or illusion which requires action.”

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*Part II*  
*Analyzing Adi Sankara*

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Like the student in the first half of *Part I*, I was eventually able to grasp the concepts that go into Sankara's theologically philosophical system of thought, and understand what he thinks and why. However, I cannot say that I agree with some of the leaps in logic he takes, nor do I put stock in the scriptures from which he occasionally cites. I can follow his ideology from the concept of *Brahman* all the way through to salvation, but there are several spots where I lose my willing suspension of disbelief and thus reject the conclusions Sankara comes to. That is to say I understand his system fairly comprehensively, but I do not agree with some of the parts that make it work. The main points I shall address and attempt to debate are the cause of *avidya* and the theory—as well as the practice—of *moksha*, or salvation from the transmigratory existence. But in order to get to those things, we must first take a look at Sankara's Cosmological theory.

Sankara states that *Brahman* can be described using the theory of 'neti, neti,' or, 'not this, not this,' which entails pointing out everything that *Brahman* can *not* be and working your way through the layers of non-eternal things until you at last find the pure, perfect 'stuff' behind the world we live in. Instead of reaching the Buddhist answer of *Brahman* being nothing, Sankara finds that this uncaused, unknown *being* is all things, the 'One without a second,' which is the reason that there can be only one dimension of reality. Sankara then goes on to say that *Atman*, which is *Brahman*—and also deserves its own definition as 'That which is You'—is the Pure Consciousness which ties all of our past and future lives in the transmigratory existence together. He also uses the phrase 'saccidananda' to describe It, which is broken down into 'Being' (*Brahman*) - 'Consciousness' (*Atman*) - 'Bliss' (Which Sankara does not accept and ignores unless whatever he is commenting upon forces him to mention it; he does not believe *Brahman* to be 'Blissful' no matter what his sacred texts tell him). This is not a 'division' of *Brahman* so much as a way to think about it; similar to Thomas Aquinas's God having three facets yet still being 'one' person—though of course, *Brahman* is vastly different from that deity. Moving forward, the proposition that *Brahman* and *Atman* are both different and non-different, as the sea and its waves are different and non-different, is certainly an apt metaphor for this idea. To me, this theory of Spiritual Monism is fairly logical, and—though to my Westernized mind it seems vastly more complicated than the dualism of mind and body we are familiar with—*Brahman* and *Atman* make sense, up to a point.

As I outlined in Question 3, *Brahman* 'emanates' and 'evolves' into the physical world, and Sankara further believes that the 'reality' we experience is in fact an illusion caused by *avidya*—ignorance, or more specifically the superimposition (or 'switching of qualities' which was outlined during my answer to Question 3) of *Atman* and non-*Atman*—whose cause he does not go into much depth with during his writings. In my humble opinion, this is not a satisfactory explanation for the world we know. Sankara tries his hardest to preserve the notion of Spiritual Monism—which declares that there is ultimately only one reality—but Mayeda himself states, "[Sankara's notion of Unevolved Name and Form creates a new issue:] What is *avidya*? This problem gave birth to very great controversy among the followers of Sankara himself, just as later the problem of the relationship between *Brahman* and *Atman* was to play a central role in the division of the whole Vedanta school"(25).

The world we live in, or at least experience in our ignorance, is a very imperfect place. So, if *Brahman* is the only truth and all else is illusion, where exactly does this false perception come from? It seems difficult to contemplate how an utterly perfect entity could somehow give rise to a universe as complex and as wildly shrouded in nescience as our own. Sankara himself deflects the question of *avidya*'s origin each and every time one of the pupils in his writings ask it, because he "knows what the questioner is really asking, but [...] refrains from engaging in endless and profitless

speculation on *avidya*”(80). To Sankara the real issue is earning final release from the cycle, and this is his real goal to the exclusion of all else—including this rather glaring lack of explanation. Mayeda points this out several times over the course of his commentary, but yet he also agrees that, “Indulgence in profitless speculation [on *avidya*] is nothing but the result of *avidya*”(80). Despite the fact that I can see the logic behind this statement—trying to understand where ignorance comes from is something only someone still caught in the cycle of ignorance would worry about—this still does not answer the question of nescience’s existence. And thus I cannot help but question the integrity of Sankara’s Monism which—despite its comprehensiveness—asks us to simply wave away the cause of all imperfection, evil, suffering, and the rest of the transmigratory existence. However, agreeing to disagree with the eighth century thinker on this point and accepting the fact that *avidya* exists, I will move onto the soteriology of Sankara’s philosophy—his main purpose for writing and teaching.

Once again, I find that I can follow him through this chain of logic up to a point. Sankara puts forth the theory that each of us is a part of—or rather, One with—*Atman*, but we are all trapped in *maya*—the illusion of the world—and have lost knowledge of *Atman* due to our nescience. In order to be saved from *avidya*, we have to step back from our egos, our “I”-notions, realize that we are a part of the Pure Consciousness, not an individual, and let go of our false perceptions of reality to become ‘One with the One’. Now, to me, as a general concept this ‘transmigratory existence’ makes sense. Action gives ‘you’ karma, forces ‘you’ to be reborn as something either better or worse than what ‘you’ were—a cycle that must be escaped from as it will never cease and you cannot maintain ‘good’ karma for long—and the only way out of that vicious circle is knowledge, which is incompatible with action. At least, once I decide to simply accept that the *Sruti*—scripture ‘heard’ by ancient vedantic sages—says so, and therefore this theory of how life works *must* be true, I have little logic to actually critique here aside from ‘who gave the scriptures the authority to tell the truth?’. So with that said I shall move onto Sankara’s spin on things.

The main problem I have with Sankara’s soteriology, his path to ‘salvation,’ is two-fold. First, before I begin to question his methods, I must say I generally disagree with his motivation for ‘final release.’ Given the general idea of *Brahman*, *Atman*, *maya*, and *avidya*, I can safely say that—like the girl in my answer to Question 3—I am quite happy to continue enjoying this work of art that is our world and thus participate merrily in the illusion. In fact, the idea of reincarnation and the transmigratory existence isn’t all that *unattractive* to me—not that I put a whole lot of faith in the theory for, as I stated above, there seems to be little evidence of it aside from the scriptures Sankara follows.

Now, moving past the motivation behind achieving *moksha*, I would like to focus on Sankara’s method for final release. In order to escape the transmigratory existence, the philosopher believes one must realize *tat tvam asi* or ‘Thou art That’ and thus recognize the self—the “I”-notion—is an illusion based in ignorance. In my opinion, there seems to be a few problems with this practice. First of all, the concept of ‘renouncing’ the self—one’s identity in this mortal realm—seems contradictory to me. Sankara writes, “He to whom both ‘I,’ the notion of ‘oneself,’ and ‘my,’ the notion of ‘one’s own,’ have become meaningless, becomes a knower of *Atman*” (138). And my response to this declaration is: who, exactly, is ‘He’? The individual who steps back and declares his identity and “I”-notion to be false is still an individual, for, if *Atman* is changeless, how can it reject—as an action—anything?

Moving on, should this rejection of the individual be possible as Sankara claims, even the very idea of ‘final release’ seems strange. When a seeker reaches enlightenment and realizes that he or she is *Brahman*, they are supposed to simply cease all action in the illusory world. This leaves me questioning the reason they retain their bodies at all, if they truly are *Atman* and have completely given up their worldly “I”-notion. In fact to me it might make more sense if their physical forms simply evaporated, or were otherwise given up at the same time as their mental identities.

But, regardless of that oddity, another point I would like to bring up is the notion that ‘you’ have escaped. Firstly, Sankara states, “[...] action should be renounced by a seeker after final release”(85). And I, personally, would think that if one truly does attain *moksha*, they would no longer exist as something *capable* of action. They become One with *Atman*, and therefore should not be able to perform any actions at all in the physical realm as they are changeless and eternal. How can they *renounce*, which is itself a form of action, anything? Of course, I also question the reverse of that point. If one escapes the cycle and renounces or rids themselves of *avidya*—again, the individual seems to be the one rejecting *avidya*—how can they be certain that ‘they’ will not simply enter the transmigratory existence once again as another false “I”-notion? In theory, they have become One with *Atman* and ceased to exist as an individual, so what part of *them* is ‘saved’ exactly? The *Atman* behind their ‘self’ should never have been in need of ‘saving’ as it is perfect, and their “I”-notion was just terminated. ‘Their’—or rather ‘that’—wave of *Atman* on the sea of *Brahman* has returned to its source, yet I see no pressing need for this to happen. In fact, since they are now a nameless part of *Atman* once more—or at least have lost whatever separated them from *Atman*, as *Atman* itself cannot change—what is to stop ‘them’ from simply rising again as some other wave, some other “I”-notion trapped in the transmigratory existence?

This question, and all the others I have voiced here, prevent me from simply accepting Sankara’s soteriology. I understand that Sankara does not dwell on any possible flaws in his writings because he is simply trying to help those suffering in transmigratory existence to escape, but this does not persuade me to turn the same blind eye towards them. Indeed, perhaps I am simply so entrenched in *avidya* myself that I cannot see the purity of Sankara’s truths, but if that is the case I cannot say that I am eager to give it up. The ideas of Immanuel Kant—that reason and experience are purely what we should use to look at the world—certainly hold far greater appeal to me, for one does not have to rely on scriptures, or the belief that we should not question things—such as *avidya*—that we do not understand, to find meaning in life. Overall, I would not consider myself a follower of *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy, as it seems to me both unattractive *and* bearing some not-negligible issues. Truly, I am more than content to simply live this illusory life to its fullest, regardless of how ignorant that they may be.

*Written, Revised, and Retroactively Revolutionized by: Kevin Brewton*

*Post Scriptum:* I would like to make a short comparison between Thomas Aquinas and Sankara that doesn’t really seem to have a place in the main essay. It seems to me like these two brilliant men wrote for similar and yet very different reasons. Aquinas scribbled away on thousands of pages for most of his life, trying to logically debate the existence of God, among other things, with the people of his time. And yet when he supposedly had his vision from God during a church service, the great thinker never picked up a pen again. Sankara, on the other hand, writes supposedly *after* he has already escaped the cycle and achieved *moksha*. He wants to lead people out of transmigratory existence and so ‘goes back across the river’ of nescience in order to actively write and teach for his followers; a regression which I believe he himself states is preposterous. So both philosophers write in order to help others follow their theological logic, but while both ‘see the light’ of their Ultimate Beings, they react to it in very different ways. This isn’t really a critique of either philosophers, merely an intriguing observation that we did not go over in class.

Reference

Mayeda, Sengaku (trans & ed). *A Thousand Teachings: The Upandesasahasri of Sankara*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.