

## Classical Advaitic Definitions of ‘Substance’ and the Unreality of the World

Many recent studies have highlighted the dialectical structure of the argumentative strategies through which Brahmanical and Buddhist conceptual systems developed in classical India. The diverse groups of Vedāntic thinkers were engaged in mutual doctrinal controversy over the nature of Brahman, and sought alternately to appropriate or to dismantle the standpoints of their Buddhist interlocutors. For instance, while medieval Advaita Vedānta often positioned itself as sharply antagonistic to Buddhism, Śaṅkara (c. 800 CE) himself had, however, arguably Vedānticized certain Buddhist elements that were transmitted to him through his spiritual lineage. Further, there are striking parallels between the deconstruction of rival Buddhist standpoints attempted by Nāgārjuna (c. 200 CE) who tried to demonstrate the deep incoherence of any substantialist vocabulary, and the Advaitin project, roughly ten centuries later, of Śrī Harṣa who trained his dialectical weapons at the realist categories of the Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika. If a standard accusation against Vedāntic figures such as Śaṅkara was that they had ‘gone Buddhist’, some Buddhist figures themselves would seem, at least in the representation of their rivals, to have moved towards Vedāntic conceptualisations of the self as substantial. Thus, strands of Mahāyāna Buddhism such as the Yogācāra and the Tathāgatagarbha were sometimes accused by other Buddhist camps of ‘substantializing’ the ultimate when they spoke respectively of a ‘storehouse-consciousness’ underlying empirical cognitions or a ‘Buddha-nature’ in all sentient beings.

This overview of some of the overlaps as well as disjunctions between the two camps in Vedāntic–Buddhist dialectics already indicates that a central theme that structured these

arguments was the notion of ‘substance’. We shall argue that while certain forms of Vedānta and Madhyamaka Buddhism are shaped by the same set of presuppositions regarding ‘substance’, they derive opposed conclusions from this point of departure as they elaborate their conceptual universes. Further, while ~~both~~ Advaitins such as Śaṅkara and Viśiṣṭādvaitins such as Rāmānuja seek to defend against their Buddhist rivals the thesis that the phenomenal world is a ‘dependent substance’, in the sense that it derives its empirical being from the foundational Ground of Brahman, they disagree over this crucial question: ‘precisely how real is this dependent substance?’ As we will note, while Viśiṣṭādvaitins such as Rāmānuja and Vedānta Deśika argue that the phenomenal world is a substantively real entity that is ontologically dependent on the Lord Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, several key Advaitins reject this standpoint on the ground that the notion of ‘dependent substance’ is logically incoherent. The ‘Advaita’ standpoint itself, however, is more fine-grained than this oppositional sketch would indicate: we shall argue that the Advaitins we discuss in this essay can be placed on a conceptual spectrum ranging from the affirmation that the world has some ‘measure’ of phenomenal reality (what we shall call the Weak Advaita of, for instance, the fourteenth century Advaitin Prakāśātman) to the denial that the world possesses any ‘degree’ of phenomenal substantiality whatsoever (what we shall call the Strong Advaita of, for instance, the seventeenth century Advaitin Prakāśānanda). While many of the disputes in Vedāntic discourse were conducted on the field of scriptural exegesis, we seek to highlight the point that they are often also structured by a key conceptual debate over whether the empirical world has any ‘substantial’ reality.

## *The Notion of 'Substance' in Advaita*

The responses of classical Advaita to this question are structured by the understanding that, strictly speaking, Reality (*sat*) is *that* which is not subject to any transformations, or, to use a characteristic Advaitic turn of phrase, *that* which is not sublated through the three times (Ramachandran 1969:5). Śaṅkara argues, in his commentary on *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II, 1, 1 (p.291), that something is said to be substantively real (*satya*) when once it has been ascertained to be in a certain condition it does not undergo any change in that condition (*yadrūpeṇa yanniścitaṁ tadrūpaṁ na vyabhicarati*). Therefore, all empirical entities that form the spatio-temporal world are said to be substantively unreal because they undergo change (*vikāra*). (Swami Gambhirananda 1972: 291). A clear substantival distinction is therefore to be drawn between empirical states of consciousness such as dreams and waking experiences and the Self, because unlike the Self which is self-existent they are transient events. These states cannot truly belong to the Self, for what is one's own nature is never seen to cease to persist while one is persisting (*na hi yasya yatsvarūpam tat tadvyabhicāri drṣtam*) (*Upadeśasāhasrī* I, 2, 89. :- Swami Jagadananda 1979: p.54).<sup>+</sup> This axiomatic equivalence between Reality and immutability forms the conceptual basis for Advaita's attempts to demonstrate, by appeal to epistemic instruments (*pramāṇas*) such as perception, inference, and scriptural revelation, that the trans-categorical reality of Brahman is non-dual with the phenomenal world which is an insubstantial illusion. One of the analogies that Śaṅkara uses for this Advaitic thesis is that of the substantival clay from which pots are

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produced. He argues that pots of clay are really clay in their causal substance, for these modifications (*vikāra*) are names only which originate and exist through speech. Therefore, to the extent that they are names they are unreal (*anṛtam*), and to the extent that they are of the ‘stuff’ of clay they are real (*satyam*) (*Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* [BSB] II, 1, 14; ~~Thibaut 1890, vol.1, pp. 320–21~~).<sup>2</sup> Śaṅkara employs this analogy, of course, to indicate that Brahman is the substantial Ground of the phenomenal world, not in the sense that Brahman is like the mundane substances (*dravya*) that one encounters in everyday life, but that Brahman is the eternal, unconditioned, and indivisible hyper-Being that subsists beyond all empirical changes. The axiomatic equivalence between Reality (*sat*) and non-origination indicated in this analogy underlies Śaṅkara’s view that the Self, one’s true nature, is never destroyed because it is uncaused; therefore, liberation is neither a union nor a separation from the Self, for these processes are transitory (*Upadeśasāhasrī* II, 16, 39–41, ~~Swami Jagadananda 1979, p. 179~~).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, agency does not belong to the very nature of the self (*na svābhāvikaṃ kartṛtvamātmanaḥ sambhavati*), for there would then be no liberation from it, just as fire cannot be separated from heat (*BSB* II, 3, 40; ~~Thibaut 1890, vol.2, p.53~~), ~~Swami Gambhirananda 1977: 498~~).<sup>4</sup>

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The basic theme that reality, strictly speaking, has an unchanging intrinsic nature had already been articulated by Śaṅkara’s *paramaguru* Gauḍapāda who utilised distinctive Mahāyāna Buddhist terms, images, and allusions to develop a Vedānticised doctrine of non-origination (*ajātivāda*) of the empirical world. The *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* employs at several places the equivalence between true substantial reality and immutability when it states that the change of the immutable Brahman into a world of diversity is only apparent, for if it underwent a change in reality (*tattvataḥ*), the immortal would become mortal (*Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* [GK]

[3.19; p. 24](#), [Karmarkar 1953: 24](#)).<sup>5</sup> Even more clearly, the text defines intrinsic nature (*prakṛti*) as that which is self-existent, inherent, natural, not artificial, and that which does not abandon its own nature ([GK 4.9; p.33](#)).[Karmarkar 1953: 33](#)).<sup>6</sup> More concretely, the analytic definitions that structure the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* can be stated in this manner:

Reality = Df *that* which is not subject to any modification.

Premise 1: If x undergoes change, then x is not Reality.

Premise 2: The empirical world undergoes change.

Conclusion 1: Therefore, the empirical world is not Reality.

Premise 3: Whatever is not Reality is substantively non-existent.

Conclusion 2: The empirical world is substantively non-existent.

Thus we arrive at the conclusion that, transcendentally speaking (*paramārthatā*) there is no destruction or origination, nobody is bound to the world and nobody strives for liberation, and neither is there anyone who is an aspirant after liberation or anyone who is liberated ([GK 2.32; p.17](#)).[Karmarkar 1953: 17](#)).<sup>7</sup> The argument for the non-origination of substantial reality is spelled out through a series of dilemmas regarding the nature of (empirical) causality. On the one hand, the causal substance, if it were to undergo an intrinsic change when the effect is produced, cannot be eternal (*nityam*). On the other hand, if we were to assume that it is from an unoriginated causal substance that the effect is originated, we have no illustration to support such a possibility (*dr̥ṣṭāntastasya nāstī*) ([GK 4.10–13; p.34](#)).[Karmarkar 1953: 34](#)).<sup>8</sup> Further, if both the cause and the effect were to be regarded as

originated entities, we would have to determine which one of these should be called the ‘cause’ and which the ‘effect’. Since both these are ‘unsubstantiated’ (*aprasiddha*) one cannot be the causal basis of the other ([GK 4: 14–18; pp.35–6](#)). ~~[Karmarkar 1953: 35–6](#)~~.<sup>9</sup>

The text elaborates these dilemmas to grapple with the question ‘precisely *what* undergoes transformation in everyday changes?’ If the *what* refers to an existent which possesses intrinsic nature, *it* cannot be originated, and if the *what* refers to a non-existent, neither can *it* be originated. The conclusion that origination or dissolution are only empirically perceived, but are not a feature of Reality, is elaborated by Śaṅkara in his commentary on the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* with his own set of dilemmas. Śaṅkara argues ~~[\(at 4.22\)](#)~~ that if a thing already exists (in the strict sense of possessing intrinsic nature), then just because *it* exists, we cannot speak of it being born out of non-existence; and if a thing does not exist, then by the very fact of its non-existence *it* cannot be born (*yady\_ asat tathāpi na jāyate asattvād\_ eva*) ([Gauḍapādīya-kārikā-bhāṣya 4.22; p.342](#)). ~~[Swami Gambhirananda 1978: 342](#)~~.<sup>10</sup> This is because such changes involving the mutation of one’s substantial nature (*prakṛteḥ anyathābhāva*) cannot take place any more than fire can become devoid of heat ([3.21; p.295](#)). ~~[Swami Gambhirananda 1978: 295](#)~~.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Paradox of Liberation in Classical Advaita*

These *analytic equivalences* between the existent and the immutable can be seen as part of the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā*’s response, grounded in the *Upaniṣadic* theme of ultimate reality that undergoes no change, to another version of these dilemmas outlined by Nāgārjuna. If an entity possesses an own-nature or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), we cannot say that *it* has changed because an own-nature is by definition unchangeable, while if an entity does not

possess an own-nature, we cannot say that *it* has changed for ‘change’ is understood as the transformation of one own-nature to something else (King 1995: 129). While Nāgārjuna and the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* both accept Premise 1, they dissolve this dilemma in two distinct ways because of their ‘diametrically opposite starting points’: the former starts with the doctrine of dependent origination, and the latter with the immutable Brahman (Comans 2000: 95). Thus the former concludes that there is no ~~substantial-own-nature~~ nature (*svabhāva*), and views this thesis of the insubstantiality (*śūnyatā*) of all the fleeting constituents (*dharmā*) as a logical explication of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence (*anitya*). The *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* concludes, in contrast, that there is a unitary and indivisible intrinsic nature, namely, the eternal Brahman, and all worldly changes are insubstantial appearances. For this statement of the metaphysical unreality of whatever is not substantial, namely, Premise 3, the text invokes the ‘well-established’ (*prasiddha*) reason that whatever does not exist at the beginning and at the end, that is, whatever is a part of the causal nexus, does not exist even in the present (*ādāv\_ante ca yan\_nāsti vartamāne’ pi tat\_tathā*) ([GK 2.4–6: pp. 10–11](#)). ~~Karmakar 1953: 10–11~~.<sup>12</sup> The non-existence of the world indicated in this terse aphorism should be read not as the statement that empirical objects are as utterly unreal (*tuccha*) as the proverbial horn of a hare but that because they are causal products they are, transcendently speaking, substantively unreal through all the three times.

This is the famous doctrine of the two ‘levels’ of truth that Advaita articulates to claim, according to John Grimes (1991a: 19), that only Brahman is ‘absolutely real; never being subject to contradiction. All else can be called ‘real’ only by courtesy’. The axiomatic status of this equivalence between Reality and immutability for Advaita is clear from Śaṅkara’s remark, in his commentary on *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* I, 11, 4 ([p. 275](#)), that what is eternal

cannot be produced even if there are a hundred scriptural texts which support this view (*na hi vacanaśatenāpi nityamārbhyate*). [\(Swami Gambhirananda 1972: 275\)](#). However, from the human social ‘level’, empirical distinctions, which originate in and are sustained by linguistic conventions, are accorded some measure of reality, even if ‘only by courtesy’. We find Śāṅkara moving between these two registers when he responds, [in his commentary on the \*Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upanīśad\* \(p.317\)](#), to the argument that if Brahman is the only reality there would be no culture of teaching and learning about the unity of Brahman. He replies that if the objector means to suggest that when the transcendent Brahman is realised as the only reality, there will be no more instruction or learning, this is his position as well. However, if the objector claims that instruction is useless even before the realization of Brahman, this assertion should be rejected because it contradicts the assumption of aspirants to liberation that instruction in Brahman guides them to the final end. [\(Swami Madhavananda 1950: 317\)](#). Therefore, while repetition of scriptural texts would be useless for a student who is able to cognize the true nature of Brahman on being told just once ‘that you are’, in the case of people who are not able to do so, repetition is necessary [\(BSB IV, 1, 2; Thibaut 1890: vol.2, p.334\)](#).<sup>43</sup> From this empirical standpoint, Śāṅkara allows that though it is one and the same Self that lies hidden in all reality, we may say, following scripture, that the Self reveals itself in a graduated series (*uttarottaram*) of beings [\(BSB I, 1, 11; vol.1, p.63\)](#).<sup>44</sup> Therefore, injunctions and prohibitions, in both secular and ritual spheres, become meaningful because the Self seems to have become different through connection (*sambandha*) with bodies and other limiting adjuncts [\(BSB II, 3, 48; vol.2, p. 67\)](#).<sup>45</sup> Śāṅkara emphasises that such ritual actions perform merely the negative role of removing obstacles on the path to the origination of knowledge, and in this sense they may be said to subserve final reality mediately (*ārādupakāraivat*) [\(BSB IV, 1, 16; vol.2, p. 359\)](#).<sup>46</sup> While knowledge, once it has emerged, does not need any help towards the accomplishment of its fruit, it does need certain



conditions for its origination such as sacrifices, austerities, and so on (*āśramakarmāṇi vidyayā phalasiddhau na apekṣyante utpattau ca apekṣyante*) (BSB III, 4, 26; vol.2, p. 307).<sup>47</sup>

From this empirical stance, Śaṅkara even speaks of acts of devotion as leading to different results such as gradual emancipation (*kramamukti*) or worldly success (*karmasamṛddhi*), for these distinct acts are ultimately directed at the highest Self (BSB I, 1, 11; vol.1, p. 62).<sup>48</sup>

From the transcendental vantage-point, of course, for those who have reached the highest state of reality the apparent world does not exist (*evam paramārthāvasthāyām sarvavyavahārābhavam vadanti vedāntāḥ sarve*) (BSB II, 1, 14; vol.1, pp. 329–30).<sup>49</sup>

Śaṅkara's fundamental point that Brahman alone is the true reality, for only Brahman is utterly incapable of modification, shapes the arguments of his disciple Sureśvara (c. 900 CE) for the self-established nature of Brahman at several crucial points. First, Sureśvara employs the equivalence, transcendently speaking, of substantival reality with immutability (Premise 1) to argue that the empirical 'I' is not the true Self, for the fact that the former is mutable shows that it cannot be associated with the eternal Brahman any more than coolness can find its way into a blazing fire (*Naiṣkarmya-siddhi* [NS] 1.38; Alston 1959: p.94).<sup>20</sup> Echoing the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā*, Sureśvara argues in his *Sambandha-Vārtika* (p.34) that the substantial nature of things (*svabhāva*) cannot be changed, and a thing that has lost its nature is void of reality (*nīḥsvabhāva*) like a sky-flower. (Mahadevan 1972: 34). Therefore, it would be mistaken to claim that the mutable ego is a natural (*svābhāvika*) property of the Self in the way that a mango acquires different colours at different times, for the transcendental Self is changeless (NS 2.34; p.92; Alston 1959: 92).<sup>24</sup> Second, since the substantival hyper-Ground, the timeless Brahman, is an ever-realised fact, we may speak of 'attaining' liberation in terms not of the production of a new effect through action but merely of the removal of ignorance

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(*ajñāna-hāna-mātratvāt*) (NS 1.24; p.16).<sup>22</sup> More specifically, the knowledge which through mere manifestation (*svarūpa-lābha-mātreṇa*) destroys ignorance can be neither a subordinate nor a dominant partner with action (NS 1.64; p.44).<sup>23</sup> Therefore, when ignorance is said to be removed through knowledge, [Sureśvara indicates in the \*Sambandha-Vārtika\* \(p.17\) that the perfection \(\*kaivalya\*\) attained is only figuratively spoken of as what is accomplished \(\*sādhyā\*\).](#) (Mahadevan 1972: 17). This because the sphere of ignorance, which comprises agents and means of action, is, from the transcendental perspective, unreal (*ayathā-vastu*) and that of knowledge the true reality; therefore, the conjunction between the two would be like that between the sun and the night (NS 1.56; Alston 1959: p.40).<sup>24</sup> Consequently, Sureśvara dismisses the view that the knowledge of one's non-duality with the ultimate does not dispel ignorance, arguing that knowledge derived from the Vedic revelation demolishes ignorance at a single stroke (NS 1.67; p.47).<sup>25</sup> Third, like his master Śaṅkara, Sureśvara too moves between the strict sense of substantial reality, which applies only to the foundational reality of the trans-categorical Self, and the weaker sense that is applicable to the everyday objects of social existence. An objector asks whether the teachings of Advaita are intended for the empirical self immersed in the dualities of ordinary life or the highest non-dual Self. If it is for the latter, since it is always already liberated, the teachings are useless, while if it is for the former, since it is irrevocably transmigrant (*saṃsāra-svabhāvatvāt*), the teaching will not lead to liberation. Sureśvara replies that they are directed at individuals who, from their empirical standpoints, have not learnt to discriminate between the true self (which is never caught in transmigration) and the not-self (NS 4.20; p. 244).<sup>26</sup> However, while we speak of ignorance (*avidyā*) from our familiar experiences reported as 'I do not know', such talk does not arise from the standpoint of the Self which is the eternal substantial reality (*ātma-vastu*) (NS 3.111; p. 224).<sup>27</sup> Sureśvara therefore argues that while action is not a direct means of liberation, action contributes to the destruction of ignorance through a series of effects.

Sureśvara outlines this series (*paramparā*) as beginning with the performance of daily rituals which leads to *dharma*, which leads sequentially to destruction of sin (*papa*), purity of mind, correct understanding of transmigratory existence, indifference to the world, desire for liberation, search for means to liberation, renunciation of ritual action, practice of yoga (*yogābhyāsa*), focussing of the mind within (*cittasya pratyak-pravaṇatā*), knowledge of texts such as ‘thou art that’, eradication of ignorance, and finally establishment in the Self alone (NS 1.51–52: p. 37).<sup>28</sup> Therefore, seekers of liberation (*mumukṣu*) should perform daily and occasional rituals (*nityam naimittikam*) for the purification of the mind, for by performing these rituals, indifference to worldly enjoyments is generated, and the dirt of passion and delusion is rubbed away from the mind till it becomes clear like a well-polished crystal (*sammāṛjita-sphaṭika-śilā-kalpam*) or a mirror that abides in (*avatiṣṭhate*) the inner Self (NS 1.47: pp. 34–35).<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Sureśvara is emphatic that individuals who have not developed indifference to worldly affairs, and not practised certain ethical disciplines, should not be introduced to Advaita (NS 4.70: p. 266).<sup>30</sup> However, while such actions *dispose* an individual for the attainment of liberation through the hearing of scriptural texts, they do not, strictly speaking, *cause* liberation which *is* the self-established Brahman. Therefore, Sureśvara opposes the view, associated with Maṇḍana (a rough contemporary of Śaṅkara), that the knowledge gained from scripture is only indirect, and repeated meditation can turn this indirect knowledge into the direct knowledge which puts an end to notions of duality (Comans 2000: 383–85).

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A common theme that has emerged from our discussion of Śaṅkara and Sureśvara is that while, strictly speaking, all individuals *are* always already the eternal Brahman in the transcendental core of their empirical beings, they have to ‘progress’ towards this

transcendental vantage-point. However, it would seem paradoxical to state that the indivisible Brahman, the substantial hyper-Ground of all empirical reality, is *changeless* and not the transient end-product of a chain of effects, on the one hand, and that human beings, who are essentially Brahman, have to *move* towards the eternal Brahman, on the other hand. The Advaita tradition employs the vocabulary of two ‘levels’ of truth as an intended resolution of this paradox: it is only, as it were, from below that we seek to *attain* the intuitive realization of non-duality with Brahman, for we *are* always essentially Brahman, as it were, from above. Thus, the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā*, for all its affirmations, from above, of the transcendental unreality of (empirical) difference states, from below, that the *Upaniṣads* compassionately (*anukampayā*) prescribe to people, who are at different stages of understanding, meditations which involve notions of duality as devices through which they may gradually grasp the truth

(GK 3.15–16; p.23). Karmarkar 1953: 23).<sup>34</sup>

### *The Indivisibility of Substantial Reality*

The reason why we may not speak, in Advaitic contexts, of substantively real individuals progressing towards Brahman is because Reality is utterly undifferentiated, which is a conclusion that Advaitic texts seek to establish from its fundamental definition captured in Premise 1. Śāṅkara argues that the duality between cause and effect is empirically perceived but not metaphysically real, because the effect cannot exist independently of or separately from the cause, and whatever is incapable of self-existence is substantively unreal. A vital point of debate between Śāṅkara and the realist Vedāntic schools such as Viśiṣṭādvaita is therefore over what criteria should be used for identifying or enumerating substances. As Michael Levine argues: ‘Whereas appearances are significant criteria for individuating

objects phenomenally understood, they may be irrelevant criteria for the individuation of substances' (Levine 1995: 155). For Śaṅkara, the term 'substance' properly applies only to *that* which is absolutely metaphysically independent, so that the distinctions that we propose with respect to ordinary objects fail in the case of Brahman, which is the trans-categorical and undifferentiated foundation of the empirical world. While Śaṅkara argues that particulars such as gold bracelets do not have any independent existence over and above their material cause, and *hence* are unreal, the Viśiṣṭādvaitin denies the 'fundamental premise that only that which has an independent existence can be truly real' (Comans 1989: 195). The analytic definitions structuring the Advaitin's argument can therefore be spelled out in the following manner:

Reality = Df *that* which is causally independent.

Premise 4: If x is causally dependent, then x is not Reality.

Premise 5: The empirical world is causally dependent on its substantial hyper-Ground of Brahman (from *Upaniṣadic* exegesis).

Conclusion: The empirical world is not Reality.

Śaṅkara uses this argument against the Vaiśeṣika system which accepts six metaphysically independent categories which are absolutely different (*atyanta-bhinnān*) from one another. Regarding the crucial point of the relation between substance and attribute, the Vaiśeṣika argues, on the one hand, that they are substantively different, and, on the other, that they are connected through the relation of inherence (*samavāya*). Śaṅkara argues that the postulation of *samavāya* to connect the relata will lead to the following dilemma. On the one hand, one

would need to postulate another higher-order *samavāya* to connect each of the relata and the original *samavāya*, which would start an infinite regress. On the other hand, if the *samavāya* is not connected in any manner to the relata, this would result in the dissolution of the bond between the relata ([BSB II, 1, 18; Thibaut 1890: vol.1, p. 335](#)).<sup>32</sup> Śaṅkara seeks to resolve this dilemma by denying the metaphysical reality of *samavāya*: he argues that while we do perceive fire and smoke to be distinct (*bheda*), substances and ‘their’ putative qualities are not perceived in this manner. Rather, when we perceive a blue lotus the substance is cognized by means of the quality, and the quality therefore has its basis in the substance (*tasmād dravyātmakatā guṇasya*) ([BSB II, 2, 17; vol.1, p. 395](#)).<sup>33</sup> Śaṅkara’s argument about the logical incoherence of the category of *samavāya* seeks to establish the point that the ‘relation’ between the world and Brahman, its self-established foundational ground, is that of identity (*tādātmya*) ([BSB II, 2, 38; vol.1, p. 436](#)).<sup>34</sup> Consequently, all changes are to be located at the level of empirical perception structured by ignorance (*avidyā*), but from the substantively Real standpoint of undifferentiated Brahman these are insubstantial illusions (*māyā*).

We arrive at the thesis which helps Advaita to explain *how* undifferentiated Brahman appears to be divided into empirical objects – namely, that this process resists any logical explication in terms of realist categories. As Sureśvara notes, the ignorance which seems to produce duality is without a cause, violates all rules and reasons (*sarva-nyāya-virodhini*), and does not brook investigation (*sahate na vicāram*) any more than darkness brooks the light of the sun ([NS 3.66; Alston 1959: p. 194](#)).<sup>35</sup> A modern commentator on Advaita, T.P. Ramachandran (1969: 3) echoes Sureśvara in arguing that regarding questions about the nature of *avidyā*, Advaitins claim that since discursive thinking itself is a part of *avidyā*, such reasoning will not be able to answer such questions. Since the temporal process is associated with *avidyā*,

we cannot enquire about the beginning of *avidyā*, but neither can we state that *avidyā* is beginningless in the same unqualified sense that Brahman is for *avidyā* would then be interminable. Therefore, the *postulation* of *māyā* as an explanatory principle is to be taken as the admission that the nature of the empirical world is inscrutable, for it is, metaphysically speaking, neither substantively real nor utterly unreal (*anirvacanīya*) (Mahadevan 1977: 248). Indeed, R. Puligandla claims that the very attempt to explain the *how* rests on the category mistake of assuming that Brahman is an object alongside finite objects which are measurable, thinkable, or objectifiable. Since Brahman is not a part of this empirical categorial framework, all attempts to explicate the nature of *māyā* ‘only result in dogmatic metaphysical systems and theologies, which cannot bear thorough rational scrutiny, the tool of *māyā* ... Śaṅkara was right to reject every effort to rationally explain *māyā* ...’ (Puligandla 2013: 622). Therefore, the Advaitic thesis of the undifferentiated Brahman as the foundational Reality and the principle of *māyā* together form a *tight logical circle*, which allows classical Advaita to argue against their doctrinal rivals that their criticisms are themselves a product of ignorance. Thus Vedānta Deśika presents, [in his \*Śatadūsanī\* \(vol.3, p.25\)](#), a dilemma against the Advaitic understanding of liberation in this manner. Regarding the cessation of ignorance (*avidyānivṛtti*), he enquires whether this termination itself is illusory or real. If it is real, he asks whether it constitutes the very nature of Brahman. If yes, then *avidyā* would always be sublated; however, if it is said that Brahman arises after the cessation of *avidyā*, Brahman would be non-eternal. ~~(Dvivedi 1984: vol.3, 25)~~. Deśika presents an Advaitin opponent who argues that such criticisms levelled against the doctrine of *avidyā* do not hold because *avidyā* itself is ultimately unreal. ~~Therefore, the~~ ~~This is because~~ ~~the very~~ fact that *avidyā* cannot be grasped through any of the means of knowledge is not a blemish but is in fact an ornament (*bhūṣaṇam, na tu dūṣaṇam*) for Advaita (vol.3, 338).

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The vital question, of course, is *how* liberation is to be possible, if the very means aimed at liberation are themselves a part of ignorance. Once again, Advaitic texts seek to resolve this paradox through the dynamic of the ‘level-shift’ indicated in previous sections. Sureśvara outlines this shift tersely when he argues that by dissolving itself, the I-notion, which realises its non-duality with Brahman, serves as an *instrument* in the realization of the truth (NS 3.43; p.173). ~~Alston 1959: 173.~~<sup>36</sup> Further, he notes in his *Taittirīyopanisad-bhāṣya-vārtika* (pp. 380–81) that the cognition ‘I am Brahman’ is such that it can destroy ignorance and can itself disappear, in the same way that medicine disappears after destroying a disease. ~~(Balasubramanian 1974: 380–81).~~ Therefore, in addition to the partite knowledge (*khaṇḍākāra-vṛtti-jñāna*) which removes ignorance about empirical objects, the Advaita traditions speak of the impartite knowledge (*akhaṇḍākāra-vṛtti-jñāna*) which can remove ignorance about the formless Brahman, while itself perishing in the process of producing a direct knowledge of Brahman (Grimes 1991b: 298). That is, the human intellect, which is a product of *avidyā*, can, when it undergoes a scripturally-guided spiritual discipline, become the instrument which removes this ignorance as well as itself. (Indich 1980: 56). As R. Balasubramanian puts it, scriptural texts such as ‘I am Brahman’ produce ‘the non-sentential sense which goes beyond the realm of mind and speech. How it does is a mystery. But the truth is that it does’ (Balasubramanian 2000: 229).

### *The Reality of Dependent Substance*

The Advaitin appeals to ‘mystery’ can be read as an argumentative strategy to grapple with the notion that the empirical world is a ‘dependent substance’, which implies that it is real to the extent that it is grounded in Brahman, and substantively unreal to the extent that it is not



self-established. Indeed, it is *because* the world is not a substantial reality that it can be sublated, for given the strict definition of ‘substance’ in Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara, and Sureśvara (Premise 1), it would be a logical contradiction to claim that the *substantially real* world has been *negated*. The Advaita position on the ‘reality’ of the world has therefore been aptly characterised by C. Ram-Prasad as a form of ‘non-realism’ which states that there is no non-cognitive means of establishing whether the world is metaphysically determinate or not (Ram-Prasad 2002: 121). Śrī Harṣa (c. 1200 CE) elaborates this ‘non-realism’ against the Nyāya school which speaks of causally efficient objects that are independent of cognition, to claim that all that is required to explain (empirically observed) causal regularities is the *cognition* of these regularities. If he were to venture to describe the natures of things independently of cognition, he would be transgressing his own restrictions about not providing assertions about the world beyond the features attributed to it from within the circle of cognitive access. Ram-Prasad points out that Śrī Harṣa’s conclusions make his ontology contingent on our current human features of cognition, and that this is precisely the result that the Advaitin needs to indicate the provisionality of the empirical world (Ram-Prasad 2002: 188–197).

A key question that has therefore shaped Advaitin dialectics down the medieval centuries is the *degree* of reality that can be attributed to the empirical world. We may characterise the post-Śaṅkara Advaita traditions as Strong Advaita (SA) or Weak Advaita (WA) depending on the varying degrees of reality they ascribe to the empirical world. This distinction is, of course, only conceptual, for both SA and WA share the basic thesis that underlying phenomenal appearances stands the unitary foundation of Brahman. However, while SA tends to claim that phenomenal entities do not have any measure of empirical reality, WA is

willing to speak of grades of reality: the transcendental (*pāramārthika*), the conventional (*vyāvahārikī*), and the illusory (*prātibhāsikī*) (Upadhyaya 1959: 26–29).

Śaṅkara himself occupies a position nearer to WA on this conceptual spectrum. He notes that if Brahman-realization could annihilate the world in the same way that butter can be melted by bringing it near fire, the first released person would have performed this feat. In fact, until such knowledge of Brahman as the foundational ground of the phenomenal world has been generated, we will not be able to dissolve it even if we were commanded a hundred times (BSB III, 2, 21; Thibaut 1890: vol.2, p. 163).<sup>37</sup> Further, the conditions of time and space location, causality, and non-refutation (*abādha*) help us, according to Śaṅkara, to distinguish phenomenally (not metaphysically) between dreams and waking experience (BSB III, 2, 3; vol.2, pp.134–36).<sup>38</sup> Therefore, Śaṅkara rejects the Vijñānavāda Buddhist claim that an account of everyday experience can reject references to external objects, viewing these merely as mental projections which are intrinsic to cognitive episodes. Śaṅkara argues that experience can be adequately explained only with the *notion* of the externality of phenomenal objects, for the distinction of the embodied selves and their objects of experience is well known from ordinary existence (BSB II, 1, 13; vol.1, p.319).<sup>39</sup> Śaṅkara’s position is therefore realist from an idealist perspective because it asserts that an adequate explication of our cognitive experience requires the *assumption* (and not the substantial reality) of cognition-independent objects, but is idealist from a realist point of view because it holds that there is no proof that a world of such cognition-independent objects exists. In C. Ram-Prasad’s words, just as Śaṅkara is ‘[a]n anti-idealist about the denial of externality, he is equally an anti-realist about its assertion’ (Ram-Prasad 2002: 61). Śaṅkara therefore offers no clear answers on topics such as whether there is only one self or many selves, does not

speculate about whether the logical status of the world can be classified as real or unreal or neither, and does not develop a causal theory of the relation between Brahman and the world in terms of an apparent transformation (*vivarta*) (Potter 1991: 165). He answers the question ‘whose is *avidyā*?’ by saying that it belongs to the very individual who is raising it, and this somewhat cryptic response has often been read by modern commentators as an indication that Śaṅkara was more concerned with pedagogic techniques aimed at liberation than with logical scrutiny of the nature of ignorance (Doherty 2005: 210).

The immediate post-Śaṅkara traditions, however, grappled precisely with these questions related to the substantial reality of ignorance (Grant 1999: 188–89), and they can be arranged on a finely-graded continuum depending on their conceptual proximity to SA or WA. The three theories often noted in the secondary literature on Advaita regarding the relation between the finite self (*jīva*) and *Brahman* can also be located on this conceptual spectrum. According to the *ābhāsa-vāda* of Sureśvara, the finite self is an insubstantial appearance of Brahman, and because of its association with the intellect, itself a product of ignorance, it seemingly undergoes empirical experiences. According to Padmapāda (c. 900 CE) and his commentator Prakāśātman (c. 1300 CE), the Lord is the reflection of *Brahman* into ignorance (*ajñāna*) and the finite self the reflection of Brahman into the mind, itself a product of ignorance. Both these theories accept Brahman as the common locus of ignorance (*brahmāśrita*) and ‘telescope’ the diversities of the insubstantial empirical world into Brahman (Nachane 2000: 98). However, we can already detect a subtle move towards ‘substantializing’ ignorance in Padmapāda who reads the compound *mithyajñāna* in Śaṅkara as *mithyā-ajñāna*, as an indefinable force of *avidyā* (*avidyā-śakti*) which is the material cause (*nimitta*) out of which the world is produced (Solomon 1969: 257). Sarvajñātman (c. 1000

CE), a disciple of Sureśvara, too argues, on the one hand, that ignorance (*ajñāna*) is ‘something’ more positive than an absolute negation (*abhāva*) (thus nodding in the direction of WA), because it is the transformatory cause of the universe in its different phases, and, on the other hand, that it is almost essenceless (*nirvastuka*) when compared with the transcendental reality (thus moving back towards SA) (*Samksepa-Śārīrakam* 2, 125; Divyananda Giri 1999: vol.2, p. 984).<sup>40</sup> The insentient *ajñāna*, which depends entirely on Brahman, is the instrument (*dvāra*) through which the world appears (*Samksepa-Śārīrakam* 1, 323; vol.1, p. 484).<sup>44</sup> However, in contrast to the ‘reflectionism’ indicated in the above theories, Vācaspati (c. 900 CE) takes the phenomenally real finite self to be the locus of ignorance (*jivāśrita*), so that the world is projected by the ignorance of each individual self. On the ‘limitation’ metaphor, the unitary Self appears to have become divided into parts because of the limiting adjuncts of the finite selves through which it is viewed, so that this metaphor accords a greater degree of empirical reality to ~~phenomenal~~~~the empirical~~ objects. Vācaspati therefore argues against the view that there is only one self (*ekajīvavāda*) on the grounds that it implies that the liberation of the primordial self would lead to the liberation of all (Nachane 2000: 99). However, while Vācaspati’s theory grants in this manner the power to produce the phenomenal world to the finite selves and thus stands near to WA, it has to deal with the spectre of metaphysical solipsism. If there is a plurality of selves, each with its own *avidyā*, there would seemingly be a plurality of worlds, while empirical usage demands a common world for all selves.

Prakāśānanda (c. 1600 CE) consistently accepts these implications of Vācaspati’s WA: denying even the phenomenal reality of the external world and of the Lord, he affirms that ignorance is one, and that there is only one self. He develops his argument through his

responses to a series of objections from fellow-Advaitins who have a relatively more ‘realist’ standpoint regarding the external world. First, to the objection that on the liberation of one individual, everybody would be liberated, he replies [in his \*Vedānta-siddhānta-muktāvalī\* \(p.20\)](#) that that this thesis, about the liberation of *all* selves if one self is liberated (*sarvamuktiprasaṅga*), is question-begging against the proponent of the one-self doctrine, since the existence of multiple selves first needs to be established. ([Venis 1890: 20](#)). Second, to the objection that the teachers of Vedānta spoke of a three-fold classification of existence because they taught that empirical duality exists even though unperceived (*ajñāstasyāpi dvāitasya sattvamabhyupagacchanti*), Prakāśānanda replies that there is in fact only a two-fold classification of absolute reality (*pāramārthikī*) and of merely phenomenal (that is, mind-dependent) reality (*prāṭītikī*), and the ancients spoke of a third conventional (*vyāvahārika*) reality only as a concession to the ignorant. That is, existence is contemporaneous with perception, so that to be is to be perceived (*pratītimātram sattvam*) (p. 40). Prakāśānanda rejects, in effect, the view that the senses operate on objects already existing (*sr̥ṣṭi-dr̥ṣṭi-vāda*); according to him, the world is produced anew at the operation of the senses, and the externality of the world to sense perceptions cannot be demonstrated (Solomon 1969: 291). Third, the objector asks why, after waking, individuals are able to recognise their surroundings as identical to those in which they had fallen asleep. Prakāśānanda replies that similarities in experiences across individuals are due to consiliences in shared illusions, in the same way that ten men can run away from *one* illusory snake, which is perceived individually by all of them. Drawing the ‘idealist’ implications of his position, Prakāśānanda argues that while there really are no teachers, knowledge can arise even through an imagined teacher (*kalpitena guruṇā vidyotpattisambhavāt*) ([Venis 1890: \(p.142\)](#)). In fact, Prakāśānanda explicitly rejects the category of ‘causality’ with respect to either Brahman or ignorance. He argues that it is mistaken to view Brahman as the cause of

the universe; Brahman is metaphorically called the cause only because Brahman is the substratum of ignorance. Nor is ignorance the cause of the world; if ignorance is said to be the cause, this is only to avoid the silence (*apratibhā*) that ensues when asked ‘what is the cause of the world?’ (p. 118).

### *The Unreality of the World*

Prakāśānanda thus arrives at a position similar to SA: the world-appearance has no reality whatsoever, all talk of causation or production is substantively ungrounded, and Brahman is the sole reality. To return to our question, ‘how real is the world?’ we can therefore see that in the WA of figures such as Prakāśātman, the world structured by ignorance (*ajñāna*) holds an ontologically precarious ‘midway’ position, which Prakāśānanda’s thorough-going [SAidealism](#) reduces to phenomenal unreality (*dr̥ṣṭi-sṛṣṭi-vāda*). Since the phenomenal diversity of the empirical world cannot be explained in terms of the unchanging Brahman, the strategy adopted by post-Śaṅkara Advaitins other than Prakāśānanda was to postulate a mysterious indefinable ‘stuff’ of *ajñāna* (Dasgupta 1922: 479) to grapple with the following dilemma. If *ajñāna* were totally unreal, we could not appeal to it to explain our phenomenal experiences of diversity, while if it were substantively real, we would not be able to sublimate it on our path towards enlightenment. The Advaita traditions therefore often speak of a two-fold power (*śakti*) of ignorance to conceal the nature of reality (*āvaraṇa-śakti*) and also to project erroneous cognitions (*vikṣepa-śakti*). The relation between these two powers is causal: the concealment (*kāraṇāvidyā*) is the cause of the projected effects (*kāryāvidyā*), and hence the concealing factor is referred to by some post-Śaṅkara commentators as the ‘root ignorance’ (*mulāvidyā*) (Doherty 2005: 213–14). Therefore, the negative prefix in *a-jñāna* or

*a-vidyā* is to be understood in the sense of opposition, so that *avidyā* is not merely psychological ignorance but some kind of existence (*kiñcid-bhāvarūpa*) which is opposed to knowledge, and can be removed by knowledge which is its opposite (*ajñāna-virodhi*) (Doherty 2005: 214). In other words, *ajñāna* is not utterly non-existent, it is a mysterious third ‘something’ that shares partly in the characteristics of existence (to the extent that it is the cause of the illusory transformations of the world) and of non-existence (to the extent that it is substantively unreal). That Advaitins who seek to avoid Prakāśānanda’s position are hard-pressed to accord some measure of reality to the empirical world is seen in Citsukha’s claim that ignorance is different from the concept of positivity as well as of negativity, and is called positive only because of the fact that it is not negative (*bhāvābhāva-vilakṣaṇasya ajñānasya abhāva-vilakṣaṇatva-mātreṇa bhāvatvopacārāt*) (Dasgupta 1932: 153).

#### *The Varieties of ‘Substance’ in Vedānta*

These disputes in classical and medieval Advaita, centred around the ‘substantiality’ of ignorance, have been revived through the writings of Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati (1880–1975) who argues<sup>4</sup> that the understanding of *avidyā* as ‘substance-like’ is a fundamental misreading of Śaṅkara- (Swami Satchidanandendra 1996: 13–15). He argues, somewhat provocatively, that the true lineage of Advaita runs through Gauḍapāda and Śaṅkara, and that post-Śaṅkara Advaitins other than Sureśvara have misunderstood the nature of ignorance. -The opponents of Swami Satchidanandendra defend the WA position that while ignorance is an existent (*bhāvarūpa*) ignorance is not real (*avāstava*); therefore, knowledge of Brahman is able to sublimate ignorance (Doherty 2005: 223). However, he understands ignorance purely in the sense of lack of knowledge (*jñāna-abhāva*), so that his

position resembles Prakāśānanda's denial of even the phenomenal reality of the empirical world (that is, SA). Thus, he concludes that since *avidyā* is nothing other than superimposition (*adhyāsa*), in the state of deep sleep, where there is no possibility of such misconception, the distinction between the self and Brahman (*jīva-brahma-vibhāga*) does not exist (Swami Satchidanandendra 1996:pp. 94–95). Consequently, the conceptual positions in classical Advaita that we have labelled SA and WA are re-articulated in the debates between Swami Satchidanandendra and his critics. He argues that ignorance is utterly insubstantial, for if *avidyā* were to exist through the three states of waking, dream, and deep sleep, then, given Śaṅkara's definition of the Real as *that* whose nature is undeviating, it would become as substantively real as the Self (p. 111). However, he still has to explain how the empirical world re-appears when an individual wakes up from deep sleep, to which he replies with the classical Advaita strategy of shifting across standpoints: phenomenal individuals mistakenly imagine themselves to be bound while they are, transcendentally speaking, eternally free. Comans presents the opposing Advaita view, which he attributes also to Sureśvara, that the reason why deep sleep is not equivalent to liberation is because ignorance persists in that state, even though the mind, conditioned by its *karma*, remains in a latent condition. Through the influence of this *karma* the mind becomes manifest on waking so that the finite self returns to the workaday world (Comans 1990: 3–4).

We return through a different route to the key question 'precisely how real is the world?' that continues to structure intra-Advaitic disputes over the 'substantiality' of ignorance. Both Swami Satchidanandendra and his critics agree that from the transcendental standpoint (*pāramārthika*) the phenomenal world is substantively an illusion; however, the central point of dispute between SA and WA is over what *measure*, as it were, of reality it enjoys from the empirical (*vyāvahārika*) standpoint (Doherty 2005: 227). Disputes over the 'substantiality' of



the world are, of course, not restricted to intra-Advaitic circles; indeed, many of the arguments that we have outlined were formulated in response to critiques levelled at Advaita from rival Vedāntic systems such as Viśiṣṭādvaita. We may extract from the enormous literature of intra-Vedāntic disputes over the notion of ‘substance’ five arguments of Vedānta Deśika against the Advaitic view that the empirical world is an insubstantial illusion.

Firstly, theologians such as Rāmānuja and Vedānta Deśika reject the basic Advaitic definition of Reality in terms of *metaphysical independence*, to argue for the plausibility of the concept of a *metaphysically* real but *dependent* substance, namely, empirical objects. Rejecting the Advaitic definitional equivalence between true reality and permanence, they claim that the mere fact that something exists only for a limited duration does not render *it* unreal. Thus Deśika argues [in \*Śatadūsanī\*](#) that we should distinguish between destruction (*vināśa*), which means that an object which exists at one time is non-existent at another, and sublation (*bādha*), which means that an (illusory) object does not exist even when it is perceived. More schematically, while the Advaitin holds, given the Advaita equivalence, that if ‘reality’ is ascribed to an entity *x*, then the statement ‘*x* did not exist *five seconds ago* and *x* exists *now*’ is a logical contradiction, whereas the Viśiṣṭādvaitin views, on the basis of the argument that it is ‘perfectly possible that something exist but only exist for a time’ (Yandell 2001: 173), such statements to be contingently true or false. Therefore, while an (impermanent) effect is subject first to origination and subsequently to dissolution, [Deśika argues that](#) this does not imply that *it* does not exist during its own time, and hence it cannot be regarded as metaphysically unreal (Dvivedi 1984: (vol.4, p.197). More specifically, against the Advaita doctrine that causal substances are ‘more’ real than their effects, Deśika argues that effects in the sense of effect-states (*kāryāvasthā*) such as pots do not exist in the cause, but are

produced by special powers at specific spatio-temporal locations (vol.4, [p.191](#)). Secondly, texts in the tradition of Advaita dialectics seek to demonstrate that there cannot be real (as opposed to merely conceptual) relations between two substantively real entities, on the grounds that such relations would lead to an infinite regress that we noted in our discussion of the notion of inherence (*samavāya*). Deśika argues, in response, that it is a mistake to think that if we speak of a relation between two objects, the relation *itself* must be related to the relata, for a relation is able to relate the terms without depending on any other relations (vol.2, [p.155](#)). The basic argument ~~is~~ here is that while a relation helps to constitute a unity of non-relational entities, the relation itself and its relata do not form a unity which would require the postulation of a higher-order relation (Dravid 2000: 155–56). The Advaitin would, of course, claim that in a universe populated with (enduring) substances, (transient) qualities, and (contingent) relations, there is one thing too many; however, this takes us back to Advaita’s definitional equivalence between ‘truly existent’ and ‘immutability’ (Premise 1), which Deśika does not accept.

Thirdly, Advaita dialectics seeks to demonstrate that the very category of ‘difference’ is logically incoherent, so as to arrive at the conclusion of the indivisibility of substantial Reality. Deśika’s response reflects the Viśiṣṭādvaita view that there are real ‘differences’ between substances and attributes, causes and effects, and so on: we are able, in perceptual experience, to apprehend the generic character (*jāti*) of an object, and this character itself marks the distinction of that object from other objects. While perception lasts for a moment, it is able to grasp even in that moment both the object (*vastu*) and its distinctive characteristics that distinguish it from other objects (vol.2, [p.22](#)). Therefore, against the Advaitic thesis that the phenomenal world is (transcendentally) unreal because it is distinct

from Brahman, Deśika argues that a real entity does not become unreal merely because it is different from another real entity (*satyāntaravyatirekamātreṇāsatyaprasaṅgābhāvāt*) (vol.2, p. 83). More categorically, he states that it is the nature of things (*tattvavyavasthā*) that all entities are not-different (*abhinna*) from themselves and different (*bhinna*) from other entities (vol.2, p. 41). Fourthly, Deśika focuses on the ‘level-shift’ between the conventional and the transcendental that Advaitic texts employ to argue that ‘difference’ is only conventionally real, and states that there is, in fact, more than one way to characterise the conventional. He argues that Advaitins cannot reject Buddhist texts as non-authoritative on the grounds that they are based on defective sources (*doṣamūlatva*), since they admit that their Vedas, which are transcendently unreal, too are defective. If the Advaitins were to claim that the authoritativeness of the Vedas is only conventional, the crux of the matter is the nature of the conventional (*kiṃ tat vyāvahārikatvam*), because this appeal to conventionality is available also to the Mādhyamikas who reject the Vedāntic view that the world has a transcendental foundation (vol.2, p.374). Fifthly, a key argumentative point in Deśika’s text relates to the significance of everyday ‘conventional’ experience in formulating one’s metaphysics. For instance, after defending the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika understanding of ‘substance’ against Advaitic criticisms, S. Bhaduri (1975: 7) argues that the school does not accept the Advaitic notion of one universal formless existence because of its ‘loyalty to experience which bears unmistakable testimony to plurality and diversity’. Deśika articulates a similar point when he argues that if the Advaitin seeks a clarification of the type of relation (*sambandha*) between consciousness and object, it may be designated as the subject-object relation which is reflected in everyday usage. For just as the distinction between sugarcane juice and milk is clearly evident to us, even if we are unable to spell out this distinction in clear terms, the distinction between subject and object is equally evident to us, and cannot be denied (vol.2, p.152). As we have noted, while Advaitins too (with the major exception of Prakāśānanda) do

not reject the concept of 'externality' in everyday epistemic dealings, they would argue, once again following their definitional equivalences between substantiality, immutability, and indivisibility (Premises 1 and 4), that empirical subjects and objects are not substantively real.

### *Conclusion*

Our discussion has highlighted the significance in Advaitic thought of the thesis that, as the medieval [Advaitin Sadānanda puts it in his text \*Vedāntasāra\* \(pp.9–10\), puts it,](#) Brahman alone is the permanent 'substantial' Reality (*vastu*) and all phenomenal things are transient. [\(Swami Nikhilananda 1949: 9–10\).](#) Further, this specific Advaita understanding of 'substance' (defined analytically, through *Upaniṣadic* exegesis, as immutable and indivisible) and the doctrine of the two standpoints of truth form an integral conceptual whole, allowing the different strands of Advaita, depending on their proximity to SA or WA, to claim that everyday cognitive and social practices have empirical validity but are substantively unreal. Thus, in response to an Advaitin who wants to know how one can demonstrate the existence of the finite self in deep sleep, Deśika replies that it is seen that what exists earlier in time and later in time also exists in between (*purvottaravatyahamarthapratibandhānabalādeva madhye' pi tatkālpanāt*) [\(Dvivedi 1984: \(vol.2, p.294\).](#) The Advaitin, following Gauḍapāda's aphorism noted above, might claim that while Deśika's principle is empirically valid, what

does not exist at the beginning and at the end does not exist, transcendently speaking, even in the present (*ādāv\_ante ca yan\_nāsti vartamāne' pi tat\_tathā*). Thus, taking up opposing positions in the great Vedāntic debate over 'what there is', the Viśiṣṭādvaitin argues that the reflection 'I did not know anything during sleep' show that the (metaphysically real) knowing subject is not apprehended as 'I' by the attributive consciousness (*dharmabhūtajñāna*) because the latter did not have any objects during that state. While the Advaitin argues that the empirical 'I' cannot be the true Self of the individual because it is not invariable, the Viśiṣṭādvaitin replies that the 'I' is indeed the real empirical self because *it* persists at all times, even though the fluctuating attributive consciousness is temporarily contracted during sleep (Comans 1990).

Consequently, some of the central disputes between Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita can be traced to a basic divergence in their conceptualisations of 'substance', which informs their responses to questions such as whether the postulation of a plurality of metaphysically real substances can be logically defended, whether the concept of a 'dependent substance' is coherent, whether real relations between *the* ultimate substance and dependent substances can be explicated without inconsistency, and so on. Thus, while Advaitins such as Śaṅkara and Sureśvara characterise substantial reality as *that* which is immutable (and this definitional equivalence is woven into their scriptural exegesis), Viśiṣṭādvaitins such as Vedānta Deśika, who view 'substantiality' in terms of persistence despite change, articulate a theological landscape structured by the supreme Person Viṣṇu–Nārāyaṇa and finite ontological dependent substances. These debates over 'substantiality' are not restricted to Vedāntic discourse, and they sometimes crucially shape the nature of philosophical argumentation on

somewhat different contextual horizons. Thus, defining 'substance' in terms of causal independence, Descartes concludes that, strictly speaking, there is only one substance, namely, God because only God is completely causally independent and for God depends on no other thing. However, Descartes (1985: vol.1, 114) simultaneously affirms that God's creatures should be regarded as 'created substances' which need divine sustenance for their existence. The Cartesian conceptual tension between, on the one hand, attributing 'substantiality', strictly speaking, to God alone, and, on the other hand, affirming ontological distinctions between 'created substances' also frames the texts of two medieval Dominicans, Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart. While for Thomas creatures possess a being (*esse*) that is really their own, Eckhart restricts the proper sense of being only to God so that for Eckhart creaturely reality lacks any intrinsic being. H. Nicholson therefore sums up the difference between these theologians in these terms: 'while for Thomas created beings are a *quasi nihil*, for Eckhart they are a *pure nihil*' (Nicholson 2011: 164).

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We can visualize these debates over being (*esse*) in medieval Christian mysticism and over substance (*substantia*) –in modern European philosophy as centred on some of the key themes/concepts that we have discussed with respect to Vedāntic philosophical theology. –As we have seen, while Vedāntic thinkers in general argue against the (Vijñāna) Buddhist denial of 'substantiality' to the empirical world, Advaitins and Viśiṣṭādvaitins disagree in turn over precisely what kind of 'substantiality' should be attributed to the world. While Viśiṣṭādvaitins such as Rāmānuja develop an ontological scheme in which the phenomenal world is substantively real (and 'grounded' in the Lord Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa), Advaitins themselves occupy different positions on a fine-grained conceptual spectrum marked by the two points of Weak Advaita (the empirical world as *quasi nihil*) and Strong Advaita (the empirical world as

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pure nihil). These are some of the debates that have formed the conceptual structure of the rich commentarial traditions of intra-Vedāntic dialectics.

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<sup>1</sup> ~~Upadeśasāhasrī (henceforth US) I, 2, 89~~

<sup>2</sup> ~~Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya (henceforth BSB) II, 1, 14.~~

<sup>3</sup> ~~US II, 16, 39–41~~

<sup>4</sup> ~~BSB II, 3, 40~~

<sup>5</sup> ~~Gaudapādīya-kārikā (henceforth GK) 3.19~~

<sup>6</sup> ~~GK 4.9~~

<sup>7</sup> ~~2.32~~

<sup>8</sup> ~~4.10–13~~

<sup>9</sup> ~~4.14–18~~

<sup>10</sup> ~~Gaudapādīya-kārikā-bhāṣya 4.22~~

<sup>11</sup> ~~Gaudapādīya-kārikā-bhāṣya 3.21~~

<sup>12</sup> ~~GK 2.4–6~~

<sup>13</sup> ~~BSB IV, 1, 2.~~

<sup>14</sup> ~~I, 1, 11.~~

<sup>15</sup> ~~II, 3, 48.~~

<sup>16</sup> ~~IV, 1, 16.~~

<sup>17</sup> ~~III, 4, 26.~~

<sup>18</sup> ~~I, 1, 11.~~

<sup>19</sup> ~~II, 1, 14.~~

<sup>20</sup> ~~Naiṣkarmya-Siddhi (henceforth NS) 1.38~~

<sup>21</sup> ~~2.34~~

<sup>22</sup> ~~1.24~~

<sup>23</sup> ~~1.64~~

<sup>24</sup> ~~1.56~~

<sup>25</sup> ~~1.67~~

<sup>26</sup> ~~4.20~~

<sup>27</sup> ~~3.111~~

<sup>28</sup> ~~1.51-52~~

<sup>29</sup> ~~1.47~~

<sup>30</sup> ~~4.70~~

<sup>31</sup> ~~GK 3.15-16~~

<sup>32</sup> ~~BSB II, 1, 18.~~

<sup>33</sup> ~~BSB II, 2, 17.~~

<sup>34</sup> ~~II, 2, 38.~~

<sup>35</sup> ~~NS 3.66~~

<sup>36</sup> ~~3.43~~

<sup>37</sup> ~~BSB III, 2, 21.~~

<sup>38</sup> ~~III, 2, 3.~~

<sup>39</sup> ~~II, 1, 13~~

<sup>40</sup> ~~Samkṣepa Śārirakam 2, 125~~

<sup>41</sup> ~~1, 323~~