

Ramanuja's Critique of Shankara's Philosophy of Non-Duality

Part I

From Ramanuja's Commentary on the Brahma Sutras

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I. Ramanuja rejects the following metaphysical claims made by Shankara

A. Brahman is non-differentiated pure consciousness.

B. The universe is unreal (i.e., a non-enduring existent).

C. Individual souls (jivas) are unreal (i.e., a non-enduring existent).

D. Individual consciousness is dissolved in moksha. (Follows from C, for the unreality of souls is not a denial of their provisional existence, but a denial of their enduring character).

II. Scriptural Arguments (BS, 49-55): Ramanuja rejects Shankara's doctrine of non-dual Brahman on the grounds of the testimony of the sacred scriptures (sastras), the very scriptures Shankara allegedly accepts. Ramanuja contends that the sastras, for example Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita, directly affirm or logically entail that *Brahman is differentiated*.

A. Many passages in the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita affirm that Brahman has attributes (*saguna*), but without any suggestion that this is a provisional fact about Brahman. However, since nothing can have an attribute and be non-differentiated, for possessing attribute Q entails that one is distinct from anything that does not have Q, it follows that the sastras teach a Brahman differentiated from other things. (BS, 49, 54)

B. The sastras teach that Brahman is *satchitananda* (being-consciousness-bliss) which (i) has no meaning unless its constituent terms have meaning, but (ii) the constituent terms have no meaning unless they are differentiated from their opposites, that is, non-being, non-consciousness, and non-bliss. (BS, 50-53)

C. Brahman says, "May I be many, may I grow forth" (Chandogya Upanishad 6.2.2-3), and this Ramanuja takes to show that the world of diversity is as real as Brahman, being a manifestation of Brahman. (BS, 51, 54, 79-80)

III. Whereas Shankara appeals to sastra passages (e.g., Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.6) that state that Brahman is *nirguna* (without attributes), Ramanuja provides an alternative interpretation of these passages.

A. When the sastras state that Brahman is without attributes, they mean to say that Brahman lacks all evil qualities (or qualities supervening on material nature,

prakrti). For example, Brahman is not perceived by senses, colorless, having no body, not grasped, etc. "Brahman is the opposite of material things." He must therefore be differentiated. (BS, 49-50, 52, 79)

B. "Brahman is one only without a second" (Chandogya Upanishad 6.1.1) means that Brahman *alone* is the efficient cause of the universe and the highest reality because Brahman has "excellent auspicious qualities," by virtue of which he is differentiated from everything else. (BS, 49, 50-51).

C. *Tat Tvam Asi* – Thou are That! (Chandogya Upanishad 6.13.3) does not mean (as Shankara maintains) "thou Atman art identical with that Brahman, but Thou Jiva art the body of Brahman. In other words, Brahman is the Self of everything in that all individual things have Brahman as their essence. So Brahman exists in two modes, as the Jiva (micro or atomic version of Brahman) and as the Supreme cause of the world. So the relation between each individual soul and Brahman is one of part to whole and thus only a partial identity. (BS, 73-81)

IV. The Scriptural arguments show that Ramanuja wants Vedanta to most accurately and consistently reflect the totality of the teachings sastras. Is Ramanuja aware of the presuppositions brought to the sastras that govern his interpretive moves? In either case, his engagement with the sastras involves a rigorous application of rules of grammar and logic. He is not demanding blind faith in the teachings of the sastras.

V. The Philosophical Argument from Sources of Knowledge: Ramanuja argues that our sources of knowledge do not permit a proof that Brahman is non-differentiated pure consciousness. (He seems at points to conflate this weaker claim with the stronger one that the considerations prove that Brahman is *not* non-differentiated. BS, 19, esp. 23, which seems to be the fallacy of appeal to ignorance: we cannot prove p, therefore p is false.

A. Experience: Only objects can be experienced, but objects are qualified by some difference; therefore we cannot experience a non-differentiated object. (BS, 20)

B. Consciousness: (i) Conscious is always intentional, i.e., directed towards an object, which is necessarily distinct from "consciousness" as that by which the object is apprehended or to which the object is given. (ii) Consciousness is also said to have qualities like eternal and self-luminous, but this makes no sense unless consciousness is differentiated from those things that lack these qualities. (BS, 20)

C. Direct Perception: Perceptions are of two kinds, determinate (savikalpa) and non-determinate (nirvikalpa). The former necessarily involves differentiated objects, as when one sees a cow we see an object qualified by a generic nature or essence: "this thing here has a cow essence." The first time we see a cow we perceive it together with its generic character, but we don't differentiate the individual cow and its generic nature because we haven't see other cows that have the same generic nature. So the individual and essence is undifferentiated, but the object of perception remains differentiated in relation to other kinds of things. So according

to Ramanuja, non-determinate perceptions do not involve apprehension of an object devoid of *all* attributes, but only devoid of *some* attributes. (BS, 21-22).

D. Inference: All inference involves a distinction because it involves a relation between things that are objects of perception, and – as already established – perception deals only with objects qualified by difference.

E. Scripture: Arguments given above.

Conclusion: Since all our sources of knowledge involve objects qualified by difference, we are not permitted through such sources to prove that there are any non-differentiated objects. (One might consider this an inductive argument for supposing that no non- differentiated objects exist).

VI. Consciousness and Existence cannot be One

Ramanuja's brief argument is that consciousness and existence cannot be the same because existence is always an object *of* consciousness. Since that *by which* we grasp an object (consciousness) is different from the object we grasp, consciousness and existence cannot be one. (BS 26)

VII. The Self Cannot be Pure Consciousness

Here Ramanuja argues that the Self cannot be identical with pure consciousness. His argument is as follows. The Self is really the knower, which is the substrate of consciousness, for the knower has permanence or continuity of existence (which is true of the Self), as is shown from a knower at any time being able to recall an object seen earlier. There is a persisting "I," but this persisting "I" is not identical with consciousness since consciousness is not permanent, as is shown from our saying "I knew this" or "I forgot that." (BS, 34)

Compare this argument to what Ramanuja argues later (BS, 41), namely that in deep sleep the "I" persists but consciousness does not. Therefore the Self (which is the "I") cannot be identical with consciousness, pure or otherwise. "I slept happily," not "I was pure consciousness."