

Consciousness, Agency, and Moral Responsibility in Vedānta



God and Consciousness in Indian Traditions

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Dr Brett Parris
DPhil Candidate,
Faculty of Theology & Religion
University of Oxford



Vedānta

What characterises Vedānta? The Vedāntic traditions are those which take the ‘three sources’, the *prasthānatrayī*, as their principal scriptural authorities:

- The *Upaniṣads* – final versions ~ 7th century BCE to ~ 1 CE
- The *Brahmasūtras* of Bādarāyaṇa / Vyasa – seeks to distill the essence of the *Upaniṣads* (~ 5th C CE?)
- The *Bhagavad Gīta* – from the epic *Mahābhārata* (~ 200 BCE to final form 2nd century CE?)
- The theistic Vaiṣṇava Bhāgavata tradition also includes the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (final form ~ 6th – 9th centuries CE?). Scriptural warrant:
 - the four Vedas, *purāṇas* and epics (*Itihāsa*), were ‘breathed out’ by that Great Being (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.10) [cf. 2 Timothy 3.16 “All Scripture is God-breathed”]
 - *purāṇas* and epics (*Itihāsa*) are described as the ‘fifth Veda’ (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 7.1.2)

Upaniṣads

- **Bṛhadāraṇyaka (BU)***, Śukla (White) Yajur Veda, (prose), ~ 7th - 6th centuries BCE
- **Chāndogya (CU)***, Sāma Veda, (prose), ~ 7th - 6th centuries BCE
- **Taittirīya (TU)***, Kṛṣṇa (Black) Yajur Veda, (prose), ~ 6th - 5th centuries BCE
- Aitareya, (AU), Ṛg Veda, (prose), ~ 6th - 5th centuries BCE
- Kauṣītaki (KsU), Ṛg Veda, (prose), ~ 6th - 5th centuries BCE
- Kena (KeU), Sāma Veda, (verse), ~ 5th - 4th centuries BCE
- Kaṭha (KaU), Kṛṣṇa (Black) Yajur Veda, (verse), 4th - 1st centuries BCE
- Īśā (IU), Śukla (White) Yajur Veda, (verse), 4th - 1st centuries BCE
- Śvetāśvatara (SU), Kṛṣṇa (Black) Yajur Veda, (verse), 4th - 1st centuries BCE
- **Muṇḍaka (MuU)***, Atharva Veda (verse), 4th - 1st centuries BCE
- Praśna (PU), Atharva Veda, (prose), ~ 1 CE
- Māṇḍūkya (MaU), Atharva Veda, (prose), ~ 1 CE

(Olivelle, 1998, p. 9, 12-13) **Bold*** = Most used in the *Brahmasūtras*. Dates = likely final forms

Major Vedāntic traditions

- **Advaita or kevalādvaita (absolute monism) – Śaṅkara (8th C, c. 788-820?)**
 - *Bhāmatī* school of *advaita* – named after Vācaspatiśrī's (c. 950-1000) commentary
 - *Vivaraṇa* school of *advaita* – named after Prakāśātman's (c. 950) commentary
- *Aupādika bhedābheda* (difference and non-difference due to limiting conditions) – Bhāskara (8th-9th C)
- **Viśiṣṭādvaita (the nonduality of distinguished/separated beings) – Rāmānuja (c. 1050 – 1139)**
- *Svabhāvika bhedābheda* ('natural' nondualism-dualism) – Nimbārka (~ 12th C)
- *Śuddhādvaita* (pure monism) – Viṣṇusvāmī (~ 13th C)
- *Dvaita* (dualism) / *Tattvavāda* – Madhva (c. 1238-1317)
- *Viśeśādvaita* (special monism) – Śrīpati (14th C?)
- *Śuddhādvaita* (pure monism) – Vallabha (1479-1531)
- *Avibhāgādvaita* (indistinguishable non-dualism) – Vijñānabhikṣu (16th C)
- **Acintya Bhedābheda (inconceivable difference and non-difference) – Caitanya (1485-1533),**
Rūpa Gosvāmī (1489–1564), Jīva Gosvāmī (1513-1598), Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa (c.1700-1793)
- *Mānavādvaita* (humanistic monism) – Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902)

Commentaries & Critical Analysis

- Original commentaries founding different lineages – e.g. Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, etc.
- Sub-commentaries and developments within lineages
- Modern critical analysis of, e.g. *Brahma-Sūtra*, *Bhagavad Gītā*
- Matters less for philosophy than for lineages
 - E.g. Most modern analyses of the *Brahma-Sūtra* (e.g. Thibaut, Ghate, Chari, Uskokov etc) conclude that whatever the merits of Śaṅkara’s Advaita as a philosophy, his commentary does not really represent the views of the author of the *Brahma-Sūtra* in some crucial respects.

Causality

- Vedāntins distinguish material cause (*upādānakāraṇa*) and instrumental/efficient cause (*nimittakāraṇa*)
- *asatkāryavāda* - the effect is absolutely different from the cause, is not present in the cause, but is newly created (Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika view)
- *satkāryavāda* - all effects already exist in potential form within any cause (Vedāntin view)

However ... the compound *satkārya* can be understood in two different ways however, leading to dramatically different interpretations (Nicholson, 2010, pp. 214-215, n. 43):

- Realist Vedāntins (*Bhedābhedavādins*, *Viśiṣṭādvaitins*) : it means “an effect that is real”
- Advaitins: it means “the effect of that which is real” - i.e. Brahman

Causality and Change

- Different understandings of *satkārya* lead to two primary divisions in Vedānta:
- The *pariṇāmavāda* is the doctrine that the phenomenal world results from a real transformation (*pariṇāma*) in Brahman (like milk becoming curds, BS 2.1.24) and was held by the Sāṃkhya and realist Vedāntins:
- The *vivartavāda* is the doctrine of unreal or apparent manifestation held by Advaita Vedāntins. Brahman itself does not change. Key text: “It is like this, son. By means of just one lump of clay one would perceive everything made of clay – the transformation is a verbal handle, a name – while the reality is just this: ‘It’s clay.’” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.1.4; Olivelle, 1998, p. 247).
- Clay is the material cause (*upādānakāraṇa*), while the potter is the instrumental cause (*nimittakāraṇa*), changing the form (*rūpa*) but not the essence (*svarūpa*) of the clay. With this approach, Advaitins could acknowledge different forms of Brahman while denying that any real change had taken place.
- Huge metaphysical consequences. If Brahman does not change, and the only reality is Brahman, the phenomenal world of apparently separate selves, time and change cannot be real. What is it then?

Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta 1

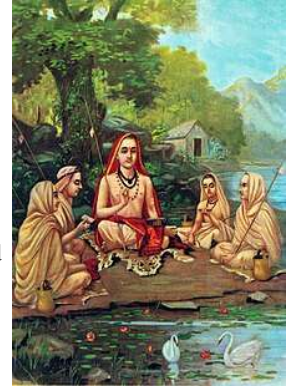
- Absolute monism: Brahman is the sole reality – eternal, unchanging, inactive
- Therefore the [impassive witness consciousness] of the individual human (*jīva*) is nothing other than Brahman conditioned by limiting adjuncts (*upādhis*) caused by ignorance (*avidyā*).
- Not the same as saying ‘I’ am Brahman – with body, mind, thoughts, actions etc.
- The appearance of difference is a false (*mithyā*) superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of an illusory world onto the real Brahman, like mistaking a rope for a snake, but correct knowledge removes ignorance (*avidyā*) and illusion (*māyā*).
- Removing this illusion by sublation (*bādha*) allows the true nature of reality to be directly revealed in the knowledge of Brahman (*brahmajñāna*), leading to liberation (*mokṣa*) from the bondage of transmigration (*saṃsāra*).



Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta 2

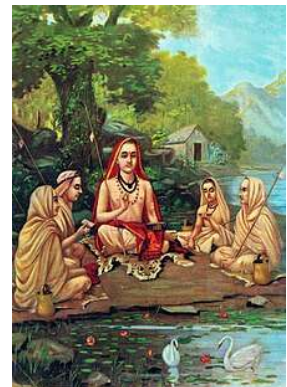
- Śaṅkara uses the Buddhist conception of levels of truth.
- Brooks (1969, pp. 393-394): Śaṅkara's usage implied a fourfold scheme that *later* Advaitins would articulate as distinctions between:
 1. **pāramārthika**, the completely or **ultimately real**, i.e. Only Brahman, without attributes (*nirguṇa*). *Paramārthadarśina* is the ultimate point of view. (= Buddhist *paramārthasatya*).
 2. **vyāvahārika**, the practically or **conventionally real** truth of the world, which possesses *arthakriyātva* – practical efficacy. At this level, say the Advaitins, the Absolute may be perceived with attributes (*saguna*) as **God (Īśvara)** (= Buddhist *lokasaṃvṛtisatya*)
 3. **prātibhāsika**, the illusory, such as a rope appearing as a snake. (= Buddhist *mithyāsaṃvṛtisatya*)
 4. **tūcchika** or **atyantāsat**, the completely unreal and uninstanced, such as the hare's horn, sky-flower or son of a barren woman. (= Buddhist *avidyāmana*)

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (MuU) 1.4-5 distinguishes between a higher knowledge (*paravidyā*) and a lower knowledge (*aparavidyā*) – but doesn't turn this into a metaphysics.



Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta 3

- What then of **agency** (*kartṛtva*)? (BS 2.3.33-40)
 - *kartā śāstrārthavattvāt* [BS 2.3.33]
[The soul is] an agent as this grounds the purpose of the scriptures
- The perception of **agency is a superposition** - without freedom from it there can be no liberation. “Anything that can acquired through practice [e.g. sacrifices] is impermanent. ... The states of being an agent and an experiencer are conjured up by ignorance” (BSB-Ś 2.3.40).
- Does that mean do anything? No. Actions still matter until liberation, and afterwards, you realise there is no actor. The impulse to action arises from the perception of embodiment (BSB-Ś 2.3.48)



Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta 4

- Ideas of someone liberated while still alive (a *jīvanmukta*) evolved within Advaita Vedānta, particularly after the beginning of the colonial period.
- Modern neo-Advaita writers such as Swami Vivekananda and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and many others, presented a view of the *jīvanmukta* that differs from that of traditional Advaita Vedānta, as articulated by Śaṅkara.
- Traditional Advaita Vedānta teaching on the *jīvanmukta* held that liberation while alive led to a relative lack of concern with the world and a spirituality of disengagement:

“Traditional Advaita tells us that liberation (*mukti*, *moksha*) is the cessation of ignorance about the nondual nature of reality and the end of bondage to transmigratory existence (*samsara*). One who attains liberation while living realises the identity of *atman/brahman* and becomes utterly detached from worldly desires, knowing the self is not related to the conditions and sorrows of body and ‘ego’. (Fort 2000, p. 217).

- Later: Swami Vivekananda's (1863-1902) Mānavādvaita (humanistic monism)



Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta 1

- The nonduality of distinguished/separated beings
- Context: Post-Śaṅkara advaitins had come to reify *avidyā* and *māyā* to such an extent that they were regarded as metaphysical principles in their own right. Rāmānuja opposed that.
- The universe of “all finite conscious and non-conscious entities” (*cidacidvastu*), including all human souls, constitutes the body (*śarīra*) of God/Brahman, who is the embodied agent (*śarīrin*).
- “Any substance (*dravya*) which a sentient soul controls and supports completely for its own purpose and is in a subordinate relation to the soul, is the body (*śarīra*) of that soul” (BSB-R 2.1.9)
- Brahman is the ‘inner controller’ (*antaryāmin*) (cf. BU 3.7.3-23)
- Brahman = *Īśvara* (God) = Viṣṇu



Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta 2

- The individual self (*jīva*) is a part (*aṃśa*) of Brahman / *Īśvara*, and is part of the body (*śarīra*) of Brahman/, who is their ‘inner controller’ (*antaryāmin*) – not in a deterministic sense, but in an enabling, enlivening, permitting sense. So we are *really* active **agents** and “**responsibility** for the initial volition is the soul’s” (BSB-R 2.3.41-42). “The supreme brahman is the inner Self of the individual soul which forms Its body” (BSB-R 1.4.22).
- In his *Vedārthasaṅgraha* (VS 76), Rāmānuja described the relationship between Brahman and the world in terms of three primary relationships:
 - the ‘support’ (*ādhāra*) and the ‘thing supported’ (*ādheya*)
 - the ‘controller’ (*niyantr*) and the ‘thing controlled’ (*niyāmya*)
 - the ‘accessory’ (*śeṣa*) and the ‘principal’ (*śeṣin*)



Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta 3

- The ‘thing supported’ (*ādheya*), the body (*śarīra*), is wholly dependent on the ‘support’ (*ādhāra*), i.e. the embodied self (*śarīrin*), and ‘is incapable of separate realization’ (*prthaksiddhyanarha*). In VS 62, Rāmānuja explains that the body can be said to be a ‘mode’ (*prakāra*) of the embodied self, and also cannot be realised separately from the mode possessor (*prakārin*) (Lipner, 2012, p. 348-354).
- Rāmānuja challenges the fundamental metaphysical links made by the Advaitins (and Buddhists such as Nāgārjuna) between existence and immutability, and existence and independence. So something can be ‘real’ even if changing and dependent. (BSB-R 1.1.1 & 2.1.15)
- Rāmānuja gave a prominent place to the will of Brahman, as something consciously and actively intended, not something merely passive like milk naturally becoming curds (BSB-R 2.2.2-3).



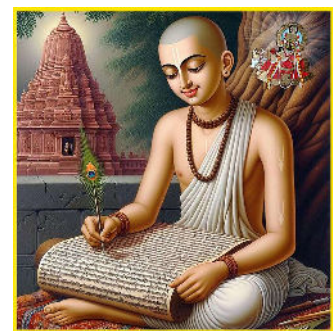
Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta 4

- A further important dimension of Rāmānuja's nondual understanding of **agency** is that while affirming the reality of human agency, he also contends that this **agency should be surrendered** to the Supreme Person, just like Arjuna's 'desireless action' (*niṣkāma karma*) in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (GB-R 3.30, 18.4, 18.66). This is in order to align the will with that of the God as the controller (*niyantr*).



Baladeva's Acintya Bhedābheda Vedānta 1

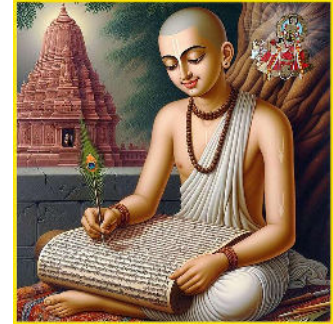
- Context: Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition deriving from Chaitanya Mahāprabhu (1485-1533)
- Sanātana Gosvāmi (1488-1558), Rūpa Gosvāmi (1489–1564), Jīva Gosvāmi (1513-1598)
- Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa (c.1700-1793) wrote a commentary for the tradition on the *Brahma Sūtra* (BSB-B).
- Core text in addition to the the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahmasūtras*, and *Bhagavad Gītā* - the ***Bhāgavata Purāṇa***.
- *Kṛṣṇa* (Krishna) is worshipped as supreme Lord.
- The relationship to Madhva's dualist *dvaita* system is controversial. Baladeva saw himself in that lineage, but his system differs from Madhva's in some important respects.



Baladeva's Acintya Bhedābheda Vedānta 2

- Core beliefs:

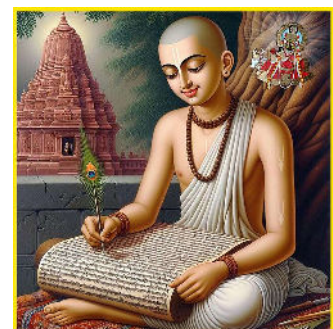
- *Brahman* = *Īśvara* (God) = *Śrī Kṛṣṇa* = *Bhagavān Puruṣottama*
- God is both transcendent and immanent, the material cause and efficient cause of the universe
- The universe of souls and matter (*jīvajagat*) is real and eternally distinct from *Kṛṣṇa* – yet God is present in each soul (*ātman*) pervading and sustaining it (*Bhagavata Purana*, 3.29.21)
- The individual soul (*jīva*) is an atomic, individual consciousness, and an **agent** (*kartā*)
- The precise relationships between *Kṛṣṇa*, souls, and the world is *acintya* - inconceivable
- *Bhakti* (devotion) is the only means of liberation (*mukti*) – and includes devoted service, ethical behaviour, reflecting the goodness of God



Baladeva's Acintya Bhedābheda Vedānta 3

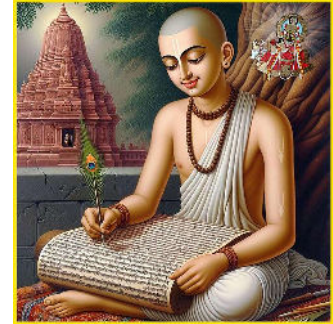
- Five kinds of liberation:

- “Devotees do not accept the five types of liberation—*salokya*, living on the same realm as Me; *sārṣṭi*, having the same opulence as Me; *sāmīpya*, living in My association; *sārūpya*, having the same form as Me; and *ekatvam* [= *sāyūjya*], undifferentiated oneness with Me—even when these are awarded, if they are devoid of My service.” *Bhagavata Purāṇa* 3.29.12-14 (Bryant, 2017, p. 276).
- In other words – the Acintya Bhedābhedavdins acknowledge other kinds of liberation, like Śāṅkara’s, but say it doesn’t compare to the possibility of an eternal blissful relationship with Kṛṣṇa.



Baladeva's Acintya Bhedābheda Vedānta 4

“There are different transcendent levels to the Ultimate Truth. The *ātman* may be the ultimate essence of an individual beyond the categories of body and mind, but *Īśvara* is a still higher Truth beyond the *ātman*. Realizing this, the *bhakta* redirects consciousness to *Īśvara*, rather than striving to direct it to its own inherent nature of objectless consciousness. This, in essence, is *bhakti yoga*. While some can indeed attain the *ātman* (also known as *puruṣa*) through yogic virtuosity and meditational prowess based on personal willpower, the attainment of *Īśvara*, a higher and Supreme Ātman, and entrance into *Īśvara*'s divine transcendent realm of *Vaikuṅṭha*, the personal abode of Viṣṇu, the Kingdom of God, is attainable only (but easily) by *bhakti*.”



Bryant (2017, p. 115), on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 3.5.45-46

Dualism, Nondualism & Monism

“There are many monisms. What they share is that they attribute oneness. Where they differ is in what they attribute oneness to (*the target*) and how they count (*the unit*). So strictly speaking there is only *monism relative to a target and unit*.”

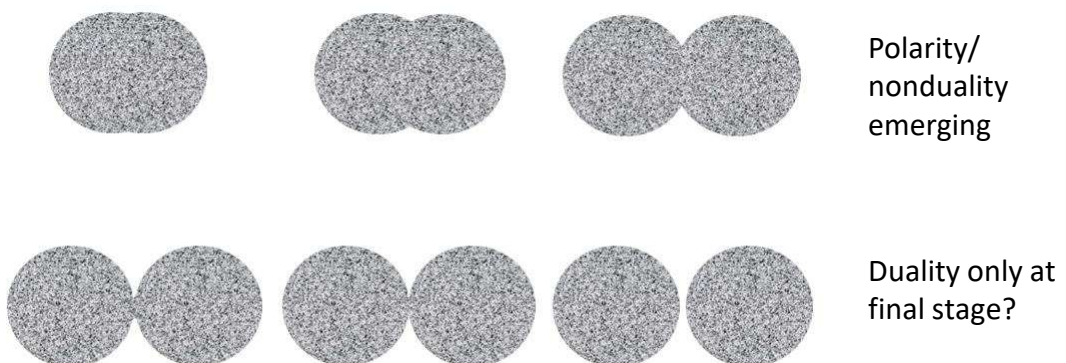
- Schaffer (2018)

Possible Targets

- **Categories** – the ‘highest general type’ such as **Aristotle’s ten categories** (*Categories* 1b25): substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, date, posture, state, action and passion (Thomasson, 2019). Or the **Vaiśeṣika’s six categories**: substance (*draya*), quality (*guṇa*), action or motion (*karman*), commonality or universality (*sāmānya*), particularity (*viśeṣa*), and inherence (*samavāya*) (Preisendanz, 2011, pp. 712-713; Kumar, 2014, 2018).
- For **Vedānta**: *Brahman* (ultimate reality / Self), *Jīva* (individual self), & *Loka* (phenomenal world)
- Also: Consciousness, Volition, Agency, Spatial extent, Power, Knowledge, Goodness, etc.
- Our images and metaphors of ‘nondualism’ can strongly influence our philosophy

Shades of monism – when does monism become dualism?

One target: **Perimeter** (or surface in 3D)



Shades of monism

Three targets: **perimeter**, **shape** & **texture**

Monism with
polarity in
perimeter –
but no other
distinctions



Monism with
polarity in
perimeter – and
duality in **texture**

Monism with
polarity in
perimeter &
duality in **shape**



Monism with
polarity in
perimeter –
dualities in **shape**,
and **texture**

The Dualism-Nondualism-Monism spectrum

| Dualism | Nondualism | Monism |
|---|--|--|
| Patañjali's Yoga Sāṃkhya Dvaita Vedānta Early Śaiva Siddhānta Śaiva tantras | Bhedābheda Vedānta Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta Śivaviśiṣṭādvaita | Advaita Vedānta Late Śaiva Siddhānta 'Kashmir Śaivism' / Pratyabhijñā / Monistic Śaivism |

The boundary between *pure* **Monism** and **Nondualism** is relatively strong. **Nondualism** is a spectrum with a weaker boundary into **Dualism**, reflecting the possibility that an entity can be dualistic in some dimensions and nondualistic, or even monistic, in others.

'Being itself' vs 'Perfect being' – Latin analogies

- A major split in medieval Catholic theology occurred over the understanding of 'being', and whether the being of God and creatures should be understood **analogically** (*analogia entis*, the analogy of being, in Latin) or **univocally**.
- For **Aquinas and the Thomist tradition** which followed him, God was 'existence/being itself' (*ipsum esse*), just existence (*esse tantum*), and infinite existence (*esse infinitum*), not **a** being among others. So 'being' was used of God analogically – the 'being' of God is not the same as the 'being' of creatures, whose existences are entirely derivative and dependent on God.
- For **John Duns Scotus and the later 'Scotists'**, 'being' was to be understood univocally – God was an infinite being (*ens infinitum*).
- Major theological debates turned, and continue to turn, on the subtleties represented by the difference between the Latin *esse* (Being) and *ens* (a being). The infinitive of the verb 'to be', *esse*, has the sense of the act of existing, *be-ing* in an active, verbal sense, whereas *ens* carries the sense of **a** being, an entity.

Rival conceptions of God

- There is arguably a sense in which both **Christian classical theism**, with its notion of absolute simplicity, and advaita vedānta, focussing on **Brahman without qualities** (*nirguṇa brahman*) seek to penetrate into the very essence of Ultimate Reality.
- 'Simplicity', 'without qualities' – and yet ... this Being itself (*ipsum esse*) or 'ground of being', turns out to have a bunch of properties: self-existence and independence (aseity), 'eternal' understood as timelessness, immutability, absolute simplicity, impassibility, essence identical with existence and attributes, no real relations, etc. It is only able to be apoken of apophatically (negative theology), (cf. 'neti neti', BU 2.1 & 2.3) and analogically, etc.
- The **Bhāgavata traditions**, and what is sometimes called '**theistic personalism**' in other traditions, reject this characterisation. The heart of reality is the living God, **Brahman with qualities** (*saguṇa brahman*), who is the source of all qualities. *Nirguṇa brahman* refers to the lack of limiting or 'bad' qualities. There is no penetrating into the *essence* of what Meister Eckhart called 'the Godhead'.

Conclusions 1

- Vedāntic interpretations vary widely, but at their core, centre on the questions of:
 - Who or what is Brahman? God with qualities or the 'Reality' that transcends even God?
 - In what sense is the human 'soul' (*jīva*) related to Brahman?
- There's been a strong tradition in Advaita since Śaṅkara, of viewing *Īśvara* (God) with qualities and *jīvas* ('souls') with a distinctive identity as being merely conventional reality, to be transcended with the pure knowledge of Brahman (*brahmajñāna*)
- The Acintaya Bhedābheda tradition rejects and inverts this notion, saying that Kṛṣṇa / God is Brahman and that the kind of knowledge of the self/Self envisaged by Advaita Vedānta is itself a preliminary option for liberation that should be passed over by the *bhakti* devotee who is committed to loving and serving Kṛṣṇa
- So 'highest' state of consciousness *not* a passive, inactive, contentless awareness, but a rapturous eternal relationship with God / *Īśvara* / *Kṛṣṇa* / *Bhagavān* who is the source of all love and goodness, and the ultimate ground for metaethical moral realism.

Conclusions 2

- In terms of agency and moral responsibility, metethically I would characterise both *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Acintya Bhedābheda* as forms of **non-natural moral realism** grounded in the goodness and love of God, and in terms of normative ethics, deontological – given the commands and desires of God and the goal of cultivating that relationship.
- *Advaita* presents a conundrum, operating at two levels of reality. Metaethically it is not simple fictionalism – where we use moral language merely for pragmatic purposes, knowing it to be literally false or meaningless, like characters in a play.
- Metaethically, I would describe Advaita with the phrase '**bimodal fictionalism**' – *fictionalism* because there is ultimately no 'good' or 'bad', and notions of morality are limited to conventional reality, and are transcended in the liberated state. But it is also *bimodal* since the tradition still acknowledges the importance of conventional reality, at least as a stepping stone towards ultimate reality, so it doesn't thereby do away with moral responsibility.

Thank you!

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