



ŚAṆKARĀCĀRYA ON APPEARANCE AND REALITY

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Abstract

Appearance and reality are one of the most fundamental concepts in philosophy. Śaṅkara has made significant contributions in developing the notions of appearance and reality. Appearance and reality are two but interrelated concepts in philosophy. These are not only the ontological issues but also their nature and status shape of epistemological quest. The basic questions are: What is genuinely real? What is mere appearance and not reality? Is there any connection between appearance and reality? Is there any realm which is Ultimate Reality? Is the phenomenal world merely appearance? If the objects are merely appearances, how do we bring them into reality? What are the means through which we move from appearances to the reality? Śaṅkara has answered these questions in his concept of Nirguṇa Brahman, vivartavāda, anirvacanīya khyātivāda and Jīvan-mukti. He, while resolving the dualism of appearance and reality, establishes his Advaita Vedānta philosophical system in which there is no place for distinction, duality, dichotomy and plurality at all.

Keywords: Appearance, Reality, Paramārtha, Vyāvahāra, Pratibhāsa.



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The present paper is concerned with the study of the nature and status of appearance and reality into the framework of ontology, metaphysics, epistemology and philosophical psychology in Śaṅkara's philosophy of *Advaita Vedānta*. Appearance, in Śaṅkara's philosophy of *Advaita Vedānta*, contains *ābhāsa*, *mithyā*, *bhrama*, *māyā*, *avidyā*, *ajñāna*, *adhyāsa*, *dvaita*, *vivarta*, *vikāra*, *anya*, *pratibhāsa*, *vyāvahāra*, *bhāvābhāvavilaksana*, *sadasadanirvacanīya*, *prapañca*, *jagat*, *pratyakṣa*, *anumāna*, *Śabda* and so on. And Reality comprises of *Satya*, *Vāstava*, *Yathārtha*, *Paramārtha*, *ParamPurūsārtha*, *Cit*, *Ānanda*, *Jñāna*, *Anant*, *Bhūmā*,

Brahman, Ātman, Sākṣ in, Mokṣ a, Tattva, Turīya, Ananya, Nitya, Advaita and so on. Generally, that which is appearance is regarded in *Advaita Vedānta* as changeable, temporary, empirical, visible and which have name and form. It depends also on space, time and circumstances with certain quality (*guṇa*) and generic feature (*jāti*) involved in action (*karma*). That which is real is regarded as changeless, pure, eternal, permanent, indivisible, formless, self-luminous, self-proved, trans-empirical, trans-rational, trans-linguistic and self-existent entity. Reality (*Sat*) is defined in *Advaita Vedānta* philosophical system as such: Reality means that “which exists in all the three periods of time (past, present and future) without undergoing any change; and also in all the three states of consciousness (waking state, dream state and deep-sleep state). This is therefore the absolute Reality-birthless, deathless and changeless-referred to in the Upanishads as *Brahman*.”¹In this sense, *Brahman* is Ultimate Reality. Then, what’s the *reality* of appearance? The world is appearance, i.e., illusion because “the world appears real only in the waking state; but it is negated (it disappears) in the dream and deep-sleep states. Hence, it is not real, according to the definition above. Therefore, the world is said to be *mithyā* by the *Acharya*.”²

As far as appearance and reality are concerned, appearance, in Śaṅ kara, is not only appearance but it is reality also. However, in appearance also, there is an element of reality but it is regarded by Śaṅ kara as reality of lower level. Likewise between *Paramārtha* and *vyāvahāra*, there is no separation in terms of reality and appearance. But there is difference in terms of degrees of reality. *Pratibhāsa* is less element of reality and more of appearance in reference to *vyāvahāra*. *Vyāvahāra* is more of real and less element of appearance in reference to *pratibhāsa*, but it is less element of reality and more of appearance in reference to *Paramārtha*, whereas; *Paramārtha* is more of real in terms of appearance. “It is the Real which appears and hence every appearance must have some degree of truth in it...”³The object, which is more of real (it is *vyāvahāra* in reference to *pratibhāsa*, and it is *Paramārtha* in reference to *vyāvahāra*), is the ground of appearance (it is *pratibhāsa* in reference to *vyāvahāra*, and it is *vyāvahāra* in reference to *Paramārtha*) which is reality of lower level. Appearance is taken as reality as long as we do not know the object which is more of real as the ground of appearance. Therefore, appearance can be removed with reference to reality. Just like *pratibhāsa*, which is more of appearance and less of reality in terms of *vyāvahārikasat*, is taken as reality as long as *vyāvahāra* is not known and, *vyāvahāra*, which is more of appearance and less of reality in terms of *Paramārthikasat*, is known as reality when we do not realize *Paramārtha*. On the one hand,

pratibhāsa is taken as appearance in reference to *vyāvahāra* and, *vyāvahāra* is taken as appearance in reference to *Paramārtha*. On the other hand, *pratibhāsa*, *vyāvahāra* and *Paramārtha* are taken as reality in its own spheres but it is imaginary reality in the case of former, practical or phenomenal reality in the case of middle and Ultimate Reality in the case of latter.

Ontological status of Reality, as the evolution of consciousness, has been explained in terms of *Pañcakośas*(five sheaths), i.e., *AnnamayaKośa*(food-sheath), *PrāṇamayaKośa*(vital air-sheath or life-sheath), *ManomayaKośa*(mental-sheath), *VijñānamayaKośa*(intellectual-sheath) and *ĀnandamayaKośa*(bliss-sheath). For Śaṅkara, Reality is *Brahman* in terms of Bliss because for from Bliss, all these beings originate, having been born, they are sustained by Bliss; they move towards and merge in Bliss. He, who realizes this knowledge, terminates in the Supreme (Bliss). Śaṅkara, on considering the Reality in terms of *ĀnandamayaKośa*, says, “This is knowledge...commencing from the self constituted by food, culminates in the Supreme, non-dual Bliss...And body else, too, who realize the Bliss that is *Brahman* by entering through this very process and through concentration alone as his aid-that man, too, in consequence of his knowledge culminating thus, gets established in the Bliss that is the Supreme *Brahman*; that is to say, he becomes *Brahman* Itself.”⁴

Śaṅkara, to establish his metaphysical system, explains Reality as *Brahman* in terms of *Sat*, *Cit*, *Ānanda* and *Satya*, *Jñāna*, *Ananta*. The three terms, i.e. *Satya*, *Jñāna* and *Ananta*, contain three different meanings of Ultimate Reality and separate among themselves. But they are related to Ultimate Reality in terms of *Brahman* and show his characteristics. As Śaṅkara argues, “The word ‘*satya*’ etc. are unrelated among themselves, since they subserve something else; they are meant to be applied to the substantive only. Accordingly, each of the... words is related with the word ‘*Brahman*’, independently of the others, thus: *satyam brahma*, *jñānam brahma*, *anantam brahma*.”⁵ The characterization of metaphysical status of Reality as *Brahman* in terms of *Sat*, *Cit* and *Ānanda* are not synonymous (*aparyāya*), even these are not qualities, aspects or phases of *Brahman*. “*Sat-Cit-Ānanda* (absolute Existence, absolute Consciousness, absolute Bliss) constitute the very essence or *Svarūpa* of *Brahman*, and not just Its attributes.”⁶ Whenever we mention to *Brahman* as *Sat*, *Cit* and *Ānanda*, it must be recognized that the other terms necessarily comprised. Śaṅkara defines Reality in terms of *Brahman* as such, “*Brahman* does exist as a well-known entity- eternal, pure, intelligent, free by nature and all-knowing and all-

powerful.”⁷ He refers two aspects of *Brahman*, as transcendental perspective and empirical viewpoint. He accepts the former as Highest Reality who is the stage of *Nirguṇa Brahman* and latter as lower reality who is the stage of *Saguṇa Brahman*. *Nirguṇa Brahman* cannot be a category of thought. It can be spoken only in negative term as ‘Not this, Not this’. Śaṅkara says, “*Brahman* is known in two aspects- one as possessed of the limiting adjunct constituted by the diversities of the universe which is a modification of name and form, and the other devoid of all conditioning factors and opposed to the earlier.”⁸

Śaṅkara explains the epistemological status of appearance and reality with reference to *antaḥkaraṇa*, *pramāṇa-vicāra*, *anirvacanīyakhyātivāda* and *vivartavāda*. *Antaḥkaraṇa* receive and arrange what is conveyed to it through the senses. Through the “function of the *antaḥkaraṇa*”⁹ and its modification, i.e. *vṛtti-jñāna*, we move from the sphere of appearance towards the sphere of reality. It makes possible for a person to come in contact with *vyāvahārikajagat*, i.e., empirical reality (*vyāvahārika sat*).

Pramāṇas are required to justify what is in appearance, what is in reality and what is in both. Through the function of *Pramāṇas*, we can transform appearances into reality. Absolute Reality is comprehended by means of *Pramāṇas* and what appearance is, from the Absolute point of view, is also known by means of *Pramāṇas*. In other words, the world of appearance and Absolute Reality are known through the function of *Pramāṇas*. Therefore, *Pramāṇas* are applicable for both appearance and reality. We establish the existence and non-existence of a thing only by means of *Pramāṇa*. The world is real from empirical point of view and “If the world is proved by all the *Pramāṇa*, we cannot say that it does not exist. But there is a *Pramāṇavyavasthā*, every *Pramāṇa* operates in a particular area, it has its own subject matter. What one *Pramāṇa* comprehends another *Pramāṇa* cannot, just as what one sense organ comprehends another sense organ cannot.”¹⁰ Śaṅkara accepts six *Pramāṇas* through which our all knowledge is possible whether it is empirical or transcendental. Śaṅkara says, “...knowledge arises from its valid means (e.g. perception, inference, etc.); and the valid means apprehend the things just as they are.”¹¹

Śaṅkara proves the world of appearance by the theory of *vivartavāda*. According to this theory, the cause is real and the effect is appearance. The cause (*kāraṇa*), without any change in itself, produces the effect (*kārya*). The change of cause into effect is appearance, not real. In the context of *Advaita Vedānta*, the world (*jagat*) is appearance of *Brahman*. The world does not

exist independently apart from *Brahman*. *Brahman* appears as the world, and being the ground (*adhiṣṭhāna*) of the world, it is a material cause. Śaṅkara, for describing the rope-snake or shell-silver analogy which is seen by the person who is present during illusion, proposes the theory of *anirvacanīyakhyāti* in terms of being neither *Sat* and *asat*.

AdvaitaVedāntins use the phrases *ābhāsa*, *mithyā*, *bhrama*, *māyā*, *avidyā*, *sadasadanirvacanīya* and so on for the term ‘appearance.’ These phrases are applied in the theory of error, i.e. *anirvacanīya khyātivāda*. According to this theory, illusion consists in the superimposition of one thing or “the characteristic of one thing on another”¹² It is known as *adhyāsa*. The theory of *vivartavāda* and *anirvacanīyakhyātivāda* indicates that “appearance can be negated only with reference to reality.”¹³

Śaṅkara describes the status of consciousness as reality in terms of *avasthātraya*, i.e., “*jāgrat*, *svapna* and *suṣupti*.”¹⁴ According to *Advaita* philosophy, “the self or consciousness, which is one, is pervasive in all the three states of experience, for the purpose of analysis, designates it as *viśva* in the walking state, as *taijasa* in the dream state and as *prājñā* in the sleep state.”¹⁵ This could be considered into the framework of philosophical psychology. Consciousness illuminates all the objects though it may be appearance or it may be reality, whether it is in waking state or in dreaming state, even it is present in deep sleep state in which there is no object. Therefore, it has been interpreted as Reality in terms of *avasthātraya*. Consciousness is the witness of all the three states of experience. The witnessing consciousness is designated as “*Sākṣin*”¹⁶ in *AdvaitaVedānta* which is always existing and changeless entity. In this sense, it is accepted as Reality. But consciousness as such cannot be known under the knowledge-situation just as tongue cannot taste itself. This is the fourth state, the nameless, i.e., “*Turīya*”¹⁷ It is at this state that *Ātman* is to be entirely identified with the *Brahman*. This is Absolute Reality, Absolute Consciousness. Śaṅkara advocates the doctrine of “*Jīvan-mukti*”¹⁸ which is also known in terms of Reality. According to *Advaita*, when *jīva* realizes his true nature, i.e., *Sat*, *Cit*, *Ānanda* nature, he is released from the worldly bondage (*bandhana*). It is the stage which *Advaita* calls as Reality in terms of *Mokṣa* or *Jīvan-mukti* (liberation from worldly bondage). When the *māyā*, *avidyā*, *adhyāsa*, all the appearances and illusions are resolved, it is called the stage of *Jīvan-mukti*. It means that the *Mokṣa* is not next step comes after the death, it can be attained even in the present life also.

Advaita Vedānta speaks of three levels of being or reality, namely, Absolute Reality (*Paramārthika sat*), practical or relative reality (*vyāvahārika sat*) and imaginary reality (*pratibhāsika sat*). *Brahman* (*Paramārthikasat*) is the Absolute Reality. The phenomenal world is practical reality (*vyāvahārika sat*) and rope-snake is imaginary reality (*pratibhāsika sat*). Śaṅkara takes the realms of *Paramārtha* and *vyāvahāra* as reality of higher and lower level. He draws a distinction between higher and lower levels of reality from the epistemological point of view. But from the metaphysical point of view, there is no separation between them, just like there is no separation between *Paramārthika sat* and *Vyāvahārika sat*. Pure existence or the Ultimate Reality is *Brahman* which is the ground reality of all but, outside of our empirical experience and free from the applicability of senses, thought and language; whereas, the phenomenal world is empirical real which is known through sensibility, categories of understanding and language but, not real from the Absolute point of view. The world is relative real (*vyāvahārika sat*). The *Paramārtha* is Absolute Real and the world is the sphere of appearance. The world is a superimposition on *Brahman* and due to *māyā*, it is public illusion (*samaś ṭ igatbhrama*). Does it mean that world is merely illusion? Actually, it is not illusion-only because the world is proved by all the *Pramāṇas* and its factual position gives it practical existence (*vyāvahārika sat*). According to Śaṅkara, the phenomenal world can never be described in terms of neither completely *Sat* (like *Brahman*) nor completely *asat* (like hare's horn), nor both and nor even different from both. Therefore, the phenomenal world, in *Advaita Vedānta*, has been explained in terms of *anirvacanīya*. Śaṅkara refers degrees of reality not only to *vyāvahāra* but also to *pratibhāsa*. Rope-snake, dreams, imaginary illusions, etc., are recognized as real as long as they appear to us and they are taken as unreal when their ground-reality is known. It is referred as the level of *pratibhāsika*. This type of appearance or illusion occurs due to *avidyā* which is known as private illusion (*vyaktigatabhrama*) in *Advaita Vedānta*. The term '*asat*' has been used for unreal in *Advaita Vedānta* because it does not appear as an object (like hare's horn). Strictly speaking, *pratibhāsa* is real due to *avidyā* and *vyāvahāra* is real due to *māyā*. Basically, Śaṅkara is *Brahmavādi*. *Māyā* and *avidyā* come only in the course of philosophical investigation that Śaṅkara undertakes.

Basically, the distinction of appearance and reality is concerned with the fundamental thesis of Śaṅkara. His primary concern is to understand *Ātman* and its relation to *Brahman*. So he goes from *Vyāvahārika* level towards *Pāramārthika* level, from the level of appearance

towards the level of Absolute Reality and speaks of *Anubhava* (pure intuition) through which we realize the Ultimate Reality. Śaṅkara retorts to those who accept that Absolute reality is unknown and unknowable. Śaṅkara says, “It does not stand to reason to say that some external thing exists substantially and still remains unknown, for this is like averring that colour is perceived while the eye is non-existent.”¹⁹ Therefore, Absolute Reality is known by direct realization (pure intuition) for Śaṅkara.

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¹⁴Now in medical science and psychology, we find some other categories of dream and sleep states which are known as ‘lucid dream’, ‘Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep’ and ‘Non-rapid eye movement sleep’ (Non-REM sleep). A lucid dream, in simplest terms, is a dream in which one is aware that one is dreaming. The term was coined by the Dutch psychiatrist and writer Frederik van Eeden (1860–1932). A lucid dream can begin in one of two ways. A dream-initiated lucid dream (DILD) starts as a normal dream, and the dreamer eventually concludes it is a dream, while a wake-initiated lucid dream (WILD) occurs when the dreamer goes from a normal waking state directly into a dream state, with no apparent lapse in consciousness. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucid_dream retrieved on Dec. 11, 2010).

Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep is a normal stage of sleep characterized by the rapid movement of the eyes. (For detail, Please visit on: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rapid_eye_movement_sleep).

Non-rapid eye movement sleep (Non- REM sleep) is recognized as Śaṅ kara’s deep sleep state (*suṣuptiavasthā*). Non-rapid eye movement sleep (Non- REM sleep), in the first step, occurs mostly in the beginning of sleep, with slow eye movement. In next step, there is no eye movement occurs, and dreaming is very rare. It is associated with ‘deep sleep’ in its final step. (For detail, please visit on: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-rapid_eye_movement_sleep).

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