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Advaita Doctrine: Preliminaries

Srinivasa Rao

in Advaita: A Contemporary Critique

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This chapter gives an overview of how there was a defective stand about non-duality taken by Mandana Miśra which was corrected by Śankara, but how this corrected view itself came to be misunderstood and distorted by later followers of Śankara. The emphasis here is on how the essentially correct view of Śankara came to be misunderstood, transformed and twisted by his followers, leading to the development of a strong orthodoxy in Advaita. The chapter gives a panoramic view of the development of these orthodox ideas of post-Śankara Advaita where non-existent entities are mistakenly hypostatized and mere pedagogic narratives are treated as philosophical theories. These mistakes receive detailed and systematic criticism in the chapters that follow.

Rope-Snake Illusion

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Advaitins of post-Śankara period hold a strange thesis that when ropes are mistaken for snakes, there are indeed snakes there, but only illusory ones. They believe so on metaphysical grounds, disregarding the obvious facts that after realizing that it was an illusion, it is believed (1) by none that there was a snake (of any kind), and (2) that it was just the rope itself that was seen as a snake. Further, they hold that at the moment of illusion, the ignorance in the perceiver instantly creates that illusory snake. Upon dispelling of illusion, that illusory snake is sublated by

correct knowledge of rope. Our experience of the world is also regarded an illusion created by cosmic ignorance (māyā) present in Brahman. This chapter is a detailed, novel refutation of this ontology of illusion, a prelude to an ensuing rejection of cosmic ontology.

The Ātman-Brahman Inquiries

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The inquiries into Ātman and Brahman and the declaration of their identity in the Upanisads has vital implications for Advaita which Śankara's commentators completely miss and misunderstand. While the Ātman-inquiry into the inner essence of man used a device of exclusion (like the body is not Ātman etc.), the Brahman-inquiry into the source of the universe did not use it. But yet, whatever was being excluded from Ātman (like the body, senses, mind, etc.) in the first inquiry went on being included under Brahmanin the second, so that ultimately these two inquiries brought under themselves just everything existing in the universe. Therefore when their identity was discovered, non-duality emerged as the only truth. But, missing this completely, the commentators hypostatize ignorance into a beginningless "second entity" and create every possible problem within a perfect doctrine of non-duality.

On Anātman

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While Śankara had spoken of anātman as merely a superimposed idea, his commentators resorted to an absolutely needless hypostatization of it as a kind of positive, experienced entity in total opposition to the non-dual Self, thereby bringing into the doctrine of non-duality some serious problems besides attracting criticisms from the dualists. If the Self is the sole non-dual reality, it logically follows from it that nothing like anātman can ever exist anywhere at any time and hence any talk of its existing,

being perceived, being experienced and then finally getting sublated can never make any sense. No sadasadvilaksana entities are ever created by māyā and then sublated by Brahmānubhava. Such creation and sublation cannot be logically and consistently asserted as true at the empirical or even at the transcendental level. The doctrine is typifies ontological extravagance.

Advaita : A Contemporary Critique

Srinivasa Rao

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The book proposes a contemporary framework for critiquing Advaita and formulating its basic thesis in a more logical and convincing way. Any proper theory in philosophy and science has to follow from accepted assumptions. Hence the book begins by identifying basic presuppositions required for Advaita and determining the different cognitive possibilities arising out of them. After thus determining what is logically and conceptually possible and impossible in Advaita, the new framework is used to assess whether or not the traditionally held Advaitic concepts and theories are satisfactory and acceptable. This is done in many chapters covering discussions of the notions of not-Self (anātman), cosmic ignorance (māyā), individual ignorance (avidyā), illusoriness (mithyātva), sublation (bādha), entities that are different from the real and the unreal (sadasadvilaksana) and so on. The book argues that all these concepts, as specifically formulated and defended in traditional Advaita for centuries after Śankara, are simply faulty and untenable both individually and as related clusters of concepts. Traditional Advaita has also defended an elaborate ontology of experiences like mistaking a rope-for a snake. It has also heavily defended the metaphysical thesis of the empirical world of our experience being a total illusion. The logical faults and conceptual inadequacies of this ontology and metaphysics are also discussed in great detail, offering absolutely new criticisms of them. Despite this almost totally negative portrayal of traditional Advaita, the book is also quite positive in showing that any belief in non-duality is still very much philosophically possible and also necessary.