

The *Mūlāvidyā* Controversy Among Advaita Vedāntins: was Śaṅkara Himself Responsible?

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Abstract The concept of *avidyā* or ignorance is central to the Advaita Vedāntic position of Śaṅkara. The post-Śaṅkara Advaitins wrote sub-commentaries on the original texts of Śaṅkara with the intention of strengthening his views. Over the passage of time the views of these sub-commentators of Śaṅkara came to be regarded as representing the doctrine of Advaita particularly with regard to the concept of *avidyā*. Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati, a scholar-monk of Hole-narsipur, challenged the accepted tradition through the publication of his work *Mūlāvidyānirāsaḥ*, particularly with regard to the *avidyā* doctrine. It was his contention that the post-Śaṅkara commentators brought their own innovations particularly on the nature of *avidyā*. This was the idea of *mūlāvidyā* or ‘root ignorance’, a positive entity which is the material cause of the phenomenal world. Saraswati argues that such an idea of *mūlāvidyā* is not to be found in the *bhāṣyas* (commentaries) of Śaṅkara and is foisted upon Śaṅkara. This paper attempts to show that although Śaṅkara may not have explicitly favoured such a view of *mūlāvidyā*, his lack of clarity on the nature of *avidyā* left enough scope for the post-Śaṅkara commentators to take such a position on *avidyā*.

Keywords *Adhyāsa · Advaita · Avidyā · Ignorance · Mūlāvidyā · Vedānta*

Introduction

The concept of ignorance, known as *avidyā*, is central to the position of Advaita Vedānta. Śaṅkara gives an exposition about the nature of *avidyā* in his introduction

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to the *Brahmasūtras*—the introductory section of his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* is traditionally known as *Adhyāsa-bhāṣya*.¹ The *bhāṣya* (commentary) of Śāṅkara was further commented upon by the Advaita scholars with the intention of strengthening the viewpoints of Advaita, particularly on the doctrine of *avidyā*. These post-Śāṅkara commentators were known as *vyākhyānkāras*. Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati (hereafter SS) in the 1930s and forties introduced certain ideas challenging the then prevailing tradition, which turned into a controversy, leading to a debate among Advaita Vedāntins regarding the nature of the concept of *avidyā*.² Michael Comans referring to the importance of this debate remarks, “In fact, if there has been a debate internal to the śāṅkara tradition of Advaita over the last 50 years, it is the dispute between the protagonists of the views of Sacchidānandendra and those who would defend the standard position” (2000; p. 249). This dispute was regarding the idea of “root ignorance” (*mūlāvidyā*) as a substantive (*bhāvarūpa*), indescribable (*anirvacanīya*) matter enveloping Brahman and being an obstruction for the realization of Brahman. Martha Doherty has given a lucid exposition of this *mūlāvidyā* debate where she emphasizes the significance of *avidyā* to the Advaita position.

The concept of *avidyā* is crucial to the Advaita position, for without it, there is no non-duality (*advaita*). The perceived duality is sublated as a reality by the knowledge of an underlying non-dual reality. Understanding the duality as real is an error, which is a function of ignorance (*avidyā*) of the non-dual reality (2005; p. 210).

Further, reviewing the post-Śāṅkara commentators’ interpretation of *avidyā*, she shows that they attributed a causal role to *avidyā*, which functions as a material cause in concealing the true nature of Brahman. This is referred to as the “root ignorance” (*mūlāvidyā*) “in keeping with its causal status” (ibid, pp. 213–214). The concept of *avidyā* is also equated with *māyā*. It is considered to have a power (*śakti*). It was SS’s contention that such an idea of *avidyā* was alien to the original Śāṅkara commentaries and was foisted on Śāṅkara by the later *vyākhyānkāras*. According to him there was not even an implication of *mūlāvidyā* in the original commentaries of Śāṅkara. He holds the post-Śāṅkara commentators, beginning with the author of *Pañcapādikā* (supposed to be written by Padmapāda) and the sub-commentator of this work Prakāśātman (who wrote the sub-commentary *Vivaraṇa*) and his protagonists, known as *vivaraṇakāras*, responsible for this misconstrual of Śāṅkara.

¹ Tradition considers *Brahmasūtra* to be one of the triple canonical texts of Vedānta philosophy apart from the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavadgītā*. Śāṅkara has written commentaries on all these texts. However it should be noted that he never calls the *sūtras* of Bādārāyana constituting the text as *Brahmasūtra*. He calls them as *Śārīraka Mīmāṃsā* or *Vedānta Mīmāṃsā*.

² He published in 1929 a Sanskrit text *Mūlāvidyānirāsaḥ* in which he opposed this idea of *mūlāvidyā* foisted on the Śāṅkara’s texts by later commentators. Subsequently he published another book titled *Śāṅkara Siddhānta* in Kannada in 1940. In the preface to the latter work he writes that he has presented there the most important points of the Sanskrit treatise *Mūlāvidyānirāsaḥ*. D.B. Gangolli has rendered a free English translation of *Śāṅkara Siddhānta*, which was published in 1996 by Adhyatma Prakasha Karyalaya. It is this translation that has been consulted for the present paper. Page number references to this work of SS are to this translated work and are indicated as (1940, Tr. Gangolli).

Such a characterization of *avidyā* that is not to be found in Śāṅkara *bhāṣyas*, SS contends, is due to the total neglect by Śāṅkara scholars of a certain method which Śāṅkara adopted in his exegesis. This is the method of *adhyāropa apavāda nyāya* (method of deliberate superimposition and subsequent rescission/abrogation). In his *magnum opus Vedānta-prakriyā-pratyabhijñā*, where he describes the nature of this method in detail, he writes,

Brahman or the absolute Reality ever remains the same, unaffected by the superimposition of *avidyā* or its removal. It is for this reason that the śruti utilizes different devices suited to remove particular impositions and this accounts not only for the special instances of the ‘Adhyāropa-apavāda’ method... (1964; pp. 54–55)

Avidyā and *māyā* are the special instance or application of the method as he sees it (1971; pp. 41–48). Referring to these terms he says,

These terms are used in Vedānta for the particular kind of wrong knowledge and the objective phenomena respectively, only as a device to introduce the reader (by means of Adhyāropāpvāda) to the transcendental entity or the Witnessing principle called Atman, and not for formulating theories which the system undertakes to defend (ibid, p. 45).

SS lays great emphasis on this method. Understanding this method, for him, constitutes the cornerstone of the teaching and unfoldment of Vedāntic vision. Commenting on how SS was influenced in this regard, Doherty writes, “The pre-occupation with methodology and the narrow insistence on one defining method was a significant part of the legacy that Satchidanandendra inherited from these authors” (2005; p. 231). What is this method of exegesis that is special to Śāṅkara Vedānta and why is this method adopted? The very nature and topic to be dealt with by Vedānta necessitates, so it is argued, the adoption of such a method.

SS shows that Śāṅkara has made explicit reference to such a method in his *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* as follows:

This in accordance with the knowers of the traditional method who say: that which is devoid of specific features is to be explained by the method of deliberate superimposition and rescission.³

The peculiarity of this method consists in adopting a two-standpoint approach for the exposition of Brahman. The two standpoints are the empirical or the transactional standpoint (*loka dṛṣṭi* or *vyavahāra dṛṣṭi*) and the transcendental or the “really real” standpoint (*paramārtha dṛṣṭi* or *śāstra dṛṣṭi*). The notion of two standpoints is very central to this method. In his exposition, Śāṅkara conveniently shifts from one position to the other in the same occasion and it sometimes becomes very difficult to make out

³ In the *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* passage on sloka XIII.13, Śāṅkara says: *tathā hi sampradāyavidām vacanam-‘adhyāropāpvādābhyaṃ nisprapañca prapañcyate’* (Panoli 1990; p. 169). I have one comment to make here. *Adhyāropa apavāda* is a methodological principle. *Brahmasūtras* known as the *nyāya prasthāna* is the text which expounds the principles of Vedāntic exegesis and methods. So it would have been more appropriate for Śāṅkara to make a reference to such a method in this text. It is surprising that Śāṅkara has not made any mention to such a method in his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*.

which point of view is being adopted. I will critically take up for discussion this method of *adhyāropa apavāda* later.

The controversy among the Śāṅkara scholars on the issue of *mūlāvidyā* continued and a symposium was organized (*Vedāntavidvadgoṣṭhī*)⁴ to debate and settle the issue. No settlement was reached as each side (those who favoured the view that *mūlāvidyā* was inherent in Śāṅkara's exposition were known as *mūlāvidyāvādins*) debated fiercely giving their own arguments and textual citations for or against the view. It is not my intention here to reopen this debate on *mūlāvidyā* and take sides in this controversy.⁵ My objective in this paper is to use this controversy as a foil to raise certain critical philosophical issues that are problematic for Śāṅkara Vedānta. The problematical issues that concern me are particularly with reference to the method of *adhyāropa apavāda* and the two-standpoint approach. It is the contention of this paper that there is not much in the method that affords clarity to the concept of *avidyā* as claimed by SS. Instead the gaps in the understanding of *avidyā* remain.

Rāmānūjācārya also recognized that *avidyā* was the central tenet of the Advaitic thought of Śāṅkara and noted the deep philosophical problems inherent in the *avidyā* doctrine. He therefore treats this as the fundamental thesis of the opponent (*mahāpūrvapakṣha*) in the beginning of his *Śrī-bhāṣya* (Grimes 1990; p. 21).⁶ Though it is also my attempt in this paper to show the philosophical weakness of the *avidyā* doctrine, I go one step further, specifically, to show how this weakness led to the postulation of *mūlāvidyā* of post-Śāṅkara commentators. Moreover there is one more point of difference between Rāmānūja's criticism of the *avidyā* doctrine of Advaita Vedāntic thought and my criticism. Rāmānūja bases his critique mainly on the post-Śāṅkara commentators' enunciation and defense of *avidyā* doctrine and assumes these to be the correct representation of the *avidyā* doctrine of Advaita. It can be argued by SS and his followers that Rāmānūja's criticism is not a direct critique of Śāṅkara's doctrine because these post-Śāṅkara commentators, according to them, did not represent correctly the stance of Śāṅkara, particularly with regard to the *avidyā* doctrine. They can, therefore, contend that it is these post-Śāṅkara commentators' view that was criticized by Rāmānūja and that Śāṅkara still remains

⁴ Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati issued an appeal (*Vijñapti*) to all scholars in 1961 and called for a debate on this issue. Doherty refers to this *Vijñapti* (2005; p. 212, fn. 9) and gives the names of scholars for and against the views of SS (ibid, p. 213, fn. 10) in that debate. She, in the same paper, makes a reference to another debate initiated by Sringeri Śārādā Pīṭha in 1976 to settle the issue of *mūlāvidyā* (p. 223). It is clear from Doherty that Sringeri Pīṭha was against the views of SS on *mūlāvidyā*. But D. B. Gangoli whom she also cites in some other context in the same paper mentions that the Sringeri *Jagadguru* had visited SS and got clarified SS's view and was fully satisfied with it (1997; p. 30). Then what was the need for organizing a debate by Sringeri Pīṭha after the passing away of SS? It appears there is some apparent contradiction here.

⁵ This debate continues till date on a low key in private circles and only restricted to scholars of older generation within the state of Karnataka (erstwhile Mysore state). The main followers of this view of SS were Vedānta śiromaṇi S. Vittalā Sastri, Veda Brahma Sri H.S. Lakṣminarasimhamurthy, Sri Devarao Kulkarni and D.B. Gangolli. However his followers did not seriously pursue with vigour on this issue though they were committed to such a view. When the author of this paper in his personal talk with Laxminarasimhamurthy had raised the issue of *mūlāvidyā*, he said that the fight which ensued in the debate between the two sides was so bitter that he does not want to rake up the issue any more. The monastic institutions like Sringeri, considered to be the centre of Advaitic learning use all their power and influence to suppress such intellectual debates.

⁶ *Śrī-bhāṣya* is Rāmānūjācārya's commentary on *Brahmasūtra* giving the Viśiṣṭādvaita's viewpoint.

immune to these criticisms.⁷ In contrast here, I take SS's own interpretation of Śāṅkara and then provide my own argument to show that such an interpretation is also not philosophically tenable (See footnote 16).

Since it is the contention of SS that the lack of understanding of the method of *adhyāropa apavāda*, based on its central doctrine of two standpoints, was responsible for this idea of *mūlāvidyā* it becomes imperative to first examine this method critically and see if it really stands up as a method. In my critical estimate of this method I show that it does not. If it does not then the above contention of SS regarding *mūlāvidyā* does not hold water. I then take up for discussion the nature of *avidyā* as expounded by Śāṅkara and how it led to the postulation of *avidyā*. In keeping with the above structure of my presentation the problem, I therefore, divide the paper into two parts as follows:⁸

- (I) I begin part I with the origin and nature of *mūlāvidyā* and then give a brief sketch of the traditional method of teaching adopted by Śāṅkara as spelt out by SS. I provide a summary of this method as, according to SS, an understanding of this method is important for the delineation of the *avidyā-māyā* concept and the introduction of this completely mistaken idea of *mūlāvidyā*, contradictory to Śāṅkara, could have been avoided by this understanding.
- (II) In part II I proceed to give my critical estimate of such a method and then show its futility for Vedāntic exegesis and its irrelevance for the delineation of the *avidyā-māyā* concept. I then show that Śāṅkara had left some gaps in the understanding of *avidyā* that led the post-Śāṅkara commentators to postulate this *mūlāvidyā*. In other words my main argument in this paper is: If it is the contention of SS that the idea of *mūlāvidyā* is something that the later commentators foisted on his doctrine then I would like to suggest that Śāṅkara was himself responsible for this due to his lack of clarity on the nature of *avidyā*.

My critique of Śāṅkara's exposition of *avidyā*, particularly its philosophical aspects, appears in the second part. However, this critique would not be effective without critically engaging with certain issues regarding the method of Śāṅkara Vedānta in the first place. Therefore I begin the second part with my critique of the

⁷ A suggestion to that effect has been made by Devarao Kulkarni but with reference to Dvaita-Vedāntins. He opines that if *mūlāvidyā* is admitted within Śāṅkara Vedānta then "the defects raised by Dvaita-Vedāntins are impossible to be refuted" (1989; pp. 67–68). According to him, "these defects will not effect (sic) the Adhyasavada of Shankara ..." (ibid, p. 68). A similar but an indirect suggestion has been made by Vittala Sastri where he avers that *mūlāvidyā* "if admitted as part of the Advaitic doctrine, reduces it into a form of Dvaita philosophy" (1980; p. 36). He further remarks, "It may be noted here that it is on the score of this theory of Original matter or Maya that the Advaitic doctrine has had to suffer several onslaughts in the hands of its critics. Perhaps, it may not be an exaggeration to say that, this kind of interpretation has occasioned the birth of the schools of Visistadwaita ... and Dwaita ..." (ibid; p. 36). K.B. Ramakrishna Rao voices certain strong doubts held by SS with regard to the consequences of holding to the idea of *mūlāvidyā* in his (Rao's) introduction to Vittala Sastri's *Mūlāvidyā-bhāṣya-vārttika-viruddhā* (a Kannada publication) that "the twisted sub-commentaries were responsible to a great extent to give rise to other systems of Vedāntic schools like Ramanuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita and Madhvācārya's Dvaita" (Sastri 1975; p. 10).

⁸ I am extremely grateful to the anonymous referees for suggesting this structure that affords a more rigorous link between the two parts and also clearly opens up the problem of *avidyā* in Advaita Vedānta—the theme of this paper.

method. If I can show that there is nothing much that this method of Vedānta offers then my critical arguments regarding the problems inherent in the concept of *avidyā* in Śāṅkara's exposition are placed on firm grounds.

Part I

Idea of *Mūlāvidyā*: Genesis and Nature⁹

The idea of *mūlāvidyā* or root ignorance, an indescribable subtle matter enveloping the *Brāhmic* nature, is not to be found in Śāṅkara. SS firmly holds the view that Śāṅkara's elucidation of *avidyā* in his *bhāṣyas* has been completely misinterpreted and a totally distorted picture of *avidyā* doctrine is presented by the post-Śāṅkara commentators. The controversy of *mūlāvidyā* hinges around the fact that post-Śāṅkara commentators equated *māyā* with *avidyā*. He holds *Pañcapādikā* as the earliest *ṭika* (gloss), which sowed the seeds of this distortion, and he cites the *Pañcapādikā* to show how certain words were distorted by the sub-commentator.¹⁰

The compound word *mithyājñāna* is resolved into the words *mithyā* and *ajñāna*. By the word '*mithyā*' is meant *anirvacanīya* (undefinable) and *ajñāna* means the inert potentiality of *avidyā* as opposed to *jñāna* or consciousness. *Adhyāsa* has this *avidyā-śakti* (power of *avidyā*) for its *nimitta* (cause), i.e., *upādāna* or material cause.¹¹

He says "Śāṅkara alone, clearly defined the undifferentiated seed of differentiated names and forms of the universe as *Māyā* or *Prakṛti*...It is a tragic travesty of Śāṅkara's teaching, introduced by the earliest sub-commentator on Śāṅkara's *Sūtra*

⁹ Doherty has made a clear and compact presentation of the sources of the idea of *mūlāvidyā* in her paper (2005; pp. 213–218). I make a very brief reference to the genesis in the context of our main arguments.

¹⁰ *Pañcapādikā* is the principal sub-commentary of Śāṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* and considered by the scholars as a *ṭika* or gloss. Ramachandra Rao opines that one can characterize this work as a *vārttika* as it satisfies the following description given to a *vārttika*-

uktānuktaduruktānām cintā yatra pravartate |
taṃ granthaṃ vārttikaṃ prāhuḥ vārttikajña manṣiṇaḥ ||

i.e. it makes clear what is said and left unsaid or imperfectly said in the earlier work like *bhāṣyas* and makes it perfect by supplying the omissions of the original work. According to him *Pañcapādikā* "not only explains what Śāṅkara has explicitly mentioned, but elaborates on what the great teacher merely suggested; and it introduces several new ideas and arguments not found in the work on which it is a gloss" (1978; p. 20). SS also holds a similar opinion in this regard and concurs that the work can be called a *vārttika* in his Kannada publication (1998; p. 57).

Pañcapādikā is believed to be written by Padmapāda, one of the direct disciples of Śāṅkara. SS contends (1940, Tr. Gangolli; p. 8) that such a belief is gathered from texts like *Mādhavīya Śāṅkara Vijaya* and that there is no evidence in the *Pañcapādikā* text itself to attribute the authorship to Padmapāda. An English translation of this work was published by the Oriental Institute, Baroda under the general editorship of B. Bhattacharyya of *Gaekwad Oriental Series*. Bhattacharyya in his foreword attributes a second work by the name *ātmabodha Vyākhyāna* to Padmapāda (Venkataramiah 1948; p. ix). However, SS contends that the latter work was not much widely known or published (1966; p. 8).

¹¹ *mithyājñānanimitā iti | mithyā ca tadjñānaṃ ca mithyājñānaṃ | mithyā iti anirvacanīyatā ucyate | ajñānaṃ iti ca jadmīka avidyāśaktiḥ jñānaparyudāsenocyate | tannimitaḥ tadupādāna ityarthaḥ ||* (SS 1966; p. 19).

Bhāshya, who makes *avidyā* and *māyā* identical...” (1974; pp. 73–74) and cites from *Pañcapādikā* to show how *avidyā* and *māyā* is confounded.¹² The passage gives a description of *avidyā* which is considered to be synonymous with *māyā*, *prakṛti*, *agrahaṇa*, *avyakta* etc. It covers the Brahman transforming it into *jīva* (1974; pp. 73–74).

There are two sub-schools of Śāṅkara Vedānta; *Vivaraṇa prasthāna* and *Bhāmatī prasthāna*.¹³ SS opines that it is the *Vivaraṇa prasthāna* that gives in detail the ‘theory of *mūlāvidyā*’ (1940, Tr. Gangolli; p. 9). It is the *vivaraṇakāras* who have stated that *mūlāvidyā* is the *upādāna kāraṇa* (material cause) of *adhyaśā*.¹⁴ In the analysis of the nature and concept of *avidyā* these post-Śāṅkara commentators bring their own innovations. SS draws upon the *Pañcapādikā*, *Vivaraṇa*, *Bhāmatī* and its sub-commentary *Kalpataru*, and presents the essential nature of *avidyā* according to each of the *prasthānas* that can be summarized as follows (1940, Tr. Gangolli; pp. 11–22):

Avidyā according to *Vivaraṇa*:

- (a₁) *Avidyā* is beginningless (*anādi*), existing in the Brahman and is indefinable or indescribable (*anirvacanīya*) as either reality (*sat*) or unreality (*asat*).
- (b₁) It is also termed as *avyākṛta* (unmanifest), *māyā*, *prakṛti*, *nāmarūpa* etc., which covers the essential nature of Brahman or self. It is the material cause of the appearance of the world.
- (c₁) *Avidyā* does not signify an *abhāva* (non-substantive) but is *ajñāna* which is opposite (*virodha*) of knowledge. In other words, as Doherty puts it, the *nañ* does not indicate *abhāvārthe* but only *virodhārthe*. It is of a substantive nature.

¹² “*yeyam śrutismṛtīhāspuraṇeṣu ‘nāmarūpam’ avākṛtam , ‘avidyā’, ‘māyā’, ‘prakṛti’, ‘agrahaṇam’, ‘avyaktam’, ‘tamaḥ’, ‘kāraṇam’, ‘layaḥ’, ‘śaktiḥ’, ‘mahāsuptiḥ’, ‘nidra’, ‘akṣaram’, ‘ākāśam’- iti ca tatra tatra bahudha gīyate caitanyasya svata evāsthītalakṣaṇabrahmasvarūptāvabhāsam pratibadhya jīvatvāpādika vidyākarmpūrvapūrvaprajñāsaṃskārcītrabhittih, suśupte prakāśacchādanavikṣepasaṃskāramātrārūpasthītiḥ anādīrvidyā...*” (SS 1966; pp. 47–48).

¹³ The *Vivaraṇa* school of thought, according to scholars, is said to begin from the *Pañcapādikā* of Padmapāda. Some of the major texts that follow this school are (i) *Pañcapādikā Vivaraṇa* by Prakāśātman (ii) *Tattvadīpana*, a commentary on *Pañcapādikā Vivaraṇa*, by Akhaṇḍānanda (iii) *Vivaraṇa Prameya Saṅgraha* by Vidyāraṇya. Some of the major texts of the *Bhāmatī* school beginning with the *Bhāmatī* of Vācaspatimiśra are (i) *Kalpataru* by Amalānanda (ii) *Parimala* by Appayya Dīkṣita.

¹⁴ Doherty (2005) traces the idea of causal nature of *avidyā* to Mandanamiśra’s *Brahmasiddhi*. She opines that the term *mūlāvidyā* was introduced by Vācaspatimiśra of *Bhāmatī Prasthāna*. It appears that there is slight difference here with SS, as he mentions clearly at two places in his (1940, Tr. Gangolli; pp. 10, 18) that the *Bhāmatīkāra* does not accept *mūlāvidyā* explicitly. Though there is no mention of *mūlāvidyā* in *Bhāmatī*, SS maintains that according to Amalānanda, the commentator of *Kalpataru*—a sub-commentary on *Bhāmatī*—the *Bhāmatīkāra* has accepted the *mūlāvidyā* doctrine. Ramachandra Rao also notes that Mandanamiśra mentions of a view “holding nescience as the material cause... but he does not subscribe to it” and “it is undoubtedly Padmapāda that was responsible for the phenomenologically valid conception that nescience was both positive and constructive (*bhāva-rūpa*). The *Vivaraṇa* school developed this conception and unraveled its implications” (1978; p. 21). When I summarize the nature of *avidyā* by these two major schools it will be shown that *mūlāvidyā*, in a sense, was accepted by Vācaspatimiśra.

- (d₁) Another significant feature of this school is that the *Vivaraṇa* invokes valid means of knowledge to establish this *bhāvarūpa avidyā*.

Avidyā according to *Bhāmatī*:

- (a₂) It locates the *anirvacanīya avidyā* in the *jīva* (soul) and talks of two *avidyās*; the *kāraṇāvidyā* (causal ignorance) and the *kāryāvidyā* (effect ignorance like misconception or wrong knowledge). The non comprehension is the *Kāraṇāvidyā* which is *anādi*.
- (b₂) This *avidyā* is the cause of *saṃsāra* (transmigratory existence).
- (c₂) At the time of *pralaya* (dissolution of the world) there is a subtle potency resting in the *kāraṇāvidyā*. It is in this sense one can say that *Bhāmatī* accepts the notion of *bhāvarūpa avidyā*, though *mūlāvidyā* has not been explicitly acknowledged.
- (d₂) Though *Bhāmatī* does not invoke the valid means of knowledge to establish this *bhāvarūpa avidyā*, its sub-commentary *Kalpataru* follows *Vivaraṇa* in this regard.

Comans makes an interesting remark about such characteristics of *avidyā*, which the later commentators had developed. Summarizing Hacker's thought he endorses his view that the post-Śaṅkara Advaitins do away with the concept of *nāmarūpa* but the capacities of *nāmarūpa* in the form of *śakti* is now attributed to *avidyā*. "Thus *avidyā* is said to be the material cause (*upādāna*) and indeterminable (*anirvacanīya*)..." (2000; p. 248). SS strongly maintains that the above characteristics of *avidyā* were that of the post-Śaṅkara commentators and not that of Śaṅkara himself. These characteristics of *avidyā*, over a period of time, have been absorbed by the tradition. It is this tradition that has come to represent the real position of Advaita to which SS strongly objects.¹⁵ SS holds that the post-Śaṅkara commentators lost sight of the method of *adhyaropa apavāda nyāya* and therefore their approach to *avidyā* led them to the idea of *mūlāvidyā*. I now turn to give a brief sketch of this method, which I will take up for critical review in the next part.

Tradition of Śaṅkara Vedānta and its Method of Teaching¹⁶

The Nature of Avidyā, Vidyā and the Two-Standpoint view

Śaṅkara in his introduction to *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* starts with this concept of *avidyā*. It is important to realize here that Śaṅkara tries to show the essential nature

¹⁵ Grimes also mentions the six aspects of *avidyā*, what according to him, a typical Advaita tradition holds that is more akin to what these *prasthānas* hold. They are as follows (1) it is beginningless (*anādi*) (2) it can be terminated by knowledge (*jñāna-nivartya*) (3) it is a positive entity (4) its ontological status is neither real nor unreal (*anirvacanīya*) (5) it has two powers of concealment and projection (6) its locus is either *Brahman* or *jīva* (1990; p. 21).

¹⁶ For this section I have consulted SS's *Essays on Vedānta* (1971) and *Vedānta-Prakriyā-Pratyabhijñā* (1964). For more details of this method the readers can consult these works. It is SS's contention that Śaṅkara's methodology (*prakriyā*) has not been understood and that has given rise to such confusions as *mūlāvidyā*. Therefore it was more appropriate to take SS's interpretation of Śaṅkara, at least for this paper, and then show its philosophical weakness.

of *avidyā* but does not formulate an account or a theory of this *avidyā* or error. In his *Adhyāsa-bhāṣya* he clearly mentions that *avidyā* is of the nature of *adhyāsa* (superimposition): “This superimposition (of the self and the not-self on each other), the wise consider to be *avidyā*.”¹⁷ Superimposition is the mixing up of the attributes of two different things in our cognition and Śāṅkara also refers to it as the transference of the properties of one of them on the other. In the beginning of *Adhyāsa-bhāṣya* he clearly affirms that we are already having misconception or error as a natural fact leading us do the mixing up of the self and the not-self i.e. we are engaged in the act of superimposition. It is because of this superimposition from the beginning that the world of duality is generated leading to an empirical or the practical (*vyāvahārika*) world. Our day-to-day transactions and conduct are based upon this empirical world of multiplicity that is infected with error. This world is real only from the standpoint of the empirical realm. There is only a partial reality or truth attached to such a world. But from the transcendental or the “really real” point of view there is only one reality that is Brahman, the self of all, which is non-dual and distinctionless and is the underlying reality behind the phenomenal Universe.

The question that arises here is: How is it that in spite of the fact that the non-dual Brahman being the really real and one without a second, that we see this world of multiplicity? It is because we are already seeing this world only from the empirical standpoint, which is steeped in *avidyā*.¹⁸ The opposite of *avidyā* is *vidyā*. The discrimination between the unreal and the real, which one acquires as ignorance is wiped off, is termed as *vidyā*. That these two are of opposite nature is stressed in the *śāstras*: “*avidyā* and *vidyā* are wide apart and are mutually opposed to each other.”¹⁹ “The discernment of the true nature of reality, as it is, is called *vidyā*.”²⁰ This distinction, for Śāṅkara, also arises only due to *avidyā*. Śāṅkara uses the term *loka dr̥ṣṭi* or empirical view to describe the circumstance of the individual who, due to *avidyā*, attributes a partial reality to this empirical world. Every individual already has this *avidyā*, which Śāṅkara says is a natural tendency (*naisargika*), and thereby sees the world of duality conducting his day-to-day transactions.

The other view is the *parmārtha dr̥ṣṭi*, which gives a complete vision of reality, and this is contrasted with the partial view as the “really real” view. The complete vision of reality negates all the distinctions, which the empirical world had created. This view is spoken of as knowledge or *vidyā* of the one non-dual Brahman that is absolutely real. The Advaita tradition of Śāṅkara represents the notion of reality from its own metaphysical perspective and is closely tied to what it considers to be the notion of knowledge. Reality is defined as that which does not change in all the three periods of time. The notion of reality so defined depends upon our knowledge of the same. If it ever remains constant then it is not subject to any sublation or contradiction. Reference to reality is then based on the cognition that one has. The

¹⁷ *tametamevaṅlakṣaṇaṃ adhyāsaṃ pañditā avidyete manyante* (Śāṅkara 1980; p. 19).

¹⁸ It is special to Śāṅkara Vedānta that the phenomenal world is thought to be there due to *avidyā*. The *avidyā* doctrine has been a subject of criticism by other later schools of Vedānta. John Grimes has given a list of polemical works with regards to the *avidyā* doctrine of Advaita (1990; pp. 3–4).

¹⁹ *dūrmete viparīte viśuṅct avidyā yā ca vidyete jñātā* | in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1-II-4 (Panoli 1995a; p. 189).

²⁰ *tadvivekena ca vastusvarūpāvdhāraṇaṃ vidyamāhuḥ* | (Śāṅkara 1980; p. 19).

characteristic of valid knowledge, therefore, in this tradition has for its object something that is uncontradicted (*abādhitatva*).²¹ The real is that which is unsublatable. The changing nature of an object is open to be falsified or contradicted in our future experience. There are passages of Śāṅkara where such a definition of real is given.²² Brahman the self of all, is the only changeless reality and therefore the knowledge of Brahman is uncontradictable or unsublatable. These two standpoints of *loka dr̥ṣṭi* and *parmārtha dr̥ṣṭi* are central to the *adhyāropa apavāda* method, a teaching device that is specially adopted to reveal the nature of the Self.

The Adhyāropa Apavāda Method—Why is this Method Adopted?

The Upaniṣads, which are treated as *śāstras*, purportedly teach the real nature of Brahman. But Brahman the Absolute is not something that is given to description because descriptions are always carried out in terms of subject-predicate distinctions of an objective world and therefore thought and speech, the essential components of any description, which rely on distinctions and chop up the world cannot capture or reveal the Brahman—the very self of ours. These words and thoughts can operate only in the empirical world of distinct objects.

This teaching of Brahman is meant for those in bondage that arises due to error ridden empirical world. Knowledge as commonly understood in the empirical world is obtained by operating, what in Vedāntic parlance is known as the valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). In the empirical world it is presupposed that there is a person who obtains the knowledge (*pramātr*) and the knowledge thus obtained of any object is of the type ‘this is such and such’. Such knowledge is always based on distinctions that are accepted in the empirical world. But the knowledge or intuition of Brahman the absolute is not of such a type. There are no distinctions such as the knower, the object known and the means of knowledge. In fact words and thoughts become ineffective in revealing this knowledge. Therefore, the *śāstras* in their effort to teach the true nature of reality make use of both *loka dr̥ṣṭi* and *śāstra dr̥ṣṭi*. This two-standpoint approach is employed in the method of *adhyāropa apavāda nyāya*, a pedagogic device through which *ātman* is revealed. This is done by making a temporary or a deliberate ascription or superimposition (*adhyāropa*) of a certain characteristic from the empirical point of view and subsequently rescinding (*apavāda*) the same from a different standpoint.

How does this Method Work?

The nature of *avidyā* according to Śāṅkara is superimposition (*adhyāsa*). All distinctions like knowership etc. are superimposed on *ātman*. But these distinctions are really not the property of the *ātman*. Śāṅkara uses superimposition itself as a device to remove the property that does not belong to *ātman*. This is the essence of

²¹ *Vedānta-Paribhāṣā*, a systematic text of Advaita epistemology, defines knowledge as such (Adhvarīndra 2000; pp. 4–5).

²² *yadviṣayā buddhiḥ na vyabharati tat sat, yadviṣayā buddhiḥ vyabharati tad asat iti sad-asadvibhāge buddhiantre sthite* | in the *Bhagavadgītā bhāṣya* II.16 (Panoli 1989; p. 57). Other passages on the definition of real is to be found in *Taittirīya Upaniṣadbhāṣya* (2-1) and *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (2-1-11).

the method. In this method the language of the empirical view is used and the words are employed in a special sense.

It is assumed that the teaching is meant for seekers who are already within the clutches of *avidyā*. Certain properties are deliberately superimposed on *ātman*, in teaching, with the aim to remove duality as Śaṅkara himself says in his *bhāṣya* on the *Bhagavadgītā*,

Hands and Feet and the rest which seem to be limbs of each and every body, owe their respective functions to the presence of the power of consciousness inherent in the *Atman* to be known. So, they are evidential marks indicating the presence of *Atman* to be known and are therefore spoken of as pertaining to it in a secondary sense (SS 1964; p. 42).

This way of description, as SS notes, “is for convincing us of its undeniable existence... The ascription of the sensory activities was merely a device to familiarize our mind with the existence of the Self, very much like the temporary scaffolding used for the erection of building” (1964; pp. 42–43). Some contrary characteristic should not be thought to qualify *ātman* and therefore superimposition as a device is employed. The deliberate superimposition of certain properties is resorted to in order to avoid the thought that some other property of *ātman* belongs to it.

Thus SS contends that if attainability is something that is attributed to Brahman it is not in the sense that we need to attain it by some efforts but to show that its attainment is through the means of knowledge. He further holds that superimposition, for example of knowability, has the following implications.

- (a) The thought that something other than Brahman deserves to be known is averted.
- (b) It suggests that the omniscience of Brahman leads to a permanent destruction of ignorance.
- (c) Appearance of duality is due to the ignorance of *ātman*.

Though Reality itself is devoid of all features, a particular feature is attributed to *ātman* in order that the human mind is not inclined to think of *ātman* as something else. Once having made the ascription to Brahman as a temporary measure, the next step consists in revoking or negating this very ascription or superimposition. This is the *apavāda* phase of the method. The negation is resorted to with the intent that the seeker should not think these to be actually belonging to Brahman. This negation aspect, which is part of this *adhyāropa* method, is quite significant for the teaching of Brahman.

Avidyā and Māyā: An Application of the Method

Having explicated the *adhyāropa apavāda* method, SS then takes up for discussion the applications of the method in order to show how the Vedāntic teaching uses the distinction between the two standpoints (1971; p. 29). One of the applications of the method is that of *avidyā* and *māyā*, which is very central to my discussion as the controversy of *mūlāvidyā* hinges around this distinction between *avidyā* and *māyā*. The teaching of Vedānta is that the Brahman is the self of all. The manifested

universe, which we take to be real, Śāṅkara affirms, is infected with error. We need to understand this manifested universe as an appearance. Our inability to understand this is what constitutes *avidyā*. The opposite of this is the correct understanding of the Brahman as the self of all. The word *avidyā* is used in a distinct way as far as Vedānta is concerned. The inability to recognize the true nature of our own self and thus seeing the multiplicity of the world is termed *avidyā*. The objective world of multiplicity that is concocted or projected by *avidyā* or ignorance is called *māyā*. Though SS states that this is an application of the method of *adhyāropa apavāda* he has not clearly shown how it so. That this is an application can possibly be constructed, however loosely, from his exposition of what is *avidyā* and *māyā*. He talks of a basic superimposition with which Śāṅkara starts his *Adhyāsa-bhāṣya* and referred to as *avidyā*. This *avidyā* is ignorance, which primarily refers to a subjective notion. The objective phenomenon of name and form (*nāmarūpa*)²³ that is imagined by *avidyā* is to be understood as *māyā*.²⁴

SS makes the following four important points that characterize the nature of *avidyā* (1971; p. 47).

- (1) For Śāṅkara, *avidyā* is only a technical name to denote the natural tendency of the human mind that is engaged in the act of superimposition.
- (2) It is used only for the purpose of teaching the truth.
- (3) It has a *function* that consists in setting up an unreal not-self as a second to the really real self.
- (4) Its effect is *māyā*, which consists of this world of multiplicity and induces one to imagine that one is really an agent of action and experiencer of the fruits thereof.

All the above four will have to be seen only from the empirical point of view. This intrinsic error of the human mind is termed as *avidyā* by the Upaniṣads and the opposite of this is *vidyā*. That *avidyā* has a function and that there are agents of actions, experiencer of fruits, are all distinctions, which are superimposed on *ātman* that are to be negated again from transcendental point of view. *Māyā* is an objective appearance imagined by *avidyā* and that it induces the sense of agency and enjoyership is also a superimposition on *ātman*. Even the opposites *avidyā* and *vidyā* are ascribed in the *śāstras* only for the purpose of teaching. The absolute reality of Brahman is all that there is and lest the enquirer thinks that this multiple world is real, the notion of ignorance and knowledge is brought forth to indicate a basic superimposition with which all are afflicted and to show that the reality of *ātman* is the correct knowledge, *vidyā*.

There is another way in which the same can be explained. The enquirer or seeker confers a certain degree of reality to the empirical world. Therefore from the *loka dṛṣṭi* standpoint, an explanation needs to be given as to how the undifferentiated reality becomes the universe that is characterized by multiplicity. The concept of

²³ Comans devotes one section to *nāmarūpa* (2000; pp. 239–246). As he correctly notes, *nāmarūpa* is ‘the primary stuff out of which the world is made.’

²⁴ *Māyā, avyakṛtaṃ, nāmarūpaṃ* etc are said to be *avidyā kalpita* by Śāṅkara in his *bhāṣya* (SS 1971; p. 44).

māyā is only brought in to explain to the enquirer, from the empirical standpoint, to account for the creation of this world. The enquirer looks for a causal potentiality of the world. The term *māyā* refers to such a potentiality. But this *māyā* is nevertheless conjured up by *avidyā*. Thus SS concludes “*Māyā*, then, according to Śāṅkara is the illusory causal seed of the world, due to *avidyā* (*Ādhyāsa* or mutual superimposition of *Ātman* and un-*Ātman*, occasioned by want of discrimination)” (1996; p. 20). But from the *paramārtha* standpoint there is no creation and therefore the idea of a causal seed form of *māyā* also becomes negated. SS very strongly makes the distinction between *avidyā* and *māyā* and charges the post-Śāṅkara commentators of having affirmed the identity of these two terms (1971; p. 43). This ultimately led to the postulation of *mūlāvidyā* as the post-Śāṅkara commentators lost sight of the importance of this method. Such is the opinion of SS and his followers.

Part II

A Critical Estimate of *Adhyāropa Apavāda* as a Pedagogical Method

Implications of the Two-Standpoint Approach

SS makes the doctrine of the two standpoints central to the *adhyāropa apavāda* method. He has not clearly spelt out what exactly these standpoints indicate. The ontology to which he is committed depends on the two different standpoints that form the basis of his method of expounding the Vedāntic vision. The standpoints suggest the idea of ‘degrees of belief’. The degrees of belief in reality are different in these two standpoints not in the sense that he talks of relative degree but of two different levels of reality; (i) reality of the empirical world (ii) reality of the transcendental world. He grants a certain degree of reality to the empirical world which a person comes to know of in his day-to-day transactions and this knowledge is not contradicted from the *loka dṛṣṭi* standpoint. But from the *śāstra dṛṣṭi* standpoint it is contradicted. As the contradiction or sublation arises from a particular standpoint, these standpoints can be thought of as the epistemic statuses that form the ground upon which the deliberation of Brahman is conducted. In this he does privilege the *śāstric* viewpoint in so far as the teaching of absolute reality is concerned. Śāṅkara, in the eyes of SS, therefore straddles between the two levels of ontology and uses the two-standpoint approach to his convenience. Doherty also makes a similar remark about SS using these two standpoints as part of his approach and shifting from one to the other as a tactic to respond to any objections (2005; p. 227). Śāṅkara can be understood to be envisioning a certain reality largely determined by the epistemic status. We have already seen above how the notion of reality is closely tied to the notion of knowledge within the system of Śāṅkara. But the question that arises is: To whom does this epistemic status pertain? This is precisely the question of the locus of *avidyā*, which Śāṅkara is aware of, but does not give a clear answer. In his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* he raises this question “To whom does this *avidyā* belong?” SS dismisses such questions initially saying that they are raised only by

people lacking discrimination (*avivekins*). But then it is unclear to whom this epistemic status belongs to.

One example where this way of teaching that has led to some tension in Śaṅkara himself is revealed in the beginning of his *Adhyāsa-bhāṣya*. In the *bhāṣya*, Śaṅkara after affirming that *avidyā* is of the nature of *adhyāsa* (superimposition) holds that the self and the not-self do get mixed up. The self for him is the *ātman* which is always the subject and the not-self is object of the knowledge of *ātman*. Human mind due to this superimposition thinks in the form of ‘I am this’ and ‘This is mine’. Śaṅkara himself raises the question as, if posed by the opponent (*pūrvapakṣa*), as to ‘How can there be superimposition of the object and its properties on the self which is never an object?’ for superimposition can take place only between one object on the other which is already present before us. The self, according to Śaṅkara, is not an object; it is *aviśaya*. How can there be any superimposition between the self and not-self which are opposed to each other? Śaṅkara proceeds to give his reason to meet this objection. He says that it is not true to say that the self is not an object. J. N. Mohanty responds to this answer of Śaṅkara thus: “How can Śaṅkara consistently say so, when he, times without number, in all his writings, describes the *ātmā* as *a-viśaya*?” (1993; p. 69).²⁵ Śaṅkara can again bring the two-standpoint approach when he says: “It is an object of me notion.”²⁶ In other words, in the empirical world, i.e. from the *loka dṛṣṭi* point of view, *ātman* is apprehended as having an “I” sense, the “I” which is used as an indexical of the speaker’s self in the empirical world. This “I” as a speaker’s self, which comes with the baggage of limitedness of body, mind and intellect is known to all in the empirical world.²⁷ It is in this sense that it is an object. Śaṅkara negotiates the inherent tension of the subject-hood and object-hood of *ātman* by invoking the two-standpoint approach. Śaṅkara’s way of meeting the objection is philosophically imprecise because within the same context it is not clear as to which self he is referring to the limited self referred to by the indexical ‘I’ or the self that is Brahman the subject.

Later I would like to show that not being able to answer such valid philosophical questions forced one to postulate, like the post-Śaṅkara commentators, an ontological sense to this *avidyā* and thus crops up the idea of the *mūlāvidyā* as a subtle indescribable (*anirvacanīya*) matter. It is interesting to note that in trying to suggest a consistent way out of the enigma of object-hood of self, Mohanty also propounds an idea very similar to *mūlāvidyā* though he has not explicitly mentioned it. I will take up this issue later in this paper.

Critical Assessment of the Adhyāropa Apavāda Method

Great stress is laid on the fact that Śaṅkara has adopted the *adhyāropa apavāda* method in his teaching of the non-dual Brahman. A detailed exposition of this method has been given by SS in his (1964) and a summary has been presented

²⁵ Śaṅkara in his commentary says *na tāvadāyam ekāntena aviśayaḥ* (Śaṅkara 1980; p. 17): the self is not entirely a non-object. This for Mohanty is an enigmatic statement and rightly so.

²⁶ *asmatpratayaviśyatvāt* (ibid).

²⁷ *pratyagātmāprasiddheḥ* (ibid, p. 18).

above. What pedagogical purpose does it serve in the teaching of Brahman? SS has also pointed out the sub-varieties or applications of this method, *avidya* and *māyā* being one of the applications (1971; pp. 41–48). It is not at all clear how his can be called a method to teach the nature of Brahman. How does the deliberate attributing of features to Brahman serve the purpose?

One of the common illustrations taken up for this purpose is that of the pot and the clay from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*:

Dear boy, just as through one lump of clay, all that is made up of clay would become known; the modification (the effect) is merely a play of words and that it is all clay, is the only truth.²⁸

The above passage from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is taken to illustrate only the nature of this method and it should be made clear at the outset that this example is not a deliberation on the theory of causality. As SS makes it clear,

The Upanishads do not undertake to examine the concept of causality as such and to pronounce their judgment in the matter. They rather take up the concept as accepted in the empirical world and utilize it to teach us that the real nature of Brahman is above the notions of cause and effect (1964; p. 46).

The teaching goes somewhat like this. The teacher presents the pot to the student and gives him an understanding of what the pot is. In other words he makes him have the ‘pot vision’ in Vedāntic parlance. The knowing of pot as a pot is considered to be ignorance because the potness of pot cannot be seen without the clay. All that there is to the pot, according to the teacher, is the clay. The pot is only considered to be an effect, a mere play of words (*vācārambhaṇam vikāro nāmadheyam*). So in effect the ‘effect’ is considered to be in the sphere of ignorance because one is not able to conceive of it apart from the clay. It is in this sense that the pot is called unreal, as being not different from clay. The clay here is the underlying cause for the (effect) pot and the pot does not exist apart from the clay. The pothood, which is the effect, very much depends on the clay. The pot is a mere name for the clay, which is real, in this case. It is impossible to see the pot apart from the clay. Having made the enquirer see the underlying cause, the teacher concludes that the effect is already contained in the cause and therefore it is not different from cause. From this he dismisses the reality of the effecthood of pot and affirms the causehood of clay. This cause and effect relationship is taken from the empirical world only to illustrate that the manifest world that we see is nothing but the effect that has Brahman as its cause. The reality of Brahman is thus shown to be established by this illustration and the world that is non different from It is said to be unreal as it does not exist apart from Brahman. In this illustration, reality is imputed to the clay and its reality lies relative to the effect pot. But the reality to the clay is negated or rescinded when Brahman is shown to be the really real. *Apavāda* aspect of this method is this rescission of the reality to clay. Finally the status of causehood that is imputed on the clay is also removed as there is no separate effecthood and

²⁸ *yathā somyaikena mṛtpāndena sarvaṃ mṛnmayam vijñātam syādvācārambhaṇam vikāro nāmadheyam mṛttiketyev satyaṃ* || in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6-1-4 (Panoli 1995b; p. 555).

thus transcending this cause effect duality, the clay alone remains as the real. The causal relation is itself another *adhyāropa*, which is subsequently abrogated, with the truth being that Brahman alone is absolutely real (SS 1971; p. 26).

I would like to take up this illustration for my response in terms of how the method serves the pedagogical purpose. In the first place I would like to point out that the non-difference of the clay and the pot can be seen only as far as the material constitutionality is concerned. The functional efficiency of the pot in the empirical world is as important as its material constitutionality and this is definitely different from the lump of clay from which it is made.²⁹ If we take this example seriously, are we then asserting the material constitutionality of the world with Brahman? But Brahman we are told is not material (*sat cit ānanda*). The leap, which the teacher takes from one point to another, in this case is not convincing enough. The fact that something is an effect of something does not make the effect lose its identity. This example only shows some kind of material identity in the cause and effect and from this to argue that the effect is no different from cause looks facetious. It is argued that one cannot see the pot different from the clay. But why should it be so? It all depends upon what one means by 'seeing the pot'. In this example the Upaniṣads take the seeing of the pot only from the material angle. I can also see the pot from its functional efficiency point of view i.e. in its ability to hold certain volume of water, in its ability to hold water cool etc., which a lump of clay definitely lacks. SS holds, as I have mentioned above, that the Upaniṣadic exposition takes the accepted concept of cause and effect in the empirical world. But then in such a concept we definitely see the pot as something different from the clay having certain distinct utilities and purposes, which a lump of clay will not serve. Moreover there is a certain method that needs to be employed to transform the clay into this distinct entity. All these aspects of this illustration will come into play to understand the relation of Brahman and the world. It is quite possible for the seeker to understand this world as a transformation of Brahman, which the Advaitin precisely wants to deny. All these transformations for the Advaitin are merely apparent. The words 'The effect is merely a play of words (*vācārambhaṇam vikāro nāmadheyam*)' then becomes just a rhetorical device and nothing more to force the seeker to accept a certain doctrine. It is not just a mere modification of speech and change of words that do bring about the pot, a different utility altogether. The effect is seen merely as change in the mode of the cause seen as a substance. The relation of cause and effect is then understood only "in terms of the category of substance-mode" (Banerjee 1975; p. 238). A pedagogical method generally adopts a step-by-step approach to unfold a particular truth with examples that shows certain analogy and also shows where the analogy stops. The example taken should not be used as rhetoric device, as it is done in the present case, to drive home a certain point of view.

Finally in the *apavāda* stage since the effecthood is shown to be no different, the causehood is also denied because without effect the cause does not make sense. This is a bit of a specious argument and where jumps are made in the process in the following way.

²⁹ In this one is reminded of the Aristotelian account of four causes i.e. the material cause, the formal cause, the efficient cause and the final cause, all of which are crucial to the understand the idea of cause.

- (a) The very causal relation of cause and effect that is in vogue in the empirical world affords a certain kind of understanding in our day to day world. Pot is an effect only in its terms of its material constitutionality. It is taken for granted that the whole pot is exhausted by the clay and based on this the whole pot considered to be the effect is determined to be inconsequential and from this the teacher jumps to the conclusion that the very notion of effect is inconsequential.
- (b) Since the notion of effect is inconsequential (which I have already shown is problematic), the causehood is also made inconsequential. Hence it is shown that the clay exists by itself transcending the cause effect duality.

The above steps in the argument go to establish the reality of clay dismissing the causal relation for the pedagogical purpose of teaching Brahman. In the (a) above if one sees the whole of the pot then potness is not exhausted by the clay. Clay is only a part of what goes into the pot i.e. the material. The argument centers on the point whether the clay in the pot is same as the original clay and this is an argument of a different kind, about the clay in two different states. This illustration cannot be used to dismiss the effecthood, the causehood and the notion of the causal relation.

These criticisms in a way reflect the criticisms of the Nyāya Vaiśeṣika against the *satkāryavāda*, the theory of causation held by Sāṅkhya. It is not our intention here to mount a criticism of *satkāryavāda*. Nevertheless, it is important to realize the relevance of this criticism in understanding that this illustration does not offer itself as an adequate illustration of the *adhyāropa apavāda* method. The Nyāya criticism allows us ample scope to understand cause and effect differently and therefore one cannot privilege the *satkāryavāda* view—the view which is reflected in the presently—in the illustration of this method.³⁰ The major objections to the *satkāryavāda* view can be summarized as follows:

- (i) The pot as an effect is different from its constituent.
- (ii) We do not come to see the pot in the clay itself before it is produced.
- (iii) If the effect is same as the cause then the agent who brings forth the pot becomes redundant.

The substance-mode category that is drawn to understand the relationship of cause and effect was totally misplaced. This approach adopted by Sāṅkhya and Advaita Vedānta has the following consequence, as Banerjee notes,

In fact, both these schools of Indian philosophy missed the truth that something is a cause not in itself, but only in relation to something else called its effect. This means that the concept of cause is *relative* and, consequently, that it cannot be represented by the concept of substance which is absolute (1975; pp. 239–240).

He further remarks that such an understanding of cause and effect is arbitrary and unwarranted. To have a complete understanding of clay, I need not invoke the pot

³⁰ *Vivartavāda* is considered to be the view of causation held by Advaita Vedānta. It is slightly different from the *Satkāryavāda* in the sense that the effect is seen as an unreal appearance.

for it. I can have an independent fix or understanding of clay irrespective of pot. The invoking of pot is only to show the causal nature (in its material aspect) of clay. This can be a good illustration to show the material causal nature of clay. But having invoked to show the causal notion the very notion is dismissed to show and establish a different point, that of the all-pervading reality. This, I contend, does not show up as a method of teaching Brahman. This example, at best, exemplifies the relationship that exists between the Brahman and the world through pointing towards a certain relationship between the clay and the pot and that too in terms of constitution. One still fails to have an independent conceptual fix of Brahman because causal relationship “cannot be represented by the concept of substance which is absolute.”

The illustration also tries to show in what way the world is unreal by stipulating that unreality within Advaita Vedānta means that which does not exist independent of Brahman (SS 1971; p. 26). A certain relationship is invoked only to stipulate the concept of unreality within its own system. This illustration also compels one to understand reality according to Advaita Vedānta, indirectly through this relationship that is invoked. But that Brahman is the only reality is to be known only from the *śruti vākya* (sentence).

The Advaitins may say that this illustration is only to show the causal nature of Brahman, which later on is abrogated. But then the question that still remains is “What pedagogical purpose does it serve?” The Advaitin intends to use this method to teach Brahman but it is just not clear with this illustration how it serves the purpose. It is asserted that that the *adhyāropa* that is done is only to turn our attention away from that which would be mistaken for Brahman, as mentioned above in the example of attainability and knowability that is attributed to Brahman. SS says that the ascription of certain characteristic is done just to discard an opposite characteristic, which the enquirer or seeker may think that Brahman may possess, and then annul the presupposition itself (1964; p. 48). This appears like a roundabout way of teaching. When Brahman is affirmed to be non-dual and *nirguṇa* (devoid of qualities), then where is the apprehension that an opposite characteristic or quality will be taken to pertain to Brahman. It looks too preposterous to consider such a situation and therefore do an opposite superimposition on Brahman and then subsequently annul the superimposed characteristic.

Avidyā and Māyā—Does it Serve the Purpose of Teaching?

SS also considers *avidyā-māyā* among others as the sub-varieties or the application of the method of *adhyāropa apavāda* method.³¹ But it has not been clearly shown how this application of the method serves the purpose in the understanding of Brahman. One can perhaps understand *avidyā-māyā* as a teaching device in the following way. The terms *avidyā* and *vidyā*, indicating duality, is superimposed on the real nature of Brahman only from the empirical standpoint to show that our

³¹ The other applications of this method are (i) Agama and Reason, (ii) Being and Becoming, (iii) *Isvara* and *Jīva*, (iv) Cause and Effect, (v) The Universal and Particular, (vi) The *Jīva* and the Real *Atman*, (vii) Examination of the States of Consciousness, (viii) Bondage and Release, (ix) Discipline and Goal (1971). SS devotes one chapter on each of these in his *Essays on Vedānta* (1971).

present understanding of the world of appearance is already in the domain of *avidyā*. It is this world of objective appearance, which is projected by *avidyā* that is termed *māyā* or *prakṛti*. Its undifferentiated form is termed *avyākṛta* and the manifest world is nothing but the *nāmarūpa* (name and the form). The difference of *vidyā* and *avidyā*, and the consequent projection of the *māyic* world is a superimposition (*adhyāropa*) on the Brahman from the empirical point of view to drive home the point that we are already in the domain of *avidyā*. But once the real nature of *ātman* is intuited, there are no distinctions of this sort. As I have already mentioned I still fail to understand how one can claim that this serves as a pedagogical exercise to teach the nature of Brahman.

An illustration from the empirical world is also drawn to show how this *avidyā*, in terms of mixing up one for the other, occurs thereby causing a false projection. We sometimes mistake a seashell for silver.³² This example is used to show that the silver that we project on the seashell is actually not the real silver and seashell is said to be the substratum for such a projection. The projected silver is to be understood as *māyā* due to a subjective ignorance *avidyā* in this method. In a sense *avidyā* or subjective ignorance can be seen as a means of error and *māyā* as false knowledge (*mithyā-jñāna*), misapprehension or appearance due to error. These distinctions of subjective ignorance and the objective phenomena (*māyā*, *prakṛti* etc.) can be understood as a projection on Brahman from the empirical point of view. These deliberate ascriptions are made from the empirical standpoint to show a causal potentiality, which is termed as *māyā*, *prakṛti*, *nāmarūpa* and *avyākṛta* etc. Since the *śrutis* speak of Brahman as the material cause of the world, the enquirer is told in what sense it is the cause, by bringing the concept of *māyā*, the causal potentiality. But all this is only from the empirical point of view. But even from the empirical standpoint there is weakness in such an analysis, which I will take up later.

The sub-variety or the application of this method (*avidyā-māyā*) is supposed to teach the very nature of *ātman*. In his introduction to the *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* of Śaṅkara, SS describes the way Śaṅkara has used these words. Although certain *ślokas* of *Bhagavadgītā* (13-5) refer to *māyā* as the *śakti* (power) of *īśvara* (God), SS contends, that *māyā* is not there in the real nature of *ātman* but only to be thought of as a product of ignorance. According to him, Śaṅkara uses *avidyā* and *ajñāna* in the sense of non-comprehension and misconception of the *ātman*. *Avidyā*, therefore, is to be understood in the sense of our inability to comprehend the true nature of *ātman*. In other words it is held that our understanding of *avidyā* already presupposes the idea of the knowledge of the true nature of *ātman*. There appears to be a blatant circularity in this enunciation of *avidyā* and *māyā* as an application of the method of *adhyāropa*, a device to reveal the true nature of *ātman*. This illustration is, at best, an analogy to understand how the world can be seen as a product of error but does not serve any teaching purpose.

Having shown that the method of *adhyāropa apavāda* does not afford any understanding of Brahman, it therefore loses any importance as a method within the system of Śaṅkara Vedānta. It is not of much relevance in understanding the

³² Another common example used is that of a rope and the snake.

problem of *avidyā*. Therefore, the contention of SS that the lack of understanding of this method was responsible for the genesis of the idea of *mūlāvidyā* falls flat. I now turn to the central issue of this paper; the problem of *avidyā* in this system.

The Problem of *Avidyā* in Śaṅkara's Commentaries

How Śaṅkara is Responsible for *Mūlāvidyā*?

The above discussion was just to show that the so-called method, which has been invoked by the tradition, does not really serve the purpose but instead raises some basic philosophical questions. It is these questions, which were left unanswered by Śaṅkara that led post-Śaṅkara commentators to postulate *mūlāvidyā*. It is in this sense that we can say how Śaṅkara was himself responsible for *mūlāvidyā*. I turn to address this issue now.

I would like to show that though Śaṅkara may not have postulated any *mūlāvidyā* in his commentaries, the gaps which he had left in his analysis of *avidyā* / *adhyāsa* led the post-Śaṅkara commentators to postulate such an entity. SS has repeatedly mentioned that Śaṅkara used the *adhyāropa* method based on two-standpoint approach. It is doubtful whether this method has been an effective pedagogical instrument for the purpose of teaching. On the other hand he (Śaṅkara) has conveniently used the two-standpoint approach, on which this teaching is based, to defend any philosophical objection against him. It is also to be noted that Śaṅkara here only describes what is characteristic of *avidyā* but does not formulate an account or theory of *avidyā*. SS also stresses this fact:

It is sometimes supposed that the Vedantic *Avidyā* is mere doctrine formulated to explain the appearance of difference and manifoldness. That this is a hasty judgment can be readily seen by any critical enquirer who cares to bestow the close attention which it deserves, on the *Adhyāsa Bhāṣya* (1971; p. 38).

Avidyā therefore as a tendency of the mind to mix up the real and the unreal, is a fact, not a theory brought forward just to account for appearances (1971; p. 39).

In the summary of the nature of *avidyā* in the *Bhāmātī* and the *Vivarāṇa*, given earlier, two significant issues that come up are (i) the cause of *avidyā*, (ii) the locus of *avidyā*. Śaṅkara's response to these questions shows that he tends to give an ontological status to an epistemological concept of *avidyā*. This tendency on the part of Śaṅkara gave enough scope for the later commentators to take up this ontological dimension of *avidyā* and work out a more detailed metaphysics, partly as a response to some of the objections of the other schools.

Let me start with the question of the causal nature of *avidyā*. The question with regard to the causal nature that can be posed is 'How is this *adhyāsa* caused?' This question, however, is illegitimate for Śaṅkara according to SS. Doherty also clearly states SS's views: "...Swami Satchidanandendra proposes that superimposition (*adhyāsa*) is the only meaning of *avidyā* used by Śaṅkara. This *avidyā/adhyāsa*, Satchidanandendra maintains, is uncaused." (2005; p. 215). But SS 'provisionally

accepts' this question and gives the following explanation. Drawing upon the *Adhyāsa-bhāṣya* of Śāṅkara, SS says that *adhyāsa* is caused due to lack of discrimination, which can also be characterized as of the nature of non-comprehension (*agrahaṇa*) (1940, Tr. Gangolli; p. 36). But this sounds like a *virtus dormitiva* kind of an explanation. In other words it is an unsatisfactory explanation. To ask, "Why does this drug put everyone to sleep?" and then explain it by saying "the soporific power of the drug is the cause of the sleep" is not a satisfactory explanation because the term "soporific" means sleep inducing. Śāṅkara resorts to some similar kind of explanation. In short he is trying to say that *adhyāsa*, which is "the inability to discriminate" is due to "lack of discrimination" and this lack of discrimination is also known by synonymous terms like *ajñāna* and *agrahaṇa*. SS affirms,

It is true that Avidyā which is of the nature of *Agrahaṇa* (non-comprehension) is called "Nimitta", "Hetu", "Kāraṇa", "Bīja" etc. in the Bhāṣya; in such contexts or places the *Mūlāvidyāvādins*...comment that "Bīja" means Avidyā alone which is *Upādāna Kāraṇa* (material cause) (1940, Tr. Gangolli; p. 37).

It is this provisional concession, as Doherty terms it, that Śāṅkara supposedly makes for the causal nature of *avidyā*, offering what I have shown to be a *virtus dormitiva* explanation that leads to the postulation of the *mūlāvidyā* i.e. *avidyā* being substantive. Once it is treated as a cause it seems intuitive to think of this as something that is endowed with a certain power to bring about something and look upon it as some kind of an entity attributing to it a positive function. The post-Śāṅkara commentators were thus led to describe it as a subtle matter. Śāṅkara in his *virtus dormitiva* explanation leaves adequate scope for such an interpretation. This is exactly what the *Bhāmatikāra* has done as shown in c₂ above (under the sub-heading 'Avidyā according to *Bhāmatī*') where they call this potency or power as *sūkṣma śaktirūpa* (subtle power or potency).³³

Śāṅkara does not give much importance to the locus of *avidyā*. For him, this question is not of much importance. He makes use of the two-standpoint approach here. As I have already argued, if properly understood, these two standpoints should constitute the epistemic status and, therefore, Śāṅkara should be making a certain commitment towards such a status. Whenever we talk of ignorance it is always with respect to someone towards something. There isn't ignorance just hanging out there. For example, if we say there is ignorance of mathematics, it is always presupposed that it is with respect to some section of students or persons who are not aware of the subject matter of mathematics. The same is the case here. If we say that this world is a result of certain ignorance then this ignorance should pertain to somebody. It is this fact that Śāṅkara has not clarified and does not even give much importance to it as SS notes:

The two questions—"To whom is Avidyā? About which matter or thing is there Avidyā?"—in truth, do not at all arise in this Advaita Siddhānta. For, the

³³ Śāṅkara also uses the word *śakti* with reference to *avidyā* but as SS contends, the signification of the word *śakti* in Śāṅkara means the potential aspect of the Universe of names and forms and not as the power of *Īśvara* (1973; p. 29). In his *bhāṣya* on *Brahmasūtra* 1-4-3 Śāṅkara says, 'the potential power is mentioned by the word *avyakta* (unmanifest)'.

questions—To whom? About which matter?—have to arise in Dvaita” (1940, Tr. Gangolli; p. 38).

However, these questions according to SS arise only in the domain of duality and therefore are raised only by *avivekins* (non discriminative people). Śāṅkara therefore gives a short shrift to such questions and answers in the following way only to satisfy such people.

To whom is this Ajnana (ignorance)?—In answer, ‘To you who is asking the question’, we say. You may object to this saying that—‘In the *Sruti* it is stated that I am verily *Ishwara*, is it not?’ If you have cognized in that manner, then to no one there is Ajnana whatsoever” (SS 1940, Tr. Gangolli; p. 39).³⁴

To the question of *viśaya* (subject matter) of *avidyā*, Śāṅkara affirms that the *avidyā* is with regard to Brahman in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣadbhāṣya* 1-4-10 (Panoli 1994; pp. 220–221) but firmly denies in committing himself to any sentient being who is deluded. In other words he talks of ignorance but does not want to say to whom this ignorance pertains. Therefore the status of ignorance is left hanging at that. He is not willing to address the issue that I have pointed out earlier i.e. the presupposition that whenever we talk of ignorance it is with respect to someone.³⁵ Ignorance being the epistemic status, it is obligatory to make it clear to whom this status belongs or pertains. The two-standpoint approach comes very handy here for Śāṅkara. He responds that such questions only arise from the empirical standpoint already steeped in ignorance and do not arise from the standpoint of Brahman. Therefore the whole process of analysis, reasoning and argumentation that is so essential for philosophy is itself dismissed by Śāṅkara as pertaining to the domain of *avidyā*. In fact Śāṅkara extensively argues in the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (2-1-11) that the aim of Upaniṣads is true knowledge, which leads to liberation. And reasoning is inconclusive in such matters.³⁶ But even so, Śāṅkara can at least answer these

³⁴ *kasya punarayam aprabodha iti cet | yastvaṃ pṛcchasi tasya ta iti vadāmaḥ | nanu ahaṃ iśvara evoktaḥ Śrutyā, yadyevaṃ pratibuddho’si nāsti kasyacidaprabodhaḥ |* in the *Brahmasūtra bhāṣya* 4-1-3 (Śāṅkara 1980; p. 833).

³⁵ Karl Potter, in the context of discussing this question “whose is *avidyā*?” as raised by Śāṅkara, also remarks that “he conspicuously avoids the above issues by simply denying that *avidyā* belongs to anything. It is never really connected to either the *jīva* or to Brahman or God. And he drops the matter there” (1981; p. 80). I will take up this issue of how Śāṅkara avoids to spell out *avidyā*’s connection with the self in my paper when discussing his passage on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣadbhāṣya* IV.iv.6.

³⁶ The argument of Śāṅkara in *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (2-1-11) is that each set of reasoning is refuted by cleverer logicians, which is again refuted subsequently and thus the process continues, and therefore reasoning cannot be taken as a sure foundation on matters of liberation. However the argument of Śāṅkara that reasoning is inconclusive in matters of liberation, which the Upaniṣads deal with, can recoil against him. The different schools of Vedānta have also rejected and refuted each others interpretation of the *śruti* and have propounded their own doctrines and in this they are no different from the logicians (Chat-topadhyaya 1993; p. 94).

Ingalls also refers to this tendency of Śāṅkara and remarks, “He concentrates on what he considers the heart of the matter, the teaching that is necessary for the attainment of *mokṣa*. This teaching is that *avidyā*, whatever its modality, is never truly connected with the self. Here, as in other differences that may be noticed between Śāṅkara and his disciples, one may say that Śāṅkara’s approach to truth is psychological and religious. His interest in metaphysics and logic is always subordinated to the center of his attention” (1953; p. 72).

questions only from the empirical standpoint. My point of contention is he fails to do that even from this empirical standpoint.

There is a circularity involved in the response Śāṅkara provides to the question of locus of ignorance. Śāṅkara's reply to such a question is perfunctory and therefore leaves the status of *avidyā* hanging. Hacker's comments on the above passage of Śāṅkara is noteworthy when he says that it is not "philosophically exact, but pedagogically impressive" (Ingalls 1953; p. 70). The reply given in the above passage of Śāṅkara points out that it is the person who is asking the question to whom ignorance pertains. But the person who is asking the question is already in the empirical realm and himself a product of superimposition. This person who is already a product of superimposition does the superimposing. It is then not clear who does the earlier superimposing. Again an easy answer for Śāṅkara is to dismiss this question saying that such questions posing contradictions arise only in the empirical world of duality and therefore is itself a product of superimposition. But from the *pāramārthika dṛṣṭi* or the transcendental viewpoint such a question does not arise. Drawing upon the above *bhāṣya* citations of Śāṅkara, SS concludes,

It becomes quite evident from the above-mentioned sentences that all these matters like Avidyā, the object for Avidyā and the substratum for Avidyā are, in truth, conjured up or projected by Avidyā itself...for the purpose of *Ātmānātmaviveka* (Intuitive deliberation between Ātman and Anātman). (1940, Tr. Gangolli; p. 40).

He says that Śāṅkara expresses that *avidyā* is a quality that is to be attributed to the *antahkaraṇa* (inner instrument of cognition) but this has to be understood only from the empirical standpoint. It is in this sense that Śāṅkara very conveniently uses his two-standpoint view to evade the question "To whom does this superimposition pertain?" He immediately switches conveniently to the *pāramārthika* standpoint (a different epistemic status) saying that such questions all pertain to the domain of duality plagued by *avidyā* and thereby avoids answering the question. But then this leaves the status of *avidyā* hanging. I will elaborate on how this way of leaving the status of *avidyā* open ended, or dropping the matter, as Potter remarks, leads one to confer a certain ontological status to *avidyā*.

Śāṅkara says that in the process of *adhyāsa*, which is nothing but *avidyā*, there is a mutual transference of properties one object on the other. In the illustration of mistaking seashell for silver it is shown that the property of silver is transferred to the seashell, which is considered to be the substratum. Let us elaborate this error and examine the situation. All that happens in this case is that seashell has certain shining characteristics.³⁷ Due to this characteristic one mistakes the seashell for silver. We can consider the above process in the following two ways:

- (1) Mistaking a seashell for silver.
- (2) Mistaken silver is conjured up on the seashell.

³⁷ In the present day optical theory, the shining of seashell takes place due to the phenomenon of total internal reflection. All shining of objects happen only due to reflection of light. That this theory was unknown during his times does not vitiate my main argument.

So long as the second statement is made figuratively, it is not a problem. One can say that ‘We see a silver in the place of seashell’ as a *manner of speaking*. But the problem becomes significant when the projection of the silver on the seashell is construed literally. In construing it literally we proceed to treat the mistaken silver to have an ontological significance. Having made a certain commitment to this ‘mistaken entity’, Śaṅkara then goes to give an explicatory analysis of this entity leading him to propound the concept of *anirvacanīya* (inexplicable). But in the first place it should be realized that the mistake in knowing or error is only an epistemic notion needing no analysis of the entity ‘mistaken silver’ on ontological lines. It is also difficult to understand from this example how there is a transference of the property of silver to that of the seashell (unless one wants to speak in figurative terms). A mistake or error is then accounted along ontological lines by bringing into discussion the entity ‘mistaken silver’.

There is no analysis of error in the above illustration from a proper perspective. At the most, it can be said, that a certain way of characterizing or talking about error is taken up for analysis by Śaṅkara. Such an analysis along ontological lines is mistaken for an actual analysis of error. In other words a proper analysis of the above illustration of error should be an epistemological one as the concept of error comes within the domain of epistemology, but Śaṅkara proceeds to give an ontological analysis.

Having failed to identify to whom it pertains, but at the same time affirming that the world of duality is due to *avidyā* coupled with the above misplaced analysis of *avidyā* naturally forces one to give this *avidyā* an ontological status and describe it as a subtle matter. In this commentary on *Brahmasūtra* (2-1-14) he refers to the apparent nature of the appearances by the use of the word *anupākhyatvāt* (undefinable) and it is this idea, which further down in the commentary of the same *sūtra* leads to the idea of *tattvānyatvābhyām anirvacanīya* i.e. neither identical nor independent of Brahman. *Avidyā* is held to be the cause of such appearances and is also referred to as one that is responsible for preventing the revelation of the true nature of things. Śaṅkara’s treatment of *avidyā* in such a manner leads the post-Śaṅkara commentators to look upon *avidyā* as a subtle matter covering or obstructing, like a screen, the real nature of things. When it comes to Brahman, the *avidyā* which obscures the true nature of Brahman leading to this conception of the empirical world is termed *mūlāvidyā* (root ignorance). It is *mūla* (root) in the sense that it is the fundamental or primary nescience screening the true nature of Brahman and in its place showing the world of duality.

There is another way Śaṅkara avoids the issue of the locus of *avidyā* by reframing the contents of the question in a different way and then proceeds with his arguments starting with a different kind of a premise altogether. Even this argument of Śaṅkara strengthens the view how he leaves enough space for *avidyā* to be construed as a functional entity thus conferring an ontological status to it. In a very clever strategy used by Śaṅkara to escape certain philosophical objections to his doctrine, he starts with a premise where he treats *avidyā* as an entity or a property. I would like to unpack this aspect of his exposition which is so succinctly brought out by Daniel H.H. Ingalls in his short essay (1953). Ingalls in his essay raises the question: ‘Whose is *avidyā*?’ and begins with a certain logical dilemma that confronts Śaṅkara regarding the nature of *avidyā*. The dilemma is this: If *avidyā* is a real entity the whole of the doctrine of

non-duality of Advaita collapses because there is another entity besides Brahman that is posited. If it is not a real entity then the whole doctrine of *avidyā* that is so central to Advaita comes to a naught, being just a figment of imagination. He points out that Śāṅkara starts with the premise that *avidyā* is not a property of the self and then drives or directs his entire argument in showing that this is not a property of the self but at the same time not saying anything about the reality of *avidyā*. According to him the passages in which Śāṅkara takes up this matter avoids either horn of the dilemma “not by solving but by avoiding it.” This Śāṅkara cleverly does by first admitting that *avidyā* is a certain entity, a property that is borne by someone. *Avidyā* is looked upon as an entity by later commentators and this idea continues to stay till the present day.³⁸

The whole problem in this discussion is diverted by Śāṅkara by treating ignorance as a property and then showing that it does not pertain to anyone and therefore the question of locus becomes irrelevant to him. Ingalls refers to the passage from the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (IV.iv.6)³⁹ *bhāṣya*, where Śāṅkara treats our awareness of the fact like ‘I am a stupid man’ (*mugdho’ smi*) as percepts which are perceived in the same sense as ‘I see a pot.’ But, according to Śāṅkara, whatever is perceived are objects of perception and therefore do not belong to the perceiver who is the subject. Referring to the not so exact philosophical discussions of the above *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* passage of Śāṅkara, Ingalls proceeds to give what he considers to be a more exact philosophical discussion of Śāṅkara in the *Bṛihadāranyaka*, which discussion does not concern us much here. But what is important for us in the *Bṛihadāranyaka bhāṣya* passage of Śāṅkara, which Ingalls refers to, is that he (Śāṅkara) adopts a very clever strategy in order to escape certain philosophical objections to his doctrine by starting with a premise where he treats *avidyā* as an entity or a property. The ‘abstract sense’ that we sometimes resort to in our language to represent facts of the matter comes in handy for Śāṅkara here. I will try to sketch how he adopts this argument. Śāṅkara treats this abstract sense of the term *avidyā* as a property in his argument and it is this that goes against one’s intuition. This point stands in need of elaboration.

It is here that we need to distinguish between property and fact. That something is the case is a fact. But to consider the abstract sense of the fact to be an entity or property is to make a category mistake. For example if one does not know mathematics then it is a fact of the matter that ‘He does not know mathematics.’ From that it is implied that he is ignorant of mathematics. So as a manner of speaking one can say that ‘He has ignorance of mathematics’. But in all these we have to be careful to note that whenever we speak of ignorance we always presuppose that there is a subject matter of ignorance and someone who is ignorant. It is in that sense we can say that *someone* can be thought of as the locus of ignorance. The word ‘ignorance’ therefore comes to be used in an abstract sense to refer to the case of someone’s not knowing. But on that account to treat of ignorance as a property term inhering on something looks facetious. To speak of *avidyā* is to speak about the fact of the matter. And the fact of the matter is different from the entity. The fact of the

³⁸ Grimes also refers to *avidyā* as an entity when he says, “*Avidyā* implies some entity it belongs to and some object to which it refers” (1990; p. 25).

³⁹ This *bhāṣya* passage of IV.iv.6 is wrongly referred to by Ingalls in his essay as IV.i.6.

matter when somebody talks about *avidyā* is about the epistemic status. Understanding or the lack of it are not entities. To speak of it in abstract terms as just shown, does not make it an entity. In the above example let us suppose that the student, who did not know mathematics, later comes to know of the subject when taught. In such a case one can still refer to this fact by saying 'He has got rid of his ignorance'. But the phrase 'getting rid of his ignorance' is definitely not to be understood in the same sense as one gets rid of the physical thorn stuck to the leg or a dust particle from his eyes.⁴⁰

Śāṅkara in order to avoid certain horns of the dilemma, which Ingalls mentions, treats *avidyā* as an entity and property and leaves it at that. Though Śāṅkara does not have any intention of giving a positive content (*bhāvarūpa*) to *avidyā*, as SS rightly contends, his explication of *avidyā*, as shown above leaves ample scope to give an ontological sense to the epistemic concept of *avidyā* further allowing it to be construed as an entity with a positive content. It is this aspect which the post-Śāṅkara commentators took up and in the process of constructing a more logically coherent metaphysical system ended up postulating the concept of *mūlāvidyā*. An epistemological concept is turned into an ontological one and here lies the root of the confusion.

This ontological status of *avidya* arises also among present day writers in meeting certain objections within Śāṅkara. I had mentioned above of Mohanty's enigma of Śāṅkara's sentence holding *ātman* also to be an object.⁴¹ After showing that Padmapāda, Bhartṛhari and Vācaspatimiśra's account to be circular, he suggests a way out. According to him there is a fundamental function of ignorance, which is to conceal the self. It is this function which gives rise to the possibility of *adhyāsa*. The concealing function of ignorance has for its object the self. Self is considered as an object in the sense that it is the object of ignorance and it is this concealment function of ignorance leading to 'primal objectification' that is prior to all cognitive functions. But this idea of ignorance is very much similar to that of *mūlāvidyā*. However, he leaves it open whether this idea is a philosophically defensible proposition. I have shown in this paper how it is not defensible.

Adhyāropa apavāda method based on the two-standpoint approach is then invoked to dismiss the philosophical questions being posed and argued for, by treating these questions as relevant only from the standpoint of empirical world of ignorance and invalid from the transcendental point of view. It is the contention of Vedānta that such transcendental knowledge is not obtained by reasoning and arguments alone, and these are to be used only within the boundaries or ambit of

⁴⁰ This elucidation of the problem is somewhat similar to Wittgenstein's thought: that certain philosophical problems arise due to confusion in language use. Hudson gives an illustration of the "philosophical perplexity" in the context of moral philosophy. Suppose that one asks the question: "With what sense moral rightness is perceived?" The same question when asked with respect to redness or hardness can be easily understood and answered. Therefore to conclude that there is a special moral sense which perceives moral rightness in the sense of perceiving redness or hardness is a mistake (1983; p. 47).

⁴¹ *na tāvadāyam ekāntena aviśayaḥ.*

śāstras and do not have an independent validity in the deliberation of Brahman.⁴² *Adhyāropa apavāda* method in this way therefore explains too much and also explains away too much by shifting its standpoint according to its own convenience.

One can see that there is a definite shift with metaphysical implications within the system of Śāṅkara from the epistemological standpoint; and then the very idea of the epistemological standpoint is conveniently negated from a different perspective of reality resulting in a certain lack of clarity on the nature of *avidyā*. There are familiar illustrations in the form of allegorical tales, which are often given in the discussions of Advaitic teaching. These illustrations emphasize that realization or liberation consists only in the recognition of the already present Brahman being the self of all, which went unrecognized previously. It is only this that is revealed by the teacher and there is nothing new to be attained. The story of the tenth man and that of the banished prince brought up by the tribesman (or some variation of it) are two typical examples.⁴³ They are illustrated for the purpose of showing that all that is required is a change in one's understanding of the self when properly instructed.⁴⁴ In other words it (realization or liberation) can be understood as a change in one's epistemic status. But in all these examples the change in the epistemic status does not lead to a change in certain ontological status of the tenth man or that of the prince. But on the other hand in the state of realization or liberation when the person comes to know of his true nature, not only is the *avidyā* which he is subject to is gone, his ontological status itself changes. It changes in such a way that we are not in a position to say that it is the same person who has realized. This is the status because the removal of *avidyā* has resulted in his moving up the ontological ladder. It is this which makes the idea of '*avidyā*' nebulous, not knowing what to make out of it?

⁴² The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1-II-9 firmly affirms: *naiṣa tarkeṇa matirāpneyā proktānyenaiva sujñānāya preṣṭha* (Panoli 1995a; p. 196) meaning that the knowledge of the self cannot be attained by argumentation but is learnt if taught by some well versed teacher other than a logician. Commenting on this passage Śāṅkara writes that the self cannot be attained by "mere conjecture of one's own intellect": *ātmani svabuddhyabhūhamātreṇāpaneya na prāpñiyetyarthaḥ* (ibid, p. 196). Further, commenting on how reasoning should be in accordance with the *śāstras* in the *Brahmasūtra* (2-1-11) he writes: *ataḥ siddhamsyaivoupaniṣdasya jñānasya samyagjñāntvaṃ | ato'nyatra samyagjñātvānūpatteḥ saṃsārāvimokṣa eva prasajyeta | ata āgamavaśenāgamānusāritarkavaśena ca cetanaṃ brahmā jag-ataḥ kāraṇaṃ prakṛtiśceti stithaṃ* || i.e. "Therefore it can be concluded that the knowledge arising from the Upaniṣads is perfect knowledge. Hence there is no other perfect knowledge from which liberation can arise. Further, it can be concluded from the *āgamas* and *reasoning in accordance with the āgamas* that the sentient Brahman is the cause of the world" (Śāṅkara 1980; p. 369).

⁴³ The tenth man example is given in the *Pañcadaśī* of Vidyāraṣya Swāmi VII.22–27 (1967; pp. 242–243). The story of the prince brought up by the tribesman is found in the *Vṛtti* of Anirudha on *Sāṅkhya Pravacana Sūtra* IV.1, *Rājpūtravat tatvopadeśāt* (Sinha 1979; p. 361). Though the latter story is found in the Sāṅkhya literature, it is used in the Advaita Vedāntic discourses to drive home the importance of instruction of truth and the nature of liberation.

⁴⁴ Briefly, the story of the tenth man goes as follows. Ten men cross a river and the leader of the group wants to make sure that all have crossed the river and therefore counts the number of persons. But each time he does not count himself. The group members grieved over the loss of one person who they think has drowned. A passer by realizes their problem and asks them to count once more. At the end of counting nine persons he tells the person who is taking the count that "You are the tenth." He (the person taking the count) thus recognizes that he is the tenth man and the truth dawns on him.

I have shown in the above discussion that Śāṅkara does not provide an appropriate answer to the questions of causal nature of *avidyā*, the locus of *avidyā* and keeps shifting his metaphysical and epistemological standpoints conveniently to deflect or parry any philosophical objections to his position. An answer to these questions would have constituted a formulation of an account of *avidyā* or theory of *avidyā*. But as SS claims such a theory was not worked out by Śāṅkara as the terms such as *avidyā* and *māyā* were only introduced as a device to teach Brahman (1971; p. 45).

In the *Adhyāsa-bhāṣya* Śāṅkara starts with the consideration that we are, in our empirical world, already affected with *adhyāsa* or *avidyā*. He says that the self and the not-self gets mixed up and there is a mistaken transference of properties of one on the other. If Brahman is all there is, that is distinctionless, being the self of all, then who is having this misconception of mixing up? To whom is the teaching of Upaniṣad, adopting this device, meant? It is incumbent on Śāṅkara to answer such questions clearly because the nature of teaching and its methods come only after one is clear as to whom is this teaching meant. He also states that the *avidyā* is due to a natural tendency (*naisargika*). If ignorance is conceived to be something natural, there is all the more reason for Śāṅkara, to answer the question: “Naturalness is with respect to whom?” The gaps that Śāṅkara has left in answering such questions forces one to postulate an ontological status to *avidyā* and from there it is one short step to see it as a root ignorance (*mūlāvidyā*) possessing a causal power that brings about the needed superimposition and thus, in some way, tries to answer some of the questions raised by later philosophers of different school. It is another matter that this postulation has led to a new set of questions, which has been raised by Rāmānuja and his followers.⁴⁵

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⁴⁵ In fact Rāmānuja and his followers take it for granted that the post-Śāṅkara commentators correctly represent the *avidyā* doctrine of Śāṅkara and mobilize their arsenal for attack on such a representation.

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