7 Two conceptions of the relation between the self and God

The debate between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja

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7.1 Introduction

Although it is controversial whether the Sanskrit terms *Brahman* and *atman* can always be interpreted to mean *God* and *the individual self*, it is fair to say that Rāmānuja and Śaṅkara disagree about the relation between *Brahman* (God) and *ātman* (the individual self).[1] The disagreement is over how best to understand the thesis (AB), *ātman is Brahman*. Śaṅkara holds that (AB) is true. Rāmānuja holds that (AB) is false. In Section 7.2, I briefly present an account of their disagreement before moving on to an examination of (AB). In Sections 7.3–7.6, I offer four analytic interpretations of Śaṅkara's position on (AB): predication, constitution, sortal identity, and strict identity. My analysis is only partially historical and textual. The purpose of it is to show what problems (AB) faces under the four interpretations. I show that the first three interpretations are not plausible, given Śaṅkara's overall philosophical goals. The last interpretation, strict identity, is the most plausible account of Śaṅkara's philosophy. However, it runs into a problem due to the transitivity of strict identity and the reality or illusory nature of the self as advocated by Śaṅkara. In Section 7.7, I move on to Rāmānuja's critique of the use of ignorance (*maya*) by Śaṅkara as a way to avoid the problem. In Section 7.8, I present Rāmānuja's adjectival modification theory of the relation between the self and God. I conclude, in Section 7.9, with some general comments on the debate.

7.2 The positions of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja

In order to discuss (AB), *ātman is Brahman*, in the work of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, we need to understand their respective positions on *Brahman*.

One way to taxonomise their positions is to look at a core statement found in the *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* at (III. xiv. 1): *sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*, which is often translated as (*) *all this is verily Brahman*.

Śaṅkara interprets (*) as:

(a)   *Brahman only* is real.

The core idea is that "*all this*" is ultimately identical with *Brahman*, and only it is
  real.
Rāmānuja interprets (*) as:

(b)   Everything is *dependent on* the reality of *Brahman*.

The core idea is that "*all this*" is dependent on *Brahman*. The alternative read-
ings offered by Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja lead to a difference over how (AB) can
be understood. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly discuss the work of
Śaṅkara to bring out an important analytical insight before going into a longer
analysis of his view. I discuss Rāmānuja in 7.8.
    On my reading of Śaṅkara, there are two logically distinct ways in which his read-
ing of (*) can be understood. On *the illusionist reading*, Śaṅkara is saying that all
that is real is God, and everything else is an illusion. On *the relative realist reading*,
Śaṅkara is saying that everything has a degree of reality, and the degree of reality is
a function of how permanent in time the entity is. God being permanent is the most
real, but material objects, which change over time, are less real than God. So, from
the perspective of something that is permanent, the relative realist argues that enti-
ties that are impermanent are less real. But unlike the illusionist, the relative realist
doesn't think that the entities that are less than permanent are illusions. They are sim-
ply not as real because they are not as permanent. Finally, for Śaṅkara, *Brahman* is
without qualities (*nirguṇa*); if there are any qualities to *Brahman* (*saguṇa*), then those
are either illusory or less real from the perspective of *Brahman* without qualities.
    Both interpretations of (*) lead to the main question of this work: in what sense
is "is" being used in (AB), such that (AB) is true? I now turn to four interpretations
of (AB). There is no claim here that Śaṅkara intended any of these interpretations,
except the last one. The main claim is that from an analytical point of view on
"is" in English, there are four readings, because there are four interpretations of
"is" in English. Assuming that (AB) is a fair-enough translation of the Sanskrit,
it seems plausible to discuss (AB) through these different interpretations of "is"
(Sections 7.3–7.6).

7.3 An analysis of the plausibility of Śaṅkara's position via *predication*

On *the predicative reading* of (AB), "is" is being used in the sense of *predication*.
"Is" in the sense of predication uses the relation of predication to attribute a prop-
erty to an individual or class of individuals. The sentence "Thomas is tall" predi-
cates the *property of being tall* to the individual *Thomas*. On this reading of (AB),
the statement says of each individual self that God is a property of each individual.
Here, *is God*, is a property like *is tall*.

What sense can be made of this interpretation? First, it is likely that predication is not the reading Śaṅkara sought to advance from a textual point of view. Second, however, it is instructive to look at the reading analytically to see what problems arise from it.

If the predicative reading is taken seriously, then the predicate, *is God*, like, *is tall*, is merely a property and not a substance. We predicate properties of individuals. We don't predicate substances of individuals. This leads to a problem. If substances are more permanent or real than properties, *God* as a property would make *God* less real than the individual self it is predicated of. The property, *being tall*, is less real of Anya than the substance-individual: Anya. Thus, by analogy, on this reading of (AB), the self would be more real than the property of being *God*. But this consequence is the exact opposite direction of what Śaṅkara is going for. There is another reading, one on which we say that "is God" is elliptical for "is Godlike" or "participates in God". On these readings, (AB) is saying that each individual self is like God in a certain way or participates in God in a certain way. Both of these readings can be further examined when we consider the constitution and the sortal identity theses.

7.4 An analysis of the plausibility of Śaṅkara's position via *constitution*

On *the constitutive reading* of (AB), "is" is being used in the sense of *constitution*. "Is" in the sense of constitution uses the relation of constitution to tell us what something is *made of* or *constituted by*. The sentence "The lump of clay is the statue", tells us that the lump of clay is *what the statue is made of or constituted by*. This is coherent because one can say that the statue is constituted by the lump of clay but not what it is identical to, since the clay is essentially clay, but the statue is accidentally clay. Using this sense of "is", one can say that (AB) says of each individual self that there is a constitution relation between it and God.

There are two directions the constitutive reading can take. On the one hand, the view could be that each individual self is constituted by God, or God is constituted in part by each individual self. Both readings are far more plausible than the predicative reading for two reasons. First, God, for Śaṅkara, is not a personal creature, but rather pure consciousness itself absent of all qualities. Second, it is plausible from the perspective of cosmopsychism to say that what makes up God is pure consciousness and that what makes up each individual self is pure consciousness constrained in some way to make an individual self. On the constitutive reading, either God isn't identical to each individual self, but God is constituted out of each of us, or each of us is constituted out of God, but not identical to God.

The constitution reading, however, faces a problem when we turn to the diversity of individual selves with respect to their lives. An individual either comes into existence or goes out of existence at a time, or their existence is permanent in time. Consider the following: both Melissa and Mona are individual selves, and each individual self on the constitution reading is part of God. Now suppose that Melissa and Mona existed at different times. It follows that God's constitution

is not permanent, because his constituents changed. This is the opposite of what Śaṅkara would want, since God is most real by being permanent in time. If we now suppose that Melissa and Mona are parts of God, but are permanent substances that never originate and never go out of existence, then we are faced with the question: what is their relation to each other? This is the question we will take up in discussing the strict identity reading. If the constitution relation is to work, it must be the case that God constitutes us, but individual selves don't constitute God either as impermanent or permanent individuals. God cannot be dependent on anything.

7.5 An analysis of the plausibility of Śaṅkara's position via *sortal identity*

On *the sortal identity reading* of (AB), "is" is being used in the sense of *sortal identity*. Just as one can say that two pictures are the same and mean that they are the same kind of thing without meaning that they are one and the same thing, one can say that each individual self is the same kind of thing as God, but identical neither to God nor to each other.

The sortal reading is more plausible than the constitution reading, which is more plausible than the predication reading. On the sortal reading, the individual self and God are the same kind of thing without there being a constitution relation between them. God isn't constituted out of each individual self. Rather, God is the same kind of thing as each individual self. This reading becomes clearer if we substitute *pure consciousness* for *God* and *true self* for *individual self*. For under this substitution, we get the true self (*ātman*) is (sortal identical with) pure consciousness (*Brahman*).

The sortal reading faces a series of problems. First, for something to be a sortal, such that their can be sortal identity, it must be the case that more than one thing falls under the sortal. However, God and the self in Śaṅkara's system are singular and one. It isn't just the case that the self and God are identical in some sense, rather there is only one thing. As a consequence, there cannot be a sortal reading of the relation between God and the self. Second, if God and the individual self are the same kind of thing as God, then every individual has the same properties, except for constitution and spatial–temporal location. For example, two pens of the same type differ only in their material constitution and their spatial–temporal location. The essence, in the sense of what they are, is the same except for constitution and spatial–temporal location. On analogy, it follows that God and each individual self are the same kind of thing essentially, which is pure consciousness, but they differ in constitution and spatial–temporal location. Could this be true? It would seem not. If God is permanent and the ground of time, then each individual self, being the same kind of thing as God, would also be permanent and the ground of time. As a consequence, there would be no difference temporally. This leaves spatial location. Could it be that God and every individual merely have a different spatial location? There are two positions here. On the one hand, God could be everywhere, but each individual self only somewhere, where every individual overlaps with some part of God but not with any other individual. On the other hand, each individual

could be everywhere like God, because each individual self is the same kind of thing as God. Both suffer from the same problem: individual selves and God are the same kind of thing, pure consciousness, but since selves and God have spatial location, they have qualities, and this contradicts Śaṅkara's view of *Brahman* as lacking qualities (*nirguṇa*).

7.6 An analysis of the plausibility of Śaṅkara's position via *strict identity*

On *the strict identity reading* of (AB), "is" is used in the sense of strict identity. Just as one can say, "Anand is Jack", and mean that the two names refer to the same person and that there is only one individual picked out, one can say that each individual self is identical to God.

Śaṅkara has the strict identity reading in mind because *advaita* means non-dual. God (*Brahman*) is the same exact thing as each individual self (*ātman*). And if we again substitute *pure consciousness* for *God* and *the true self* for *each individual self*, we get the claim that the true self is one and the same thing as pure consciousness, which is God. It is far more plausible to say that the true self is pure consciousness (one and the same thing) than to say that the true self and pure consciousness are the same type of thing except for constitution and spatial–temporal location. The sortal identity view leads to the quality problem, while the strict identity view does not.

This strict identity reading leads to a problem that takes us back to the illusionist versus the relative realist readings of Śaṅkara on the nature of the individual self. Recall, the illusionist reading holds that Śaṅkara is saying that only pure consciousness is real, everything else, such as the individuality of each individual self, is an illusion. Recall, the relative realist reading holds that Śaṅkara is saying that from the perspective of pure consciousness (*Brahman*), everything else is less real. The problem for both of these reading comes from three claims:

(i)   Each individual self is strictly identical to God (*atman is Brahman*).
(ii)   Strict identity obeys symmetry of identity: if $x = y$, then $y = x$.
(iii) Strict identity obeys the transitivity of identity: if $x = y$, and $y = z$, then $x = z$.

Consider two individuals, Melissa and Mona, where Melissa's individual self is A and Mona's B, and God (G):

(1)   Melissa's individual self is identical to God: $A = G$.
(2)   Mona's individual self is identical to God: $B = G$.
(3) $G = B$, by symmetry of identity on (2).
(4) $A = B$, by transitivity of identity on (1) and (3).

The problem is that on the relative realism reading, we cannot make sense of the statement that Mona and Melissa are relatively real in relation to one another because they are identical, and on the illusionist reading, we cannot make sense of

the claim that there is anything other than pure consciousness that is real. At bottom, on the strict identity reading of (AB), Śaṅkara faces *the problem of distinctness*: Mona and Melissa are distinct individuals. The strict identity reading forces us to ask: how can we make sense of their distinctness, when the view is that the true self of each of them is strictly identical to God?

7.7 Rāmānuja's critique of *avidyā*

Śaṅkara tries to avoid the problem of distinctness and account for intuitions about the reality of each person by asserting: *brahma satyam jaganmithyā jivo brahmaiva nā'paraḥ*. This statement holds the following:

- *Brahman* is the sole reality.
- The world, qua world, is unreal.
- The individual soul is non-different from *Brahman*.[2]

Furthermore, Śaṅkara deploys the concept of ignorance (*avidyā*) to explain how these features hold together consistently. Ignorance has six characteristics:[3]

- It is beginningless (*anādi*).
- It can be terminated by knowledge (*jñāna-nivartya*).
- It is a positive entity (*bhāva-rūpa*).
- Its ontological status is neither real nor unreal. It is inexpressible/inexplicable (*anirvacanīya*).
- It has the two powers of concealment and projection (*āvaraṇa* and *vikṣepa-śakti*).[4]
- Its locus (*āśraya*) is either *Brahman* or *jīva* (individual soul).

Through his *Sapta-Vidhā-Anupapatti* ("Seven Great Untenables"), Rāmānuja criticises Śaṅkara's use of ignorance:

(A) The very nature (*svarūpa*) of *avidyā* is riddled with contradictions.
(B) The description of *avidyā* as inexplicable (*anirvacanīya*) is untenable.
(C) No valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) supports the Advaitin theory of *avidyā*.
(D) The locus (*āśraya*) of *avidyā* can be neither ultimate reality (*Brahman*) nor the soul (*jīva*).
(E) It is unintelligible to claim that *avidyā* can obscure (*tirodhāna*) the nature of *Brahman*.
(F) The removal of *avidyā* by right knowledge (*jñāna-nivartya*) is untenable.
(G) The very conception of the cessation of *avidyā* (*avidyā-nivṛtti*) is absurd.

I will focus on a brief exposition of (A)–(D) to show how epistemically incoherent Śaṅkara's use of ignorance is. While my presentation does not follow Rāmānuja's own order, it provides a coherent story where one problem leads into another in a series.

7.7.1 The problem of the locus of ignorance

(1)   Ignorance requires a locus, since in the case of a person who is ignorant there is a locus.

(2)   Either *Brahman* or a conscious finite self is the locus of ignorance, since there is nothing other than these.

(3)   A conscious finite self cannot be the locus of ignorance, since it would have to come into existence at the same time as *Brahman*. A conscious finite self comes into existence only after *Brahman* is covered with ignorance. A conscious finite self is the consequence of *Brahman*'s ignorance.[5]

(4)   *Brahman* cannot be the locus of ignorance, since self-luminosity is its nature, and ignorance and self-luminosity cannot exist in the same locus just as light and darkness cannot exist in the same locus.[6] Self-luminosity is an epistemic notion that rules out any lack or failing of knowledge with respect to the entity that has self-luminosity. Light and darkness cannot be in the same place, since darkness is simply the absence of light. As a consequence, ignorance and self-luminosity cannot be in the same place, since self-luminosity is simply the absence of ignorance.

(5)   So, the Advaitic doctrine of ignorance is incoherent.

Rāmānuja describes the Advaitin position as follows:

> *Brahman*, the non-differentiated Consciousness, is the only reality, and all this manifoldness is imagined in It alone and is false. Due to the effect of beginningless ignorance which is unspeakable, this manifoldness is wrongly imagined in the non-dual *Brahman* Which is pure consciousness.
>
> (*Śrī-bhāṣya*, I.1.1, pp. 8–9)[7]

In this argument, "manifold" refers to a single manifold, and not a universal manifold that has instances, and "unspeakable" means inexplicable, and not that something cannot be spoken of. (1) is true because ignorance is located. For example, when Nitin is ignorant of something Anita knows, we are assigning the reality of ignorance to Nitin and denying it of Anita, both of whom are different loci. (2) is true because were a conscious finite self to be the locus of ignorance, it would follow that the conscious finite self comes into existence at the same time as *Brahman*. But *Brahman* is the cause of a given conscious finite self being ignorant of its true nature. In addition, since *Brahman* is self-luminous consciousness, *Brahman* cannot be the locus of ignorance. For were *Brahman* the locus of ignorance, its self-luminosity would be incoherent. What could self-luminosity be if *Brahman* is simultaneously, in virtue of being the locus, ignorant as well as self-luminous?

  Śaṅkara could respond by emphasising that ignorance is *unreal* and thus doesn't require a locus. He could argue that because each conscious finite self is non-different from *Brahman*, if *Brahman* is a locus, so too is each finite self.[8]

  Whether this response is satisfactory depends on the tenability of the claim that ignorance is unreal. If thinking about how individuals are ignorant is not sufficient for thinking about how *Brahman* can be the locus of ignorance, then of course the

reality of Nitin's ignorance cannot be used to criticise how *Brahman* could be the locus of ignorance. Nevertheless, for Rāmānuja, the nature of ignorance deployed by Śaṅkara is contradictory, which leads to a further problem.

7.7.2 The contradictory nature of ignorance[9]

(1)   If ignorance is intelligible, then it is either real or unreal.
(2)   If ignorance is real, then dualism follows, but Advaita is non-dualist about *Brahman*; in addition, if it is real, it exists for all times and cannot be destroyed because the underlying assumption is that what is real is eternal and unchanging.
(3)   If ignorance is unreal, then it must be unreal as either (i) the cogniser (*draṣṭā*), (ii) the object which is cognised (*dṛśya*), or (iii) the knowledge of the cognition (*dṛṣṭi*). But it cannot be any of (i)–(iii).
(4)   Therefore, ignorance is not intelligible.

Rāmānuja defends (3) by pointing to an infinite regress:

> The unreal ignorance cannot be the knower, the object known, or the perception connecting the two, for in that case there must be some other ignorance which is the cause of this unreal ignorance even as this first ignorance is the cause of the unreal world. That second ignorance must have a third ignorance which gives rise to the second and so on *ad infinitum*.
>
> (*Śri-bhāṣya*, I.1.1, p. 58)[10]

Even though the argument concludes with the claim that ignorance is unintelligible, the debate is not over, since it must further be shown that ignorance being unintelligible is a problem itself. While it is typical in analytic philosophy to accept that the unintelligibility of an explanation is sufficient for rejecting it, it is not sufficient in the dialectic between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, since Śaṅkara holds that ignorance is indescribable (*anirvacanīya*). Rāmānuja finds this to be problematic. He argues as follows.[11]

7.7.3 On knowing what is indescribable

(1)   Suppose objects are either real (*sat*), unreal (*asat*), or indescribable (*anirvacanīya*).
(2)   To claim that an object fits under one of these categories is to claim that one can also know that it fits under one of these categories.
(3)   Suppose ignorance is indescribable.
(4)   It follows that there would be no way of knowing ignorance is indescribable.

(1) is true because the list is exhaustive concerning the ways in which a thing could be for Śaṅkara. (2) is true because asserting that something fits under a category requires at least the possibility of knowledge. (3) is the assumption under consideration. (4) follows from principle that what is indescribable cannot be known to be

indescribable. This principle is plausible once we acknowledge that knowledge is generally of the kind where there is a knower and something known. Thus, knowledge follows the subject–object dichotomy of conscious experience. If what is indescribable does not fall under the subject–object dichotomy, then it cannot be known through a subject–object relation. Śaṅkara, in positioning ignorance as indescribable, makes ignorance like knowledge of *Brahman*, something that cannot be known through any subject–object relation. So, ignorance cannot be known to fall under the category of indescribable because if it were known to, it would not be indescribable.

While I have not demonstrably shown that Rāmānuja's critique of Śaṅkara's epistemology is decisive, I have shown that the use of ignorance by Śaṅkara is plausibly incoherent. These critiques are also plausible to a wide range of thinkers outside of Viśiṣṭādvaita, such as figures within Acintyabhedābheda. The goal here was only to reveal how the epistemology of Śaṅkara is problematic to vindicate the claim that Śaṅkara cannot escape the problem of distinctness that the strict identity reading of (AB) faces through the deployment of ignorance.

7.8 The metaphysics of Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita in contrast to Śaṅkara's Advaita

Both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja accept that *Brahman is realised as one's own atman*. However, they interpret it differently.[12] The former uses strict identity to explain the relation between *Brahman* and *ātman*, while the latter uses the internal relation of inseparability (*apṛthak siddhi*). *Viśiṣṭādvaita* is often translated as *qualified non-dualism*. An alternative translation is *the organic unity of the many in the one through individualised embodiment and enlivening*.[13] I prefer the alternative translation because it captures Rāmānuja's use of the internal relation of inseparability as a central feature of his metaphysics. There are several differentiae that separate Śaṅkara's system from Rāmānuja's.[14]

7.8.1 Differentiate between Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita

(1) There is a distinction between *Brahman* without attributes (*nirguṇa*) and *Brahman* with attributes (*saguṇa*). Advaita only accepts *Brahman* without attributes as real. Viśiṣṭādvaita only accepts *Brahman* with attributes as real.

(2) Both Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita hold that there is a primordial self (*paramātman*). However, Advaita interprets the primordial self as non-dual consciousness. It holds that *Brahman* is non-dual consciousness. Viśiṣṭādvaita interprets the primordial self as the supreme person (Puruṣottama). It holds that *Brahman* is Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa who has a body of matchless perfections.[15]

(3) In Viśiṣṭādvaita, the supreme person is (constitution) consciousness and has (possession) consciousness. Consciousness without a self is impossible. In Advaita, consciousness without a self is possible, since *Brahman* is non-dual consciousness.

(4) In classical Indian metaphysics, there is a distinction between a mode (*prakāra*) and the mode possessor (*prakārin*). For example, the colour of a

rose and the rose that possesses the colour. In Viśiṣṭādvaita, the kind of meta-physical dependence between a mode and its possessor is used to hold that the supreme person is strictly distinct from each conscious finite self and all non-conscious matter even though they are inseparable from the supreme person. Advaita holds that *Brahman* is strictly identical to each finite self and does not make use of the distinction between a mode and its possessor (Srini-vasachari, 1943, pp. 95, 121).[16]

(5)   Viśiṣṭādvaitins disagree with Advaitins over how the criterion for "real" should be used. For Advaitins everything that passes in time is unreal/illusory. Impermanence is the mark of unreality. For Viśiṣṭādvaitins impermanence does not entail unreality. For example, both material bodies and conscious finite selves are temporally bound and impermanent, qua material bodies and finite selves, yet they are real and inhabit a different kind of reality than what the supreme person inhabits.

I will now develop these points in more detail.

According to Rāmānuja, the primordial self (*paramātman*) is not non-dual consciousness without a subject, as Śaṅkara holds. Rather, the primordial self is Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, the supreme person (Puruṣottama) who is consciousness and has consciousness.[17] The supreme person has a layered reality: the supreme person, conscious finite selves, and non-conscious material bodies. Conscious finite selves are differentiated from material bodies by the fact that the latter are subject to mutability and decay while the former are not. The essential nature of a conscious finite self is knowledge (*cit*) and bliss (*ānanda*), neither of which can change. However, the knowledge component of a conscious finite self, in its embodied state within a material body, can expand or contract depending on its karma. For Rāmānuja, each conscious finite self in its embodied state is subject to diachronic knowledge change where one and the same finite self is said to have a change in knowledge over time depending on its karma. The supreme person is ontologically distinct from conscious and non-conscious beings because it is transcendent, even though the latter are inseparable from it.[18] For Rāmānuja, there is an ontological/metaphysical dependence relation between the three layers, as depicted in Table 7.1. The hierarchy that obtains in virtue of the dependence relation is with respect to perfections and not with respect to being more or less real.[19]

Rāmānuja holds that everything is dependent on the supreme person. The dependence relation is expressed through the Sanskrit term *ādhāra*, which means *ground/support*.[20] The supreme person is the ground of each finite self and its material body, as well as the world constituted out of the totality of material bodies and finite selves. The supreme person is the ground of these in a hierarchical relation. The hierarchy holds that there are different kinds of realities where the kinds are equally real. To understand Rāmānuja's view, it will be useful to contrast it with Śaṅkara's.

Śaṅkara holds that there are three levels of reality, where one reality is more real than another. There is unreality (*prāthibhāsika*), relative reality (*vyāvahārika*), and absolute reality (*pāramārthika*). The first is the most unreal, while the last is the most real. However, Śaṅkara's position is confusing, since he holds that *Brahman*,

Table 7.1 Rāmānuja's hierarchical ontological/metaphysical dependence relations

Entity	Rank	Differentia	Dependence
Material Body (MB)	Low	Inner and Outer Transformation	Dependent on (FS)
Conscious Finite Self (FS)	Middle	Essential Nature Does Not Change. However, the knowledge of any conscious finite self, in its embodied state, expands or contracts depending on its karma.	Dependent on (SP)
Supreme Person (SP)	High	Transcendent	Non-Dependent

understood as non-dual consciousness, is fundamental and *all and only real*. So, while Śaṅkara talks as if there are levels of reality, they ought best to be understood as talking about different levels of illusoriness. The rope–snake illusion goes away as soon as you look away. While the illusion of the material world passes only upon realising that one's own true self (*ātman*) is identical to non-dual consciousness (*Brahman*).

On Rāmānuja's view, the picture is different. Rāmānuja holds that there are different kinds of reality, and they are equally real. The kind of reality an entity inhabits is marked by duration. The body passes in time, each conscious finite self as consciousness and bliss does not. The supreme person, of which each finite self is a part, is itself beyond time.

With respect to grounding (*ādhāra*) the following inference pattern, which Śaṅkara accepts, does not hold for Rāmānuja.

X is the ground of Y.
So, Y is unreal or illusory, but X is real.

Rāmānjua does not hold that each conscious finite self is illusory, qua finite self, and only the supreme person is real. Instead, Rāmānuja endorses the following inference pattern.

X is the ground of Y.
So, Y is a different kind of reality, and equally real to that of X, but not unreal or illusory.

As a consequence:

Each MB is grounded in its corresponding FS in the FS's embodied state.
Each FS is grounded in SP.
So, each MB has a different kind of reality than its corresponding FS but is equally real.
And FSs inhabit a different kind of reality than SP, although they are equally real.

The core of Rāmānuja's conception of ground is that of a locus and support in an *enlivening emanation* sense where the supreme person sustains the world and
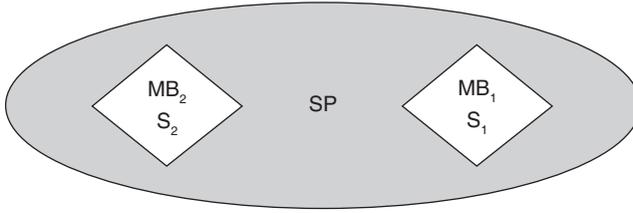
Figure 7.1 Rāmānuja on the supreme person as grounding for finite selves and their material bodies

its inhabitants. The conception of ground is not spatial for Rāmānuja. It is not as if each conscious finite self with its material body is spatially supported by the supreme person. Rather, each conscious finite self is metaphysically dependent on the supreme person for its emanation and enlivening.

Rāmānuja does not think that consciousness can occur without a self. He offers the following argument.

7.8.2 Finite-self to supreme-self analogy

(1) The corresponding material body of a conscious finite self is a mode of the finite self in the sense that the finite self is the support, controller, and principle of its corresponding material body, which is its accessory.
(2) The material world is to the supreme person as a corresponding material body is to the conscious finite self.
(3) So, the material world is a mode of the supreme person in the sense that the supreme person is the support, controller, and principle of the material world.

Rāmānuja uses a definition of "body" (*śarīa*) and an account of the relation between a mode and a mode possessor to make his argument work.

Rāmānuja holds that "body" means *any substance which a conscious being is capable of completely controlling and supporting for its own purposes*. Thus, "body" refers not only to the material structure of a human being but more broadly to any substantial entity, whether physical or not, that can control and support something. As a consequence, the relation between the finite self and its material body is homologous to the relation between the supreme person and the material world, which is the body of the supreme person. The material body of a finite self is dependent on the finite self just as a mode is dependent on the possessor of the mode. Thus, by analogy, the material world is a mode of the supreme person as its mode possessor.[21]

For Rāmānuja the distinction between a mode and the possessor of the mode has both an ontological and a teleological dimension.[22]

Table 7.2 The ontological and teleological dimensions of the mode–mode possessor

Aspect	Mode–Mode Possessor Relation
Ontological	A mode cannot be realised apart from its mode possessor. Thus, the material world is the manifestation of the supreme person but cannot be realised without the supreme person. The supreme person is the material cause of the material world.
Teleological	Just as an earring's nature is not fully explained without reference to an earring bearer, from whom and for whom earrings exist, the material world is not fully explained without reference to the supreme person, the possessor of the material world, as a mode of it, from whom and for whom, the world exists. The supreme person is the efficient cause of the material world.

These two dimensions show how the mode–mode possessor relation explains the material and efficient cause of the world. The supreme person is consciousness and has consciousness where each conscious finite self is a mode of the supreme person. The existence of each is explained both ontologically and teleologically.

7.9 Conclusion

The debate over the relation between the self and God is a complicated one with respect to realism. It is no different from an inquiry into the relation between the self and universe with respect to realism. Let me close by presenting one reason why Rāmānuja's view is more attractive to me than Śaṅkara's. If Śaṅkara were only trying to tell us that God is pure consciousness and what makes up each individual self is pure consciousness, I would find Śaṅkara's view more plausible. But he is not doing that. His other commitments are what make his view hard to accept. Even if one takes him to be a relative realist as opposed to an illusionist, it is hard to square the strict identity claim with the fact that the individuality of our existence that we feel is real—the problem of distinctness. Rāmānuja does a much better job of showing that there is a complex relation between the self and God. On the one hand everything is dependent on God, since God is what makes things real. Nevertheless, each individual self is independent from God in that what changes in them does not allow for a change in God. This is a complex relation where one must grasp dependence at one level and independence at another level.

Notes

This chapter is a combination of work I have done in my studies (2020) and (2022); however, it focuses on the issue of how "*ātman is Brahman*" is to be understood. This chapter is intended to be an analytical tour of ideas from two Vedāntic traditions concerning the nature of the self, God, and the relation they bear to one another. It is not intended to be a historical or textual analysis of the debate. Rather, it is intended for a non-historically informed audience which wishes to learn about how the relation between the self and God analytically plays out from the perspectives of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja.

 1 Both thinkers are fathers of very large schools of Vedānta. Here I am discussing only the debate between them and not how their followers might have modified the positions of each school to debate each other.
 2 See Grimes (1990, p. 16) for this translation of the passage.
 3 See Grimes (1990, p. 21). Neither Grimes nor I claim that all of these characteristics are necessarily held by Śaṅkara.
 4 See Grimes (1990, p. 22) for this description of the seven problems.
 5 See Grimes (1990, p. 27) for this point.
 6 See Grimes (1990, p. 36) for this point.
 7 See Grimes (1990, p. 26) translation.
 8 See Grimes (1990, p. 44) for this point.
 9 See Grimes (1990, p. 63) for this version of the argument.
10 See Grimes (1990, p. 64) translation.
11 See Grimes (1990, p. 73).
12 See Grimes (1990, p. 2).
13 See Grimes (1990, ch. 1).
14 Given the vast number of different Advaitin and Viśiṣṭādvaitin philosophers, these points are not to be taken as applying to every single figure in each tradition. Rather, they serve as general differentiae that can help one see differences between the two systems.
15 See Barua (2010, p. 12).
16 But these points do not apply to every single thinker in the tradition. They only seek to help one understand the general difference between the two systems.
17 See Barua (2010, p. 12).
18 See Barua (2010, pp. 13–14).
19 See Barua (2010, p. 12).
20 In Vaidya (2020), I developed Rāmānuja's account of ground (*ādhāra*) through consideration of Schaffer (2009) on grounding. However, it now seems that there are two points of disconnect between Schaffer's account of grounding and Rāmānuja's. First, it appears that grounding is transitive for Rāmānuja. Schaffer denies this. Second, Schaffer separates grounding from supervenience in part through the fact that the former is hyperintensional, but the latter is not. Rāmānuja does not engage in the issue of hyperintensionality, although he probably would accept the view that it is a necessitation relation.
21 See Barua (2010, p. 15).
22 See Ruparell (2005, pp. 45–48) for an account of Lipner's distinction between the epistemological and ontological.

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