

A New Approach to Understanding Advaita as Taught by Śaṅkara Bhagavatpāda

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1 Introduction

I present a new approach to understanding advaita vedānta in this paper. I will use some undisputed works of a great teacher of that school, Śaṅkarācārya¹, Sureśvarācārya, a direct disciple of Śaṅkarācārya, and Gauḍapādācārya, the paramaguru of Śaṅkarācārya. The thrust of this paper is philosophy. So, I will use quotations only to amplify and/or clarify a philosophical point. Śaṅkarācārya should be studied for the philosophical insights he provides, and not because of the legends associated with him², or because his commentaries on the brahma-sūtra, etc., are the oldest available to us. Antiquity is no guarantee of sensibility.

Obviously we depend on language to express any philosophy, and advaita is no exception. Advaita has its own set of philosophical terms, which succinctly express some of its key concepts. So, a study of advaita entails a study of its technical terms. But the study of the words should be subservient to philosophical ideas. This is based on three facts. First, even people with average intellects consider themselves coherent, whether they are actually so or not. So, it's a fair hypothesis that a philosopher of monumental intellect such as Śaṅkarācārya, who has been highly regarded over 1200 years, even by non-advaitins, would have tried to present a coherent system. Whether he succeeded or not is open to dispute, but we should assume that he would have at least *tried* to present a coherent system. A philosophy comprises certain fundamental premises and conclusions, and cannot be explained in a few words. A particular word may succinctly capture a key point of the system, but not the entire system. Thus, the meaning of a technical term can be determined only by understanding the philosophy as a whole.

The second reason is that any system is also only as good its fundamental premises. If the fundamental premises are wrong, any number of intellectual arguments and conclusions based on them are incorrect. Many systems are based on fundamentally flawed premises, but give an appearance of being rigorous or intellectually formidable. The arguments in these systems are akin to strengthening “a building by building steel beams into plaster” [1]. So, it is important to first understand the basic premises of advaita in order to determine whether advaita has any intrinsic value. This is very relevant when the key technical terms of advaita are examined. There is the distinct possibility of misunderstanding a technical term if only the adjacent few passages are taken as the context for determining the meaning of the term. Śaṅkarācārya always extends a philosophical courtesy to his readers. He assumes that the fundamental premises have been understood by the reader. To use an overworked adage, but one that is very apt in this context, Śaṅkarācārya assumes that the reader will not miss the wood for the trees. But it is

all too easy to be carried away by the many arguments and counter-arguments found in the bhāṣyas. Hence, I will stress the key premises of advaita many times through the course of this paper.

The third reason why study of words should be subservient to philosophical ideas is that the same word can be used in different senses, sometimes in even radically different ways³. In some cases, the technical terms are somewhat fluid and take various shades of meaning, depending on the particular context. In other cases, a word may primarily be used in a particular sense, but the same word may be used in a fairly different sense less frequently. So, determining the exact meaning a word requires a good understanding of the fundamental ideas of the system as well as the particular context. In the words of the famous philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal, “Philological research is, of course, essential. However, for philosophical studies, it should be treated not as an end, but as a means to an end” [2].

Thus, understanding a philosophical text is inevitably an iterative process. After reading the text for the first time, we will get a preliminary understanding of the usage of certain words. After, reading the book a few, or perhaps even many times, and gaining an understanding of the philosophy, the shades of meaning that a particular word can take will become apparent. It may also be the case that a word is very technical and used in a single sense throughout the text. But, the temptation to fix the meaning of a word by looking at few passages in isolation, and force-fitting a philosophy based on this incomplete analysis is great, and must be avoided.

The paper is mainly addressed to a specialist in Śāṅkarācārya. By specialist, I mean someone who has spent a significant amount of time analyzing the prose sections of the Upadeśasāhasrī of Śāṅkarācārya, and also the Naiṣkarmyasiddhi of Sureśvarācārya⁴. When discussing a particular topic, I present the major idea and conclusions first, and do not pay much attention to some of the nuances. However, in the latter parts of the section, I examine the nuances, usually in great detail. I end each section by summarizing the main points as well as the nuances. Inevitably, this means reading a section and going back to the beginning and re-reading parts, or even the whole section again. While this may seem a little cumbersome, and an idiosyncratic way of presenting ideas, this structure allows me to concentrate on the philosophy, and not just individual passages from advaitic works. Although the paper is addressed to specialist, I expect at least parts of the paper to be accessible to any dedicated reader. I have organized the paper as follows:

- First, I discuss the concept of avidyā. This has been explained differently by several authors and I hope to clear up some common misunderstandings by examining the philosophical implications of avidyā.
- Next, I discuss the role of reasoning and śruti, and jñāna in advaita. I briefly discuss the two main methods of teaching used by the upaniṣads. I also point out some common pitfalls in the cornerstone of advaitic analysis, the avasthātraya-parīkṣa, i.e., the analysis of the three states.
- Next, I briefly treat the relation between māyā and avidyā, and also the relation of the teachings of later advaitins with Śāṅkarācārya, on this particular topic.
- Finally, I finish with what I see as some recent problematic trends in studying commentaries. In the appendix, I also provide an approach to studying Śāṅkarācārya’s works,

which I think will make the understanding of the Śāṅkarācārya corpus much easier than some other suggested approaches.

The great 10th century logician Jayanta Bhaṭṭa had remarked that originality could not be claimed of any philosophical work, except in the manner of presentation, given the number of acute philosophers who would have looked at the same problems. While that was an expression of modesty on Jayanta Bhaṭṭa's part, it is absolutely true of this paper. This is nothing here other than the ideas presented by the ancient advaitins, clarified especially by Vidyāraṇya and Citsukha, packaged in a modern and also idiosyncratic format.

2 Avidyā

One of the key technical terms used in advaita is avidyā. We encounter statements to the effect that the world is a superimposition on brahman, the superimposition being caused by avidyā. Avidyā is said to be removed by the correct knowledge produced by śruti, with possibly the aid of the triad śravaṇa, manana and nididhyāsana. This liberates the jīva from the cycle of birth and death. The common meaning of avidyā is lack of knowledge or wrong knowledge of something⁵. It is also our common experience that we may sometimes lack true knowledge of something, e.g., a rope could be mistaken for a snake. This mistaken knowledge causes fear. This fear is simply removed by the correct knowledge, i.e., recognizing the object to be a rope and not a snake.

The usage of the word avidyā, how it causes delusion, and its comparison in many advaitic works with the rope being confused for the snake, strongly suggests that the technical term avidyā in advaita refers to something which is subjective. The word avidyā is itself derived from the root vid, to know. In other words, we might infer that avidyā is merely epistemic. But is that really correct? Some authors think that Padmapādācārya actually describes avidyā as something ontic⁶ [3, 4]. And the Pañcapādikā is considered an important text in the advaita tradition and is also quite close to Śāṅkarācārya in chronology. So, could avidyā be ontic and not epistemic?

2.1 Avidyā - Epistemic or Ontic?

It is useful to first define the following words⁷:

- epistemic: of or relating to knowledge or knowing
- epistemology: the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity
- ontic: of, relating to, or having real being
- ontology: 1. a branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature and relations of being, and 2. a particular theory about the nature of being or the kinds of existents

- subjective: 1. characteristic of or belonging to reality as perceived rather than as independent of mind, 2. relating to or being experience or knowledge as conditioned by personal mental characteristics or states
- objective: of, relating to, or being an object, phenomenon, or condition in the realm of sensible experience independent of individual thought and perceptible by all observer; having reality independent of the mind

The above definitions will be referred to later, and are reproduced here for convenient reference. Two scholars in particular, Hacker and Satcidānandendra Sarasavatī Svāmīnaḥ (hence forth referred to as SSS), consider avidyā to be subjective [3, 4, 5]. A number of conclusions of both these scholars, especially on avidyā are astonishingly similar⁸. Here, I shall use mainly the works of SSS⁹.

2.1.1 SSS's Understanding of Avidyā

Here are four quotations on avidyā from books written by SSS:

It is clear that the word Avidyā which, derived as it is from the root Vid - to know, can primarily express only something epistemic.

The above long passage is enough to convince the reader that the author of the Pañcapādikā is eager to show that according to Śāṅkarācārya, Avidyā is an ontological, rather than an epistemic principle, accounting for the false appearance of the empirical world.

In the face of the above unmistakable definitions of both Avidyā and Māyā, the sub-commentaries on Śāṅkara Bhāṣya, have started a procession of the blind led by the blind, in emphatically affirming the identity of both avidyā and māyā, and defining avidyā not as subjective ignorance but as something objective clinging to Atman, and thus distorting his nature by converting the all pure Brahman into a transmigratory soul by enveloping his essential nature.

Avidyā and Māyā are not synonymous terms in Śāṅkara-Vedānta. It is some post-Śāṅkara's Vedāntins who have treated Avidyā and Māyā as identical (see para 21). Nor has Māyā been even treated as a statement of contradictions involved in our experience of the world and in our knowledge of it, as some are tempted to explain it. The word anirvacanīya may have been perhaps responsible for the formulation of such a theory. Avidyā is subjective and has been explained by Śāṅkara as the natural tendency of the mind to superimpose the self and the not-self on each other.

The first and second quotations above are from [5], page 96 and page 94 respectively. The third and fourth quotations can be found in [6] page 43, and [7] page 9 respectively. In the very first quotation, SSS makes his position crystal clear: avidyā is exclusively epistemic. In the second quotation, SSS is criticizing the Pañcapādikās position on avidyā since he thinks the author of

that work interprets avidyā as something ontic. He vociferously opposes practically all advaitic works after Śaṅkarācārya and Sureśvarācārya since, in his perception, these works treat avidyā as something ontic. His sarcastic remark in the third quotation about the “procession of the blind led by the blind” is quite pungent and direct. The fourth quotation also expresses his position on avidyā, and also criticizes equating avidyā and māyā¹⁰.

A number of authors have attempted to criticize or critically evaluate the interpretations of SSS, and there is a whole genre and sub-genre of literature on this topic [8]. In his life time SSS had also arranged for “debates” with other scholars, and some of these have been published. These studies are largely about the interpretation of some passage or the other in Śaṅkarācārya’s bhāṣyas¹¹. However in my opinion, the key question is whether avidyā being epistemic is philosophically tenable or not. Merely throwing out quotations and counter-quotations from various commentaries is pointless. Let us first examine a single passage from the Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya of Śaṅkarācārya and develop on the philosophical theme.

2.1.2 Experiencer and Experienced: Distinct or Non-Distinct?

In the bhāṣya to Brahma-Sūtra 2.1.13, which raises the pūrvapakṣa that if the vedas teach lack of a real distinction between experienced objects and the experiencer, i.e.; भोक्तृ भोग्य विभागः; then the vedas would run counter to the common experience of us all. The pūrvapakṣin comments that this means vedic passages teaching the ultimate unity of the experienced and the experiencer would have to be interpreted figuratively, like the arthavāda passages, e.g., which say “This disciple is fire”¹². Śaṅkarācārya points out that the distinction between the experienced and experiencer is admitted by advaitins also; अस्मत् पक्षेऽपि विभागः; since it is experienced; एवं लोके दृष्टत्वात्. The experiencer and experienced do not get identified with each other in common experience, but in reality both are brahman. This is similar to foam and waves being none other than the sea in reality; समुद्र-तरङ्गादि न्यायेन इति उक्तम्. However, the śruti states that brahman entered its own creation; यद्यपि भोक्ता न ब्रह्मणो विकारः तत् सृष्ट्वा तदेवानुप्राविशत् इति; and thus the bhokṭṛ is not a transformation of brahman, like in the case of foam and waves in the sea. In other words Śaṅkarācārya cautions that the wave-foam analogy can be only carried so far.

An Epistemic Avidyā is Circular Logic: Now let us examine the philosophical implications of the above summary. The ultimate reality, brahman is confounded as both the experienced and the experiencer. Empirically, they are different, and this is indeed our practical experience. But the difference is not actually true, and is superimposed on brahman due to avidyā. The empirical reality and the absolute reality are also denoted by the terms vyavahāra and paramārtha respectively. Now let us consider the definitions given at the beginning of the section. Epistemology relates to one or more means of knowing. Neither knowledge nor means of knowing can exist in a vacuum. Thus any discussion of epistemology has as its fundamental assumption that there is at least one knower/experiencer (i.e., jñāṭṛ/bhokṭṛ). It should be clear that the assumption of existence of a bhokṭṛ is *prior* to any discussion of epistemology.

I will not go into detail about ontology or what it means here. An excellent discussion, with particular reference to nyāya-vaiśeṣikhā, can be found in [9]. However we should remember that a typical discussion of ontology pre-supposes the existence of things/universals apart from the experiencer, i.e., the usual discussion of the universals largely eliminates the experiencer directly

from the picture and re-introduces him into the picture in an indirect way. The uniqueness of the advaitic doctrine is that this division of brahman into subject and object is given only a provisional reality, and not an absolute reality.

Again, this division is superimposed on brahman due to avidyā. *So avidyā is the root cause of the distinctions we make, such as subjective and objective, epistemic and ontic.* Clearly, it is circular logic (cakrāśraya in the terminology of Indian logic) to categorize avidyā as subjective or epistemic, or even as ontic. So, an exclusively epistemic or ontic avidyā is philosophical nonsense. Śaṅkarācārya clearly points out that both subject and object are superimposed on brahman, and at least here it is clear that an epistemic avidyā is untenable. I will look at some other passages in the next section, in which Śaṅkarācārya and others have clearly pointed out that avidyā is not exclusively epistemic or ontic.

2.1.3 Mutual Superimposition of the Real and the Unreal or Superimposition of the Knower-I on the Real: Which is the Fundamental Error?

My claim is that the fundamental error is a superimposition of the Knower-I on the real¹³. First, a passage where Śaṅkarācārya has directly addressed the question on what avidyā is.

A Direct Definition of Avidyā by Śaṅkarācārya: In Upadeśāhasrī, Gadyaprabandha-2.50, the disciple asks the guru a direct question: “What is avidyā?”. The guru replies:

गुरुवाच - त्वं परमात्मानं सन्तं असंसारिणं संसारी अस्मि-इति विपरीतं प्रतिपद्यसे, अकर्तारं सन्तं कर्ता-इति, अभोक्तारं सन्तं भोक्ता-इति, विद्यमानं च अविद्यमानं इति, इयम् अविद्या

The guru replies: You are the supreme self and not subject to transmigration, but you wrongly regard yourself as being subject to transmigration. You are a non-doer, but regard yourself as a doer. You are not an experiencer, but regard yourself as an experiencer. You are existent, but regard yourself as non-existent.

Note that avidyā is not described as the mutual superimposition of the real and the unreal in response to a direct question on what avidyā is from a putative disciple. Avidyā is nothing but the superimposition of a subject (or the Knower-I) on the supreme self. Here, Śaṅkarācārya emphasizes the error in superimposing the Knower-I by describing it in three ways, in terms of the *effects* of superimposing the Knower-I; transmigration, doing, and of course experiencing. He ends by emphasizing that the self is what truly exists, but that ignorance is to conceive it as non-existing.

The Fundamental Error - Gauḍapādas View: A single, but very insightful śloka from the Gauḍapāda Kārikā suffices to understand Gauḍapādas view (verse 2.16):

जीवं कल्पयते पूर्वं ततो भावान् पृथग्विधान् ।
बाह्यानाध्यात्मिकाश्चैव यथाविद्यस्तथा स्मृतिः ॥

First (pūrvam) we imagine (kalpayate) that we are a subject which experiences (jīvam). From that, arises different kinds of knowledge (pṛthak-vidhān). Depending on whether the knowledge is inner or outer, a corresponding memory arises (smṛtiḥ).

It should be noted that the word pūrvam does not denote a series in time, but rather points out that the conceptualization of the jīva, i.e., Knower-I, is the root cause of all delusional thinking. Clearly, time itself is a result of superimposing the jīva on brahman¹⁴.

The Fundamental Error - Śaṅkaras Adhyāsa Bhāṣya: In the introduction to the brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya, popularly known as the adhyāsa bhāṣya, Śaṅkarācārya says that “knower-I” is first superimposed on the inner-self which is the witness of all manifestations, एवम् अहम्-प्रत्ययिनम् अशेष-स्वप्रचार-साक्षिणि प्रत्यगात्मनि अध्यस्य, and by a reverse process the inner self, which is the witness of everything, is superimposed on the inner-organ तं च प्रत्यगात्मानं सर्व-साक्षिणं तद् विपर्ययेण अन्तः-करणाधिषु अध्यस्यति.

This is of course very similar to the passage quoted from the Gauḍapāda kārika previously. Śaṅkarācārya is very clear even here that the fundamental error is superimposition of the Knower-I on brahman, and that indeed is fundamentally avidyā. Avidyā is *not* the mutual superimposition of the real and unreal by the mind. Again, it is just that the fundamental error naturally *leads* to the reverse superimposition of the inner-self on the unreal; mind, senses, etc., since a superimposition of a Knower-I on the self naturally leads to the imagination of objects “outside” and “inside” the jīva, just as described by Gauḍapādācārya. The usage of the continuative “adhyasya” in the above passage also clearly indicates that the superimposition of the Knower-I is primarily avidyā, and is logically prior to the reverse superimposition.

The Fundamental Error - Sureśvarācāryas Naiṣkarmya Siddhi Sureśvarācārya says in the sambandhokti to Naiṣkarmyasiddhi 2.27 that A seen object without a seer is not admissible; दृश्यत्वं न हि अद्रष्टृकं इष्यते. In this context note that the seer is the inner-most self and the seen is the ego itself (see Naiṣkarmyasiddhi 2.24-2.26). And the ego-sense is indeed the fundamental problem. Sureśvarācārya continues in sambandhokti 2.30 that when the limiting factor “I” is removed, nothing in the class of duality remains *since it (the ego-sense) is the root cause of the relationship with duality*; अहं परिच्छेद व्यावृत्तौ न किञ्चिद् अव्यावृत्तं द्वैत-जातं अवशिष्यते द्वितीय संबन्धस्य तद् मूलत्वात्. And, of course this ego-sense is superimposed on the self due to avidyā. The mūlatva of the ego-sense is also made clear in Naiṣkarmyasiddhi 2.53, 2.63.

The Self is Devoid of mind, etc.: Śaṅkarācārya points out that Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad says that the self is devoid of the mind and pure, which clearly means that they are also superimposed on the self¹⁵. We may also quote Sureśvarācārya who says that the person who does not know the real nature of ātman misunderstands it as possessing properties such as intellect, etc., अविदोत्थ-बुद्धादि-गुण-भूतात्म-वित्¹⁶. Now the error in calling avidyā as something epistemic should be obvious. The following extract, from the fourth quote above, is clearly putting the philosophical cart before the horse:

Avidyā is subjective and has been explained by Śaṅkara as the natural tendency of the mind to superimpose the self and the not-self on each other.

When the conception of *jīva* itself is due to *avidyā*, how can *avidyā* be the “natural tendency of the mind to superimpose the self and not-self”? The conception of *jīva*, i.e., the “individual soul”, is *prior* to that of the mind, since the mind is predicated of a *jīva*. In any case, where did the mind spring up from to confuse the self and not-self? Is not the mind itself in the “not-self” category¹⁷?

In What Sense can *Avidyā* be Called Mutual Superimposition of the Real and Unreal? However, it is not completely incorrect to say that *avidyā* is the mutual superimposition of the real and unreal. Śāṅkarācārya and Sureśvarācārya do mention this, e.g., देह-आत्मनोः इतरेतर-अध्यारोपणा in the prose section of *Upadeśāhasrī* 2.62. This is because the superimposition of the Knower-I on the inner-self naturally leads to the reverse process of superimposing the inner-self on *antaḥkaraṇa*, etc. But note the important fact that the reverse superimposition is that of the self onto the ego-mind-body complex. Nowhere do we find statements that *avidyā* is the mutual superimposition of the real and unreal *by* the mind. The *itaretara* refers to the self and ego-sense, and the ego-sense in some contexts includes the mind-body complex. There is a huge philosophical difference between saying that *avidyā* is the mutual superimposition of the real and unreal by the mind, and saying that *avidyā* is the mutual superimposition of the real and the unreal, where the unreal refers to the ego-mind-body complex. The latter, philosophically tenable position, can be paraphrased as “*avidyā* is the mutual superimposition of the real and the mind”. Finally, I would like to mention that the logical “series” of superimposition and reverse superimposition described by Gauḍapādācārya has also been identified and used by another modern author, although in a different context [11].

2.1.4 Summary of Discussion on *Avidyā*

- An epistemic *avidyā* is circular logic. The mind, etc., are products of *avidyā*, and this has been explicitly pointed out by Śāṅkarācārya. So *avidyā* is not the mutual superimposition of the real and unreal by the mind.
- Claiming that *avidyā* is *anādi* cannot solve the circular logic problem. When it is understood that the divisions into subjective and objective are due to *avidyā*, it is clear that *avidyā*, is indeed *anādi*, since time itself results from this superimposition. The *anādi*, of course, refers to the fact that *avidyā* is logically prior to time. However, calling *avidyā* as the mutual superimposition of the real and unreal by the mind, and calling it *anādi*, makes the mind also *anādi*!
- Śāṅkarācārya has directly defined *avidyā* as the superimposition of the Knower-I/ego-sense on the supreme-self.
- *Avidyā* may be called the mutual superimposition of the real and unreal in only a loose sense as explained in the previous section. In most places, Śāṅkarācārya is careful to point out that the superimposition of the Knower-I on the real precedes the reverse superimposition of the self on the unreal.

SSS has certainly noticed the passages where Śāṅkarācārya clearly mentions that the superimposition of the ego is the fundamental error. For example, SSS writes that the notions of *pramāṭṛ*,

pramāṇa and prameya are all due to avidyā quite explicitly in some works, e.g., [12] (pp. 80). However, he does not seem to realize the philosophical implications of his own statement, since in the same breath he also says that avidyā is due to a “mental superimposition of the real and unreal”¹⁸.

Note again that it is not “naisargika”, or natural, for the *mind* to superimpose the real and unreal. Instead it is natural that the ego (including the mind) is superimposed on the self, and a reverse superimposition logically follows. This is made clear by Śaṅkarācārya in his adhyāsa bhāṣya, quoted in part previously¹⁹. SSS misunderstands this superimposition and reverse superimposition as being performed *by* the mind. SSS’s confused understanding of avidyā has rather serious consequences, resulting in his confused understanding the role of śruti in facilitating knowledge, and an illogical examination of three states. I shall examine these problems in subsequent sections.

2.2 Can Advaitic Liberation be Labeled “Soterio-Ontology”?

Wilhelm Halbfass, a very perceptive philosopher and Sanskritist, has called Śaṅkarācārya’s exposition of mokṣa a “peculiar theory of soterio-ontology” [9]. It is a very attractive designation of the fact that the jñāni becomes sarvātman. While it is true that from the standpoint of vyavahāra that brahman is sarvātman, and so brahman seems to stand for something ontic, such a statement cannot be applied from the stand point of pāramārtha. Sarvātman indicates that there is a multitude (sarva) and this is true from the standpoint of vyavahāra only.

Even from the standpoint of vyavahāra, brahman is the innermost self, and hence brahman is not completely unknown. Brahman is present in the “I”, but with the dross of the intellect and mind superimposed on it. It is only the true nature of the inner-most self that remains unknown. So, either way brahman is something neither epistemic nor ontic. Thus, advaitic liberation cannot be designated by the term “soterio-ontology”, which implies that the individual soul attains an ontic characteristic after attaining mukti. Again, the error is that avidyā has been interpreted as something epistemic.

2.3 Why has Avidyā been Wrongly Labeled Epistemic?

If avidyā is not epistemic, why has avidyā been wrongly identified as being epistemic? I submit that it is because the word avidyā has been analyzed in Śaṅkarācārya’s works by looking at only the few adjacent passages, and not paying attention to the philosophy. Many times Śaṅkarācārya and Sureśvarācārya compare the avidyā due to which we superimpose false limiting adjuncts on brahman to truly epistemic errors. A few such examples are: superimposition of snake on a rope, illusion of movement of trees due to movement of a boat, and attributing blueness to the sky.

It is important to understand that avidyā is not epistemic, although the examples given above are indeed epistemic. The question then is “Why have such examples been given?”. The reason is that both common place epistemic errors and avidyā share a common feature, namely they are sublated by correct knowledge. Brahma-jñāna, which sublates avidyā, also differs from the empirical knowledge which sublates epistemic errors. But from the soteriological point

of view, which is most important for Śaṅkarācārya, both common place epistemic errors and avidyā *operate in a similar fashion*. Śaṅkarācārya makes this clear in the prose section of the Upadeśāhasrī, 2.103:

उच्यते - प्रमायाः नित्यत्वे अनित्यत्वे च रूपविशेष-अभवात् । अवगतिर्हि प्रमा । तस्याः स्मृति-इच्छादि-पूर्विकायाः अनित्यायाः कूटस्थ-नित्याया वा न स्वरूपविशेषः विद्यते । यथा धात्वर्थस्य तिष्ठत्यादेः फलस्य गतयादिपूर्वकस्य अनित्यस्य अपूर्वस्य नित्यस्य वा रूपविशेषः नास्ति इति तुल्यो व्यपदेशो दृष्टः - तिष्ठन्ति मनुष्याः, तिष्ठन्ति पर्वताः इत्यादि, तथा नित्य-अवगति-स्वरूपेऽपि प्रमातरि प्रमातृत्व-व्यपदेशो न विरुध्यते, फलसामान्यात्-इति ।

Valid knowledge, whether permanent or impermanent, do not differ in essential characteristic. A valid knowledge is one which delivers certainty. Among such valid knowledge, the one preceded by memory and desire which is impermanent, and the unchanging knowledge (of the self), a difference in essential characteristic is not known. This is because of the essential similarity (of both). In (descriptions such as) standing, the ones which occur before roots indicating going away, etc., and thus impermanent and the standing not preceding any other root and thus permanent, there is no essential difference, and the same information is understood. As examples: men stand and mountains stand. *In the same way, although the knower has the characteristic of unchanging knowledge, designating him as a knower (as in the empirical sense) is not a contradiction, since both kinds of knowledge (permanent and impermanent) produce results in a similar manner.*

I'll reiterate the fundamental point: correct knowledge, be it “anitya” such as sublation of a false snake on the rope, or “nitya” which is the realization of brahman, operate the same way. There is also a more subtle point conveyed here, and it is that knowledge alone can produce mukti, jñāndeva tu kaivalyam. Activity can proceed only from ignorance and thus cannot lead to realization. The correct knowledge arises from the valid śruti pramāṇa only and I shall discuss this later. Note also that the difference between common knowledge and brahma jñāna is admitted, but downplayed. Thus there is also a difference between avidyā and common place epistemic errors. It has to be so, because as I demonstrated in the previous section, the fundamental error is the superimposition of a “knower” on brahman, whereas epistemic errors presuppose the existence of a “knower”.

Summing up, Śaṅkarācārya usually does not explicitly distinguish between avidyā and common place epistemic errors because his primary concern is soteriological. Thus, he also usually distinguishes between only vyavahāra and paramārtha in his writings. But as Eliot Deutsch very insightfully points out [14], three levels of reality are implicit in Śaṅkarācārya's writings. The “third” level of reality is the so-called prātibhāsika, which refers to unreal objects sublated in vyavahārika itself, such as the false snake, etc. Quite clearly some people must have been confused about avidyā, even very early, and must have made errors similar to SSS in interpreting avidyā. So the difference between epistemic errors and avidyā is explicitly stated by later advaitins like Vidyāraṇya, for greater clarity²⁰.

But, I will hasten to point out that for Śaṅkarācārya it is also pointless to dwell on the differences between vyavahārika and prātibhāsika. As an illustration of this tendency of Śaṅkarācārya, consider the case of mistaken knowledge in imposing blueness on the sky. When the discussion

concerns the falsity of blueness, it is needless and pointless to talk about the various shades of blue which could be superimposed on the sky. The different shades of blue are certainly perceived and are different. But their similarity is that all of them are equally unreal. The situation is similar with vyavahārika, and prātibhāsika, and Śaṅkarācārya is rarely concerned with anything other than the jñāna, which liberates “here and now”.

2.4 Final Summary of Avidyā

Avidyā is not epistemic, neither is it ontic. An exclusively epistemic or ontic avidyā is circular logic. Śaṅkarācārya makes clear the fundamental nature of avidyā clear, it is the superimposition of the ego-sense on the self. However, an alternative way of understanding is that avidyā is *both* epistemic and ontic²¹. It seems to me that the two descriptions are equivalent.

Note that avidyā is known only through its effects. It has no stability, and does not stand up to enquiry. In this sense, avidyā is indeed both epistemic and ontic, since the effect of avidyā is the perceived schism between the observer and observed. To give a modern analogy, light is neither a wave nor a particle. But it does exhibit characteristics of both, so it could be called both a wave and a particle in that sense. The reason I prefer thinking of avidyā as neither epistemic nor ontic, is that it explains the description of it as bhāva-rūpā by later advaitins, in a straightforward manner.

3 Key to Understanding Advaita - Tarka vs Śruti

3.1 The Experiencer-Experienced Schism: A Fundamental Assumption in Attempts to Understand the World:

Sometimes we take certain assumptions as obvious truths or facts, and fail to realize that they are actually mere premises in building a picture of the world. The outstanding aspect of Śaṅkarācārya is that he points these out in crystal clear language, and this distinguishes him from practically most other philosophers. Nowhere is this more evident than when Śaṅkarācārya points out the importance of śruti pramāṇa.

The importance of śruti is philosophically linked to an assumption which is so ingrained in the normal thought process that it is easily overlooked. This is the fact that when we try to make sense of the world, we unconsciously remove ourselves from the picture, i.e., analysis of the observed in the absence of the observer. This is certainly convenient and is actually helpful in practical life. For example, I know that my office building would still be at the same place (in the absence of any disaster), even after I go home and the building is completely out of sight. It makes for a convenient division between ontology and epistemology. But that this is only an assumption is very clearly expressed by Erwin Schrodinger²² as (emphasis mine) [15]:

We shall submit and discuss two such features, namely the *assumption* that the world can be understood, and the simplifying provisional device of excluding the person of the ‘understander’ (the subject of cognizance) from the rational world picture that is to be constructed. ... *The second, the exclusion of the subject, has become an*

ingrained habit of the old. It became inherent in any attempt to form a picture of the objective world such as the Ionians made. So little was one aware of the fact that this exclusion was a special device that one tried to trace the subject within the material world picture in the form of a soul, whether a material one made of fine, volatile and mobile matter or a ghost like substance that interacts with matter.

It is worth repeating the subtle point: *the removal of the subject to form a picture of the objective world is only an assumption.* Whether this assumption can lead to incorrect results cannot be determined by forming a system which accepts this assumption a-priori. The point is whether the assumption can be made at all, to understand the world. If so, what is the basis for the assumption? By the same token, if we assume that the removal of subject is *not* allowed in the analysis of the observed, this premise also needs justification, especially when the opposing premise leads to empirically satisfying results. This is where śruti plays a key role. I'll discuss this point in detail in the following sections. However, I will emphasize here that I am not saying that objects are nothing but perception of them, or adopting some kind of idealist position²³. The division into experiencer and experienced is both useful and true from the empirical point of view. But according to Śaṅkarācārya, both subjectiveness and objectiveness are falsely superimposed on brahman. This only means that idea of *both* subject and object are negated in paramārtha, and it does not mean that objects are identical with perceptions in vyavahāra.

3.2 When is the Content of Knowledge Real?

Now, I'll take a single important section on knowledge from the Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya and discuss it in some detail. In the bhāṣya to Brahma-Sūtra 2.1.11, Śaṅkarācārya says that when we talk of having knowledge of something, the content of the knowledge is real if it remains the same forever. What this means is that if we mistake a rope for a snake, there is a wrong knowledge that the rope is a snake, and the wrong knowledge is sublated by recognizing the object to be actually a rope. Thus, the “knowledge” of the snake on the rope is not real, being subject to change. As an example of correct knowledge from common experience, Śaṅkarācārya points out that fire is always perceived as hot, and cannot be contradicted by anyone; लोके तद्विषयम् ज्ञानम् सम्यग्ज्ञानम् इत्युच्यते - यथा अग्निः-उष्णः इति.

We can certainly get sensory knowledge which is constant, of objects that we can directly perceive through the senses, such as heat from fire. But, it is natural to try to understand the world, and the relationship between the world and the self. Since we cannot perceive everything with our senses directly, the desire for understanding the world through our imperfect sensory knowledge invariably leads to certain assumptions. Sometimes we think that these assumptions are actually incontrovertible facts, because these assumptions are so ingrained in our thought process. As mentioned previously, frequently overlooked assumptions are analyzing the world in the absence of the observer, and analyzing the effects without actively considering the cause. There are also typically the *assumptions* of the existence of space and time as absolutes, since we seem to experience them, and they have a tangible reality in empirical dealings²⁴. In some philosophies, the existence of these “unquestioned” categories is explicitly stated, e.g., in the case of the nyāya vaiśeṣika. But worse still, many philosophers do not even realize the fundamental assumptions they have made, and pass them off as obvious facts which cannot be challenged²⁵.

3.3 The Uniqueness of Śruti Generated Knowledge

Śruti cannot be challenged by mere human reasoning: We may note here in passing that categories are typically enumerated using a combination of perception, and what are empirically useful. It is more important for the purpose of this paper to realize that the labeling of certain things as fundamental categories is open to debate. E.g., the sāṅkhya philosophers accept the existence of pradhāna, while others do not. Even if it were possible to assemble all the logicians of the past, present and future, they would come to no agreement; न च शक्यन्ते अतीत-अनागत-वर्तमानास्-तार्किकाः एकस्मिन्देशे काले च समार्हतुं, येन तन्मतिः एकरूपैक-अर्थविषया सम्यग्-मतिः, इति-स्यात्. However, śruti being eternal and not dependent on the reasoning power of any individual, can alone serve as the source of knowledge of brahman. The constant knowledge obtained from śruti cannot be contradicted by any logicians, in the past, present, or in the future; तज्जनितस्य ज्ञानस्य सम्यक्त्वं अतीत-अनागत-वर्तमानैः सर्वैरपि तार्किकैः अपह्नोतुं अशक्यं, अतः सिद्धमस्यैव-उपनिषदस्य ज्ञानस्य सम्यग्ज्ञानत्वम्. Hence by the veda and logic approved by the veda, brahman is established as the material and efficient cause of the world; अथ आगमवशेन आगम-अनुसारित-तर्क-वशेन च चेतनं ब्रह्म जगतः कारणं प्रकृतिः च - इति स्थितम्. By mere logic śruti cannot be challenged, since the human imagination is vast and independent reasoning will lead to different premises for the logical system. Hence, reasoning without the veda, and based on the independent thinking of persons is inconclusive; इतः च न-आगमगम्ये अर्थे केवलेन तर्केण प्रत्यवस्थातव्यं, यस्मात् निरागमाः पुरुष-उत्प्रेक्षा-मात्र-निबन्धनाः तर्काः अप्रतिष्ठिता भवन्ति.

When can a pramāṇa be discarded as a means of knowledge? When can śruti be disregarded as a means of knowledge? Sureśvarācārya concisely points out in the sambandhokti to Naiṣkarmyasiddhi 3.35 the situations where śruti can be disregarded as a means of knowledge. He then points out that the veda is the only valid means of knowing brahman, because it does not satisfy any of the reasons for discarding it, as far as brahman-knowledge is concerned. The reasons are:

1. it reveals something already revealed by another pramāṇa; प्रमाणस्य प्रमाणान्तर-प्रतिपन्न-प्रतिपादनम्. This is not the case since it teaches the nature of brahman, which is beyond the reach of other pramāṇas.
2. it reveals something contradictory to known truths from other means of knowledge; विपरीत-प्रतिपादनम्. It is not contradictory since the knowledge obtained via the other means of knowledge are restricted to the domain of the senses. This cannot contradict śruti which reveals the nature of that which is beyond the senses, namely the inner-self.
3. it reveals only a doubt; संशयित-प्रतिपादनम्. The śruti emphatically affirms the identity of the “individual” self with the “supreme” self, as in अहम् ब्रह्मास्मि, तदेवानुप्राविशत्, etc.
4. it reveals nothing; न प्रतिपादनम्. No comment is required here.

A pramāṇa reveals, and does not create anything new: Now, Sureśvarācārya points out in Naiṣkarmyasiddhi 1.35 that the very talk of jñāna and its attainment presuppose the existence of avidyā, since attaining jñāna depends on teacher, śruti, subject matter to be taught, etc. These being in the realm of avidyā, ātma jñāna is dependent on avidyā; न अनु आत्मज्ञानं अपि अविद्या उपादानम्. So we may suppose that advaitic soteriology suffers from the defect of circular

reasoning. But this is no defect; नैष दोषः. This is because ātma jñāna is dependent on the the self-established and ultimately real self and destroys ignorance and the myriad actions and the effects of those, and is dependent on śāstra, etc., only for *arising* in the self, but not for the destruction of ignorance; यत आत्मज्ञानम् हि स्वतस्मिद्-परमार्थ-आत्म-स्वरूप-मात्र-आश्रयाद् एव. अविद्या तद् उत्पन्न-कारक-ग्राम-प्रध्वंसि स्वात्मा-उत्पत्तौ एव शास्त्रादि अपेक्षते, नोत्पन्नं अविद्या निवृत्तौ. In the other words, the actual destruction of ignorance is due to the self itself. The purpose of a means of knowledge is to reveal, and not create anything new.

3.4 Can Śruti Alone Reveal the Self, and What is the Role of Tarka?

The uniqueness of śruti in relation to self-knowledge, and how it functions, should be clear from the previous section. Many other passages asserting that śruti alone can reveal the self can be found in the works of Śāṅkarācārya and Sureśvarācārya. So the question arises about the role of reasoning or tarka, and anubhava. Can reasoning help at all? Yes it can, but with some qualifications, and it has some limitations. I have deliberately resisted translating anubhava, and we will see very soon what this means.

Brahma-jijñāsā is different from dharma-jijñāsā: In matters such as attaining heaven, exegesis of śruti alone is the means of knowledge. The exegetical techniques are śruti, liṅga, vākya, prakaraṇa, sthāna, and samākhyā²⁶. For example, exegesis of sentences such as स्वर्गकामो ज्योतिष्टोमेन यजेत, one wishing heaven should perform the jyotiṣṭoma sacrifice. However, since the self is an existing entity, some other techniques of examining śruti can be useful to a certain extent. Thus Śāṅkarācārya says in the bhāṣya to brahma-sūtra 1.1.2:

न धर्म-जिज्ञासायां इव श्रुत्यादयः एव प्रमाणं ब्रह्मजिज्ञासायाम् । किन्तु, श्रुत्यादयः-अनुभवादयश्च यथासम्भवं इह प्रमाणम्, अनुभव-अवसानत्वात् भूतवस्तु-विषयत्वात् च, ब्रह्मज्ञानस्य ।

This is a difficult passage, and needs careful consideration. An important word in the passage is pramāṇa. Here pramāṇa does not refer to the accepted independent means of knowing such as pratyakṣa, anumāna, and śruti (veda). Rather, it refers to the means of knowing, i.e., interpreting the śruti (vedas) mentioned before - śruti, liṅga, etc. This is clear only in the context of the entire commentary to the second brahma-sūtra, namely janmādyasya yataḥ. First, the opponent says that the sūtra presents an inference for the existence of God. Clearly the opponent is a logician, who uses inference to establish the existence of God. Śāṅkarācārya replies that the sūtras are meant only for stringing together the flowers of the upaniṣad, and that reasoning not opposed to the upaniṣads can aid only in reinforcing the statements of the upaniṣads. The context is the statements of the upaniṣads. So, śrutyādayaḥ refers to the exegetical techniques of interpreting śruti, and not the actual śruti or veda itself, which is a pramāṇa in a different sense, and this is accepted by SSS also²⁷.

The other important word is anubhava, which occurs twice in this small passage. Note that the first time the word anubhava occurs, it is said to aid brahma-jijñāsa. Jijñāsā means the desire to know, being derived from the desiderative of the root jñā (to know). So anubhava cannot mean direct brahman-knowledge, for the simple reason if direct brahman-knowledge were already present, there would be no reason for any enquiry. Svāmī Gambhīrānanda translates it as

“personal experience”, which is a little ambiguous [18]. However, SSS is more explicit. According to SSS, anubhava is the essentially the experience of the three states²⁸. SSS also frequently uses “intuit” as a translation of anubhava, since for him the deep-sleep state directly affirms the identity of the individual and supreme selves. Let us accept the definition of anubhava by SSS as the avasthātraya for now, although I have a detailed critique of that interpretation later. I’ll just point out for now that my later comments on anubhava will not affect the discussion here. But is the second time Śaṅkarācārya uses anubhava actually referring to brahman-realization, since it occurs in the context of brahmajñāna? The word avasāna means end or cessation. So, both Svāmī Gambhīrānanda and SSS interpret anubhava-avasānam as anubhave avasānam, or (brahman-knowledge) ending in direct-experience. For example SSS translates [6]:

In the enquiry into the nature of brahman, it is not merely the śrutis, etc., alone that are valid means of knowledge, as is the case in the enquiry into the nature of dharma (religious duty), but also śrutis, etc., and direct intuition and the like are here the valid means according to the applicability of these. For knowledge of brahman has to culminate in intuition, and relates to an existent entity.

I’ll comment on the second use of anubhava later. For now, the key point is that after asserting that reasoning unopposed to the upaniṣads can aid only in reinforcing the statements of the upaniṣads, Śaṅkarācārya goes on to make the above statement that brahman-knowledge is about an existent entity, and that anubhavādayaḥ can also help, unlike knowledge of dharma. Now, the whole context was about reasoning, and what kind of reasoning is useful, and it seems curious that Śaṅkarācārya is suddenly talking about anubhavādayaḥ. However, Śaṅkarācārya is crystal clear that reasoning can only serve to reinforce what śruti reveals.

SSS, on the other hand, downplays the importance of śruti, using this passage of Śaṅkarācārya. First, consider the following passage of SSS in [12] pp. 14, in the chapter titled “Śāstra the One Means of Self Knowledge”, and referring to the above quotation from Śaṅkarācārya:

Now in regard to this matter, Śaṅkara is found to accept the individual view-point of the school with whom he happens discuss for the time being, and generally speaking he is seen to adopt the view of the Mīmāṃsakās in particular when he has to deal with the Vedic teaching from the empirical stand point. But in considering the validity of the Vedas with regard to Ātman, he has put forward a unique principle of interpretation which deserves to be specially kept in view. Express statements and other textual aids (such as indicatory expression, syntactical relation and so on) are not the only means of valid self-knowledge in the case of enquiry into the nature of Brahman as they are in the case of enquiry into religious duty . . .

Note especially the fact that this statement comes in a chapter entitled ‘Śāstra the One Means of Self Knowledge’. Indeed, SSS is downplaying the importance of śruti as a means of knowledge by itself, although in an almost imperceptible way, in the very chapter asserting the supremacy of the śruti. This is because he says that śruti is to be interpreted on the basis of anubhava, and that means śruti becomes subsidiary to anubhava itself. SSS is more explicit in another publication, referring to the same passage of Śaṅkarācārya says [19], pp. 50:

While by means of empirical *pramāṇas*, certain objects or phenomena which are *prameya* alone (i.e. perceptible to either our senses or conceivable by our mind) may be cognized, but by means of this *anubhava* which is the kingpin of all *pramāṇas*, the whole consummate reality behind this universe can be determined.

The reference to ultimate reality in the above quote clearly shows that SSS thought *brahma-jñāna* can be obtained from *anubhava* directly, and he actually calls *anubhava* as the kingpin of all *pramāṇas*. Further, he contrasts it with empirical *pramāṇas*. The shift is subtle, and almost unnoticeable. Originally, SSS agrees with Śāṅkarācārya that *anubhava* can help in interpreting the *veda*, and so it is not a *pramāṇa* in the sense of *pratyakṣa* and *anumana*. Now he is talking as if *anubhava* is an independent *pramāṇa* like these two empirical *pramāṇas*, and in fact even superior to them.

Clearly this is unreasonable, and quite against what Śāṅkarācārya says, and what SSS himself had accepted (see SSS’s translation quoted in foot-note 27). First of all, note that Śāṅkarācārya is not disagreeing that *brahman*-knowledge can also be obtained exactly the same way as *dharma*, namely *śrutyādayaḥ*, i.e. direct statement, syntactical connection, etc. It is only that *anubhavādayaḥ* can *also* be useful in *brahma-jijñāsa*. In any case, if *anubhavādayaḥ* can also achieve the exact same objective as *śrutyādayaḥ*, does that not make the latter superfluous? Is Śāṅkarācārya actually downplaying the importance of *śrutyādayaḥ*, a key technique in the *mīmāṃsā* as SSS implies²⁹?

The point is actually much more subtle than we might think, and I will demonstrate the subtlety in Śāṅkarācārya’s position. But, note again that according to Śāṅkarācārya *anubhavādayaḥ* are also useful, because *brahman*-knowledge is about an existent entity. Secondly note again that Śāṅkarācārya is not saying *anubhava* is a *pramāṇa* in the way *pratyakṣa*, *anumāna*, and *śruti* are means of knowing. Śāṅkarācārya is merely saying that *anubhava* is useful in the exegesis of *śruti*, just like the other exegetical techniques mentioned before. So it is clear that *anubhava* does not act by itself as an independent *pramāṇa* as SSS implies. Finally, note the use of the word *anubhavādayaḥ*. Since *anubhava* is a part of various things which are useful, we cannot grant *anubhava* a “kingpin” status based on this remark of Śāṅkarācārya.

A twist in the “brahman-knowledge is about an existent entity” tale: In a somewhat surprising twist, Śāṅkarācārya states *exactly* the same argument given above (regarding knowledge of *dharma* versus the self), in the *bhāṣya* to *brahma-sūtra* 2.1.4. However, here it is from the mouth of the *pūrvapakṣin*, who uses this argument to show that reasoning can be used to show that *brahman* is *not* the cause of the insentient universe! The statements of Śāṅkarācārya in 1.1.2 (quoted above) and that of the *pūrvapakṣin* in 2.1.4 are so similar, that even a great writer such as T. M. P. Mahadevan mistakes the *pūrvapakṣin* view as that of Śāṅkarācārya himself³⁰. Śāṅkarācārya then strongly refutes this argument in 2.1.11 (quoted in the subsection entitled “The uniqueness of *śruti* generated knowledge”). He asserts the primacy of *śruti* in all matters regarding *brahman*. At first glance, it may seem a little surprising that Śāṅkarācārya seems to be refuting what he himself stated in 1.1.2. We may also think that the argument is refuted in 2.1.11 only because the question is whether *brahman* is the material cause of universe or not. But in 2.1.4 he is arguing with a logician just as in 1.1.2, and not a *mīmāṃsakā*, and the logicians consider *śruti* as subsidiary to logic anyway. So it is quite curious what Śāṅkarācārya is trying to achieve here by asserting the primacy of *śruti* to a logician. We will soon resolve

this apparent conflict, but at this point we should carefully digest Śāṅkarācārya's statements and realize that his position is much more subtle than SSS makes it out to be.

What is the role of anubhava? We can see that SSS is fond of claiming that Śāṅkarācārya “interprets the veda to be consistent with anubhava”. Note that anubhava is direct and experienced. But does it act by itself in regards to brahman-knowledge? The answer is no, because all of us experience the three-states, and do not gain brahman-knowledge out of this mere anubhava. Anubhava needs a tarka to go along with it. This is also clear from the fact that if we need to interpret śruti on the basis of anubhava, we have to analyze both, especially anubhava, since it comprises of (at least) three quite different epistemological states - waking, dream and deep-sleep. Examining anubhava (as defined by SSS), is of course the cornerstone of advaitic analysis - namely avasthātraya-parīkṣa. SSS also admits this, and says [19] pp. 53, “In the same way, for this kingpin among pramāṇas, viz. Anubhava, a kind of tarka is needed”. He then goes on to add that this tarka is not kevala or śuṣka tarka, and adds that “for this unique tarka all universal anubhavas or experiences (intuitive experiences) themselves are the support.”

Now let us ask the question where the tarka required for examining anubhava comes from. A tarka comprises of premises and certain fundamental axioms or assumptions. In normal life, assumptions for a system of logic are accepted as reasonable as long as they generate useful results. However, in the case of philosophical enquiry, especially when exegesis of scripture is involved, these assumptions needs justification. For us, this justification itself should not be dependent on any inference. Otherwise it will suffer from the defect of infinite regress. So we are left with either direct-experience or śruti. Premises for a logical system of examining anubhava cannot arise from direct-experience, premises not being sensory in nature. Also, if the premises themselves were a part and parcel of anubhava, there would be no need to admit that a separate tarka is required to examine anubhava. So, Śāṅkarācārya asserts that the tarka to be used should be sanctioned by śruti. It is not that SSS has not realized this, he does point out that this special tarka which is not suṣka is śrutyānuṅghīta, i.e., validated by śruti. But, again he does not realize the philosophical implications, for he claims that for this tarka “all universal anubhavas or experiences are the support”. The support for this tarka is actually śruti itself. Surely the tarka *uses* anubhava, but the support for the tarka cannot come from anubhava itself.

The very fact that anubhava should be analyzed by śrutyānuṅghīta tarka in the context of brahman-knowledge implies that it can also be analyzed in other ways. Also śruti itself implicitly guarantees the usefulness of other types of tarka, since since it points out rites and meditations leading to results like heaven, etc. What I mean here is that the notions of heaven, etc., implicitly assume the existence and reality of categories such as space and time. SSS is wrong when he says that [12] pp. 23, “It is true that other schools of thought likewise claim to base their arguments on experience; but that so called experience does not cover the whole ground of life.” But clearly, the nyāya, as well as the other schools, and also the modern scientists, also analyze the three states, and it is nothing other than intellectual arrogance to assert that the logicians have not analyzed the three states. The difference is that they do not use śruti validated tarka.

But, what is the speciality of this particular śruti validated tarka? It is simply that only śruti validated tarka is useful in the context of brahma-jijñāsa. As I mentioned before, the śruti validated tarka does not make the assumption of separating the observer from observed, or the cause and effect. The temptation to separate the two is certainly great, since this leads to

empirically satisfactory results, e.g., all kinds of science, and even the results of the karma-kāṇḍa. Again, it is just that these types of logic are not useful in the final analysis of brahman. *By the same token, this śruti validated tarka is useful only in the context of brahman knowledge, since it seeks to obliterate the ultimate differences between knower and known, and quite useless in context of empirical sciences.* Both types of logic have their own distinct spheres of supremacy.

So, if the tarka required to examine anubhava is itself completely dependent on śruti, then by no means is anubhava the “kingpin” of pramāṇas. Further, claiming that śruti is interpreted to be consistent with anubhava, is also putting the logical cart before the horse, since the examination of anubhava requires the śruti in the first place. So it is quite incorrect to say that Śaṅkarācārya “interprets the veda to be consistent with anubhava”. In fact, the same claim can be made by other schools such as viśiṣṭādvaita about their own methodology also. It is actually that Śaṅkarācārya interprets anubhava to be consistent with the veda. There is a profound philosophical difference between this viewpoint of Śaṅkarācārya and claiming that Śaṅkarācārya “interprets the veda to be consistent with anubhava”. Śaṅkarācārya only shows that if we use the right type of logic, anubhava is not inconsistent with the claims of the śruti.

Anubhavāṅga-tarka or Śrutyānuḡṛhīta tarka? SSS constantly calls the useful logic as “the logic based on anubhava”, which he terms as anubhavāṅga-tarka. The logical fallacy inherent in this characterization should be obvious from the prior discussion. Śaṅkarācārya also never uses the phrase anubhavāṅga-tarka in the Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya, but by phrases such as śrutyānuḡṛhīta, āgama-anusārita, or some such variant [20, 21]. This is important, because it shows śruti is essential in any case. Again, avasthātraya or anubhava is directly experienced, and not to be questioned. However, avasthātraya-parīkṣa is dependent on liṅga, and the framework for this parīkṣa needs justification. Śrutyānuḡṛhīta points out that the logic is dependent on śruti, whereas anubhavāṅga implies that the logic is self-evident from experience, and cannot be questioned³¹. This is clearly missed by SSS as he states [6], pp. 40 “Āgama is the sole pramāṇa and reason based on intuition, is the only reason that can be employed to ascertain the nature of reality as such.” How can veda be the sole means, if the reasoning *based on “intuition”* can also be used? If reasoning is indeed based on intuition, then it does not require śruti. Śruti can at most confirm what anubhava, and the logic prove. This glaring inconsistency is not noticed by SSS.

Another serious error made by many people, especially those who follow schools of thought such as the viśiṣṭādvaita, is claiming that in advaita, śruti is a superior pramāṇa compared to perception. This, they think, is why Śaṅkarācārya declares non-duality to be true over the evidence of the senses. But this is horribly wrong, Śaṅkarācārya himself asserts that hundreds of śruti statements cannot make fire cold. Anubhava, such as the burning effect of fire, is direct, and doesn’t require any reasoning. But, we are not completely material, and we do not just go about our lives experiencing things without any desire to know the truth. We desire to know the truth, and so we have to examine the range of anubhava, and the examination of disparate experiences such as waking, dreaming, deep sleep require a logic. This logic can only be śruti validated, which does not assume any categories, implicitly or explicitly.

Indeed, works critical of advaita such as the Śatadūṣaṇi make the mistake of assuming the existence of categories such as space and time, though unstated, as the author himself doesn’t seem aware of his assumptions³². As Śaṅkarācārya says, if we can assume some number of

categories, what is the rule that it should not be more? And who is to decide what these categories are? The bottom line is that only śruti validated logic should be used in the context of brahman-knowledge, although other kinds of logic can lead to empirically satisfying results.

Brahma-jñāna is different from karmopāśana-phala We saw that the correct examination of anubhava in the context of brahman-knowledge requires śruti. But can this examination lead to the same result as statements from the śruti itself? If that is true, śruti is still somewhat superfluous, since someone could stumble on this methodology of examining anubhava by himself. But that is not correct, and a more careful examination of Śaṅkarācārya’s statements will reveal that. We saw that dharma-jijñāsā is different from brahma-jijñāsā in that anubhava, etc., are also useful in the latter. The difference does not stop there. Brahma-jñāna is also different from karmopāśana-phala. With respect to karma, once śruti relating to the karma is understood, the deed can be done or not done, done well or imperfectly, etc. The actual fruit of the karma is dependent on various other factors, and not just śrutis statements on how to perform the karma. However, in the context of brahman-knowledge, the fruit is directly experienced, merely from śruti. There is no dependence on the will of the person.

But does not the examination of the anubhava, etc., depend on the will of the person? Yes it does, and that is not a defect. This is because while logic can help examining śruti statements, they serve *only a negative role, and only show what is unreal*. The direct realization comes from the śruti itself. Sureśvarācārya makes this point clear in the sambandhokti to Naiṣkarmyasiddhi 3.57. The pūrvapakṣin claims that the three states analysis reveals the nature of the self, and that śruti cannot add anything more. Sureśvarācārya replies that this type of knowledge is dependent on reasoning, and the immediate knowledge can be given only by śruti sentences such as “The self who he adores, by that he attains”; न हि लिङ्गव्यवधानेन-आत्म-प्रतिपत्तिः, साक्षात्-प्रतिपत्तिः ‘यमेवैष वृणुते तेन लभ्यः’, इति श्रुतेः³³. Finally, note that before stating the primacy of śruti, Sureśvarācārya has analyzed the three states in exactly the same way as Śaṅkarācārya. So, it should be clear that according to Sureśvarācārya, the direct realization is directly from just śruti itself, thus satisfying the criteria for it to be a pramāṇa.

What exactly is anubhava? A typical passage from Śaṅkarācārya on anubhava is found in the bhāṣya to brahma-sūtra 2.1.6:

यदपि श्रवण-व्यतिरेकेण मननं विदधच्छब्दः एव तर्कम्-अपि आदर्तव्यं दर्शयति इत्युक्तम् न अनेन मिषेण शुष्क-तर्कस्य अत्र आत्मलाभः संभवति, श्रुत्यनुगृहीत एव ह्यत्र तर्कः अनुभवाङ्गत्वेन आश्रीयते - स्वप्नान्त-बुद्धान्तयोः उभयोः इतरेतर-व्यभिचाराद् आत्मनः अनन्वागतत्वम्, सम्प्रसादे च प्रपञ्च-परित्यागेन सदात्मना सम्पत्तेः निष्प्रपञ्च-सदात्मकत्वं परपञ्चस्य ब्रह्म-प्रभवत्वात् कार्यकारण-अनन्यत्व-न्यायेन ब्रह्म-अव्यतिरेकः - इत्येवेज्ञातीयकः

It was also said that by enjoining reflection apart from hearing, the upaniṣad shows that logic is above (even) hearing. However, by such a deceit, groundless logic cannot find any scope here. Only logic found in the śruti, by being subsidiary to anubhava is to be used. And this (logic) is of the kind: since the states of sleep and wakefulness contradict each other, the self is not associated with any of them; and in deep-sleep by dissociating from the world, (the individual self attains) the true-self which is apart from the world; since creation has originated from brahman, by the law of

non-difference of cause and effect, creation must be non-different from brahman; and so on.

Śaṅkarācārya indeed calls śrutyanugrhīta tarka as subordinate to anubhava, anubhavāṅga. It has to be so, since we cannot infer without any anubhava. But how does Śaṅkarācārya define anubhava? Śaṅkarācārya does not characterize anubhava as merely the experience of the three states alone. He points out that it is also our common experience (anubhava) that the effect is no different from the cause (waves and foam as explained previously), though they may appear different. No one can claim that the world is an “effect” of brahman, and brahman being the cause as belonging to the “three-state”-anubhava category. Since Śaṅkarācārya also explicitly mentions the three states as anubhava, there would be no reason to mention the “cause and effect” type of reasoning separately, if that were a part of the “three-state” anubhava. Also note the use of ityevanjātiyakah. If anubhava were to be restricted to just the experience of the three states, this qualifier would not be mentioned either.

Indeed, Śaṅkarācārya clubs the experience of the three states and this kind of kārya-kāraṇa-ananyatva as anubhava³⁴. This is quite different from SSS, who claims anubhava to be the universal experience of the three states. SSS has also *invented a whole new term* for kārya-kāraṇa-ananyatva-nyāya, namely māyā-satkārya-vāda, a term not present in the brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya [20, 21]. I have not come across this term in any of the other bhāṣyas either. SSS’s twist to the definition of anubhava and his new term māyā-satkārya-vāda, in direct opposition to Śaṅkarācārya, are preludes to his misconstruing the three state experience, especially the deep-sleep state. I shall examine the deep-sleep state in more detail in the next section.

3.5 Conclusion of Śruti and Tarka

The whole discussion on śruti and anubhava is quite subtle, and probably the most difficult topics to understand in Śaṅkarācārya’s works. Let me summarize:

1. Śruti reveals the real nature of the self, just like the revelations on rituals and meditation, by making categorical statements about the true nature of the self. However, brahman-knowledge relates to an existing entity. So, some peculiar types of logic can help, and śruti informs us the kind of logic we should use to analyze our experiences. So, logic has a place, but then it is only the logic which *conforms* to the logic suggested in the upaniṣads that is useful.
2. Anubhava or experience is direct. Reasoning based on anubhava requires liṅga, and that is not an experience. E.g., Avasthātraya is direct, avasthātraya-parīkṣa requires logic and the premises that go with it. Śruti is not examined to be consistent with avasthātraya, rather it is shown that the avasthātraya can be examined in a way that it is consistent with śruti’s statements on brahman, such as tattvamasi, etc.
3. It is from śruti alone we know the correct premises for avasthātraya-parīkṣa. If not for śruti, we would be arguing ad infinitum about the fundamental premises³⁵.
4. Avasthātraya-parīkṣa can only tell us what is untrue. The direct realization of the self is from śruti alone. Śruti is the supreme pramāṇa, kingpin if you will, and not anubhava.

Finally, let us remember that Śaṅkarācārya mentioned anubhavādyaḥ are useful in enquiry into brahman while discussing tarka. The anubhavādyaḥ do not refer to distinct things such as anubhava, tarka, etc., which are independently useful. Rather, anubhavādyaḥ refers to all kinds of anubhava, including kārya-kāraṇa-ananyatva, along with the indispensable āgama-anusārīta tarka. And as Śaṅkarācārya points out in his commentary to sūtra 1.1.2, when the mere effect is cognized (three states, etc), the relation with brahman cannot be known, brahman being outside the grasp of the senses. So I would translate anubhava-avasānam anubhavasya-avasaanam, i.e., the cessation of all anubhava, and not as culminating in experience. What I mean is that when anubhava is examined (in the right way) it seen to emerge from, and disappear into brahman. This fits the context of the second brahma-sūtra - janmādyasya yataḥ much better. It also explains why Śaṅkarācārya calls kārya-kāraṇa-ananyatva as an acceptable form of logic. With this, I offer the modified translation of Śaṅkarācārya's commentary on sūtra 1.1.2, quoted previously:

In enquiry into dharma, śruti, etc., alone are the means of knowing, but not in enquiry into brahman. Because, here śruti, etc., (and the various kinds of) anubhava (and the logic associated with them), as far as possible, are the means of knowing. (This is because of the property) of brahman-knowledge (being about) an existent entity, and being the conclusion of (all) anubhava.

I invite the readers attention especially to the word yathāsambhavam. Since śrutyādayaḥ, etc., have no limitations in the context of exegesis of śruti, the qualifier yathāsambhavam clearly refers to anubhavādyaḥ. That is also clear from Sureśvarācārya's statement that anubhavādyaḥ can only show what is untrue, but not reveal the truth by itself.

4 Two Methods of Teaching in the Upaniṣads: Predominantly Subjective and Predominantly Objective

There are two main modes of tarka adopted by the upaniṣads. They are:

1. Examining the observer and observed in the three states of consciousness. I call this the predominantly subjective method since it examines the experience of an individual in the world. The key premise of the logical examination is not to remove the observer from the observed.
2. Examining the effect and cause simultaneously. I call this the predominantly objective method, since the transformation the world undergoes is examined here. The key premise of the logical examination is not to examine the effect in the absence of the cause.

Both methods use the method of anvaya-vyatireka, which basically means agreement and difference. This is stated in terms of the proving the following propositions:

- If A is true, B is true, i.e, $A \Rightarrow B$.
- If A is false, B is false or If Not(A) is true, then Not(B) is true, , i.e, $\text{Not}(A) \Rightarrow \text{Not}(B)$.

This basically means $A \Leftrightarrow B$. Note that in formal logic if only $A \Rightarrow B$, then it means $\text{Not}(B) \Rightarrow \text{Not}(A)$. Proving both the propositions above assures $A \Leftrightarrow B$. Sureśvarācārya uses this technique masterfully in the Naiṣkarmyasiddhi, much more than even Śāṅkarācārya!

4.1 Avasthātraya Parīkṣa - The Predominantly Subjective Method

It's not my intention to go through this analysis in any detail, the reader is assumed to already know this analysis as presented from the advaita viewpoint. The best treatments are to be found in the vaiṭathya prakaraṇa of the Gauḍapāda Kārikas, or chapters 2 and 3 of the Naiṣkarmyasiddhi. I shall point out only some of the more subtle points, which are often overlooked, in spite of being repeatedly pointed out by Śāṅkarācārya.

Analysis of any one state implicitly assumes existence of one or both the other states: The three-state analysis has the waking state as the implicit reference point. This is an important point, not recognized by SSS, who claims each state can be analyzed with no reference to the other states. When we talk about having been through a dream, it is clear that it is with reference to the waking state. Claiming that the dream experience can be analyzed from the point of view of the dream, while being in the waking state is nothing other than a delusion. When the dream has already been sublated by waking, what is the logic in claiming that the state which has been falsified will be analyzed “from its viewpoint”? Will anyone claim that he will analyze the color of the snake which was superimposed on the rope, after realizing the error, claiming to adopt the viewpoint of when he saw the erroneous snake? Even granting that such a thing can be done, that is certainly not possible of the deep-sleep state, where the mind is quiescent. So we cannot adopt the “point of view” of the deep-sleep state, for the simple reason there is no “point of view” which can possibly be adopted. Again, the quiescence of the mind can be defined *only* relative to the waking state.

The waking state, or the “objective reality” as we usually know it, is the vyavahārika. There is no “proof” required for this vyavahārika. We experience it, we see physical laws being obeyed in it, and the veda also informs us the various means and ends, such as attaining heaven, identity with iṣṭa devata by means of meditations, etc. Some might mistakenly argue that when in the dream, we think that the dream experience is real, and what is experienced as “inside” the mind is thought to be internal and not real, just like the waking state. This, it might be supposed proves that the waking state is not the reference point. In reality, this argument only reinforces the fact that the waking state is the reference point.

The waking state being a reference point does not grant it absolute reality: The absolute reality, or lack thereof, of the three states, is however determined only through proper analysis. There are two ways of doing this analysis, each corresponding to adopting one of two different premises. The first premise is that the analysis can be conducted by removing the observer from the picture, and the second premise is that analysis should not be conducted by removing the observer from the picture. These are two conflicting premises, and this is where śruti comes to the rescue by ruling out the first premise, as pointed out in the previous sections. The dream is unreal, from the point of view of this vyavahārika, as the objects are realized to be internal to one's own self, after waking up. The śruti also informs its unreality by saying “There

are no chariots here”, etc. Detailed arguments showing that the dream and waking states are equally unreal, from the absolute point of view, are given in the *vaitathya prakaraṇa* of the *Gauḍapāda kārikā*. The chief fallacy is to consider a priori the waking state as intrinsically more valid in the absolute sense. *Gauḍapāda* points out that in terms of perception of interior and exterior, utility of objects, etc., the dream and waking are similar. Note that Śāṅkarācārya also points out one of the forms of *śrutyanugr̥hīta-tarka* is that the dream and waking states “cancel” each other (quoted in the previous section).

4.1.1 Two Seemingly Different Approaches to Deep Sleep: Bṛhadāraṇyaka and the Māṇḍūkya

The deep sleep state is where even the latent impressions cease to exist, and unity is perceived. Some people mistakenly think that nothing is perceived in deep-sleep. It is true that *objects* are not perceived. However, unity is perceived/experienced, which is called *prajñāna ghanam* in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. The cases of swoon, yogic *saṁādhi* etc., are similar to deep sleep in the sense that no objects are perceived. But again, in those states also, unity is perceived. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* also says the sight of the seer can never be lost.

In the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, the individual self is said to undergo three states: waking, dreaming and deep sleep. These are at the individual or *adhyātmic* level. These states correspond to *viśva*, *taijasa* and *prājñā* at the cosmic or *ādhidaivic* level. The true self is said to be the fourth state, the *turīya*, or beyond all these states. Note that the *upaniṣad* specifically distinguishes between the deep-sleep state and the *turīya* by calling the former *prajñāna-ghanam*, while denying that of the *turīya*³⁶. However, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* is conspicuously silent about the *turīya*, and seems to indicate that the self in the deep-sleep state itself is the true self, unlike the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. For example *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3 talks about only three states. However, while the presentation is different, the philosophy is not. This will be seen clearly if the method of *anvaya-vyatireka* is used.

To formulate the argument in terms of the *anvaya-vyatireka* method described in the previous section, define

- A as the statement “The three states are experienced”.
- B as the statement “Avidyā is present”.

When we talk about the experience and existence of the three states, i.e., A, then $A \Rightarrow B$. This is what the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* does, and declares that the supreme-self is beyond all these states. Śāṅkarācārya also has declared in his *bhāṣya* to *brahma-sūtra* 2.1.9 that the appearance of the supreme-self in identity with the three state is due to mere *māyā*, like the appearance of snake, etc., on the rope; *माया-मात्रं होतत्, यत् परमात्मनः अवस्थात्रय-आत्मनावभासनम्, रज्ज्वा इव सर्पादि-भावेन, इति*. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* follows the $\text{Not}(A) \Rightarrow \text{Not}(B)$ part of the *anvaya-vyatireka*. It declares that the objects in both dreaming and waking state are unreal. See for an example Śāṅkarācārya’s explanation to passage 4.3.18, where he points out that the objects experienced in the both the waking and dream states are superimpositions on the self. Thus, the absolute reality of both states is denied. In this case, the so-called causal state, namely the deep-sleep, is nothing other than the *paramātman*.

Note that if at all we admit that there is a state, be it waking or deep-sleep, and that it is experienced, then it is superimposed on the self. Also, admitting that there is a deep-sleep state implicitly assumes the existence of the waking state. The deep-sleep state is certainly experienced, and requires no assumptions for its experience. However the analysis of the deep-sleep state does require the assumption of the existence of the waking state, which functions as the logical reference point. On the other hand, when the absolute reality of the waking and dream states are negated, then it is seen that the self shines in its true nature in the so-called deep-sleep state. It is unnecessary to refute the causality of the deep-sleep state, when the effects - namely the absolute reality of the objects of dreaming and waking are denied in the pāramārthic sense. To drive the point home, the first method starts with the superimposition of the states on the self, and the second method is directly negating the states in the self. Śaṅkarācārya and Sureśvarācārya use both the anvaya-vyatireka arguments with fluidity, and expect the student to understand which part of the argument is being used.

For example when the $A \Rightarrow B$ part of the argument is used in the Naiṣkarmyasiddhi 3.58, Sureśvarācārya raises the objection that if it is true that the self was really pure consciousness in deep-sleep, then anyone could realize his self by just going to sleep. Sureśvarācārya replies that the seed of all experience, namely the non-perception of the self is present in deep-sleep; सर्वानर्थ-बीजस्य-आत्मा-अनवबोधस्य सुषुप्ते सम्भवात्. If there were no ignorance in deep-sleep, then without the triad of hearing, reflecting and deep-reflection (leading to) the knowledge ‘I am brahman’, all beings would just realize the destruction of transmigration by naturally falling asleep. So ignorance in deep-sleep has to be necessarily admitted; यदि हि सुषुप्ते अज्ञानं न अभविष्यद् अन्तरेण अपि वेदान्त वाक्यं श्रवण-मनन-निदिध्यासनानि अहं ब्रह्मास्मि इति अध्यवसायात् सर्व-प्राण-भूत अपि स्वरसत एव सुषुप्त-प्रतिपत्तेः सकल सम्सार-उच्छिति प्रसङ्गः. तस्मात् अवश्यं सुषुप्ते अज्ञानं अभ्युपगन्तव्यम्.

We may ask why ignorance is not perceived in deep-sleep, unlike the other states. Ignorance, i.e., its effects, are not perceptible because there is nothing to reveal it; अभिव्यञ्जक-अभावात्. It is instructive to read the following verses in the Naiṣkarmyasiddhi, which also make clear that the superimposition of the ego is what is primarily called ignorance, and that the ego itself is an object to the witness-self. The point here is that when the experience of the deep-sleep state is admitted, then ignorance is admitted, since a state is a limiting adjunct, and can only be a superimposition on the self. If the absolute reality of the waking and dream states are negated, then the so-called deep-sleep state is the pure self. As another example, the first part of the Gauḍapāda Kārikā, the āgama prakaraṇa talks about four states. However, in the second part, just two states are mentioned. Even the deep-sleep state, the causal state, is omitted. This point is missed by many authors, especially SSS. Whenever he talks about the three state analysis, I am unfortunately reminded of Goethes statement: “When ideas fail, words come in handy”³⁷. Here are two examples of the confused understanding of SSS regarding the deep-sleep state:

- “And as the witness of sleep, He is Prajñā. That this is called a state, however, is only a concession to the empirical view according to which the individual self is supposed to be ignorant, that is, to miss the particularized consciousness by which he is characterised in the other two states. But as a matter of fact, the suppositious individual self, no less than his suppositious consciousness, has merged himself, if we may so, with the panorama of objective phenomena, into their essence, the real Ātman, who is called Prajñā here, and there is no one really to regret his loss of consciousness.”
- “The following texts declare in unmistakable terms, how the so-called deep-sleep is really

no state at all, for from the transcendental viewpoint, it is the non-dualistic Atman alone that ignorant people mistake for a state in which the individual soul is shrouded in the darkness of unconsciousness.”

Let us take the first quotation. First of all, the waking and dream states are also “concessions” to the empirical point of view. The rest of the quotation makes no sense whatsoever, when this point is understood. Take the second quotation. How are the other two states any different in this regard? They are also really no states at all from the transcendental view point. Or, does SSS think there is a waking or dream state from the transcendental viewpoint? As for the second quotation above, even in those states it is only the ignorant who conceive the self as experiencing objects, etc. As a matter of fact, the precise statement is that only the ignorant think that there are any states at all! The problem is clear, SSS has missed the fact that it is $\text{Not}(A) \Rightarrow \text{Not}(B)$, and when $\text{Not}(B)$ is accepted, there is no going back to accepting A , since the proposition $\text{Not}(B)$ was derived from $\text{Not}(A)$ ³⁸!

4.2 The Structure of the Gadya Prabandha of the Upadeśasāhasrī

The structure of the prose section of the Upadeśasāhasrī can be analyzed based on the divisions of predominantly objective and subjective methods. The first chapter of the prose section is based on the predominantly objective method. This uses the *kārya-kāraṇa-ananyatva-nyāya*, and is also replete with references from the upaniṣads. While *kārya-kāraṇa-ananyatva-nyāya* is also dependent on *anubhava*, it may be supposed that brahman really undergoes change, like gold into an ornament, sea into foam and waves, etc. Only from śruti do we know that there is no actual change in brahman, and that brahman is itself the inner self. This is from śruti-vākyas which declare that brahman is *avikāra*, and also that brahman itself enters as the soul *tadevānuprāviśat*.

The second chapter is the predominantly subjective method and is based on analysis of the the dream and waking states, nature of *avidyā*, etc. Here there is not a single reference to the śruti. Only “reasoning” is employed and this can be done because the subject matter, namely (*ātman*), is not completely unknown. But the “hidden hand” of śruti is present throughout, since only *śrutyānuṅghīta-tarka* is used! The third chapter is a summary of the first two chapters and provides a method for *manana* and *nididhyāsana*.

5 Avidyā and Māyā

I will look at the usage of the word *māyā* very briefly in this section. I may expand this section in a future version, or write another article, to include the philosophical implications of *māyā*. Here, I shall start out by quoting a passage from one of the works of SSS [6] (pp. 44-45) and commenting on it:

Even according to Sankara, however, it is not wrong to speak figuratively of Avidya as Maya, and Maya as Avidya also. In its primary sense, no doubt Avidya means ignorance, and therefore refers to a subjective notion, but in a secondary sense, the

word may be extended to cover any object that is covered by ignorance. In that case, usage would permit statements like ‘All this is Avidya’ where we only mean that everything objective, is a figment of avidya, and not really real. Similarly, when the term avidya is taken to mean a modification of the mind, it is evidently included within the phenomenal world and therefore may be appropriately called maya. To avoid confusion, we shall restrict the use of words avidyā and māyā to denote ignorance and name and form respectively.

I have already shown in great detail that though avidyā means ignorance, it is not subjective. Sureśvarācārya also mentions that the products of avidyā can also be termed as avidyā in his Taittirīya bhāṣya vārtika. Since later advaitins clearly equate avidyā and māyā, consider when SSS claims such a usage is allowed: “Similarly, when the term avidya is taken to mean a modification of the mind, it is evidently included within the phenomenal world and therefore may be appropriately called maya.” I have previously quoted SSS where he says that: “Avidyā and Māyā are not synonymous terms in Śāṅkara-Vedānta. It is some post-Śāṅkara’s Vedāntins who have treated Avidyā and Māyā as identical (see para 21). Nor has Māyā been even treated as a statement of contradictions involved in our experience of the world and in our knowledge of it, as some are tempted to explain it.”

With this background, now let’s revisit the statement from Śāṅkarācārya on the three states, which I quoted in a previous section (reproduced here for convenience): माया-मात्रं हीतत्, यत्परमात्मनः अवस्थात्रय-आत्मना अवभासनम्, रज्ज्वा इव सर्पादि-भावेन, इति; The manifestation of the paramātman as the (individual) soul experiencing the three states, that is by māyā alone; like the appearance of snake, etc., on a rope. Here, the three-states are said to be superimposed on the supreme-self, like a snake on the rope. First, the superimposition of the three states is called māyā-mātram, and not avidyā mātram. Secondly, in the deep-sleep state there is no mind (it is absorbed into the self). SSS’s claim was that the modifications of the mind may be called māyā, instead of avidyā. Clearly, the usage of māyā as avidyā does not fit this explanation given by SSS.

And this is not the only example, where māyā is used fundamentally in the sense of avidyā. Many such instances are pointed out by [8]. It is a waste of time cataloging every instance where māyā has been used to mean avidyā. I’ll instead give an outline of the different ways māyā is used. The term avidyā is used fairly consistently by Śāṅkarācārya, and does not take many shades of meaning³⁹. However, māyā is used in a very fluid way to mean quite different things by Śāṅkarācārya. Here are the major ways of using māyā:

Māyā is a “product” of avidyā: This usage can be found in the bhāṣya to brahma-sūtra 2.1.14, which equates māyā with nāma-rūpa. This is the only usage really acknowledged by SSS, when he says he will restrict the use of māyā to “name and form to avoid confusion”. But note that even in these passages avidyā is not a “subjective” ignorance, but something which transcends subjectiveness and objectiveness. Otherwise we will be placed in the absurd position of claiming that a subjective error, i.e., avidyā, as causing an objective reality, i.e., māyā (name and form). While there may be systems which adopt this point of view, it seems clear that Śāṅkarācārya does not espouse such a viewpoint, as made clear by his arguments against the Buddhist vijñānavādins.

Māyā equivalent to magical creations : This is almost the same as the previous usage, but the difference is that in these passages Ívara is typically held to be the māyāvī, and suggests that the name and form are not due to just “subjective ignorance” only.

Māyā the same as ignorance: Sometimes māyā is used as a synonym for ignorance. Some examples are:

- Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya 1.3.6 (along with Svāmī Gambirānandas translation [18]): विद्या तस्या बीजशक्तेर् दाहात् अविद्यात्मिका हि बीजशक्तिरव्यक्तशब्दनिर्देश्या परमेश्वराश्रया मायामयी महासुप्तिः, यस्यां स्वरूपप्रतिबोधरहिताः शेरते संसारिणो जीवाः: “Because liberation comes when the potential power (bījaśakti) is burnt away by knowledge. That potential power (bījaśakti), constituted by nescience (avidyā), is mentioned by the word unmanifest (avyakta). It rests on God (parameśvara), and is comparable to magic (māyā). It is a kind of deep slumber in which the transmigrating souls sleep without any consciousness of their real nature.” Note that the bījaśakti is said to be burnt away by knowledge. However, we may think that knowledge cancels avidyā, and so it also burns the bījaśakti which is supposedly a “product” of avidyā, if we accept the explanation of SSS. However, the key point is that bījaśakti itself is said to be a kind of slumber in which souls sleep, slumber clearly referring to ignorance. If māyā is the product of ignorance, then this statement can make no sense.
- The supreme lord appears as many due to māyā otherwise known as avidyā; bhāṣya to brahma-sūtra 1.3.19; एक एव परमेश्वरः कूटस्थनित्यः विज्ञानधातुः अविद्याया मायया मायाविवत् अनेकधा विभाव्यते. It is senseless to claim that māyā is a product of avidyā in this context, since both are in the instrumental case and parameśvaraḥ is compared to a māyāvin, i.e., a magician. Further parameśvaraḥ appears as many (anekadha) by means of māyā, and the anekadha (name and form) is the actual “product”. So this is another passage where SSS’s explanation does not fit.
- Māyā causes the delusion of duality, or superimposition of adventitious states on the self. The bhāṣya to sūtra 2.1.9, where this usage is found, has been given in previous sections. Again note that the states are superimposed on the self due to ignorance, so māyā in this context means nothing other than ignorance.
- In the bṛhad-bhāṣya-vārtika 1.2.135-136, Sureśvarācārya says:

नामरूपदिना या इयं अविद्या प्रथते असती
माया तस्याः परं सौक्ष्म्यं मृत्युना एव इति भण्यते

That unreal (asat) ignorance (avidyā) which, by means of name and form, unfolds [as the universe],
Indeed, the extreme subtleness of [that] māyā is uttered by [the word] death (mṛtyu).

- In the Gauḍapāda kārīkā 1.16, we have

अनादि मायया सुप्तो यदा जीवः प्रबुध्यते
अजम्-अनिद्रम्-अस्वप्नम्-अद्वैतं बुध्यते तदा

Note especially the fact that the sleep (ignorance) is by means of māyā. Accordingly Śaṅkarācārya glosses that the māyā is a dream, and has no beginning and has two facets, that of non-perception of reality (tattva-apratibodha-lakṣaṇam), and false perception of reality (anyathā-grahaṇa-lakṣaṇam). Non-perception of reality can never be equated with nāma-rūpa. It is indeed the fundamental error which leads to the perception of nāma-rūpa.

- See also the use of svamāyayā in GK 2.12, where the self is said to imagine the different forms like snake on rope. Note that the imagination is *due* to māyā since māyayā is the instrumental form of māyā. Thus māyā is not the “product” of the imagination, which may be equated with avidyā. It is also clear from the fact that Śaṅkarācārya comments that the self itself, after imagination *through* māyā, perceives the objects. So māyā is not the product, but rather the cause.

In summary, it is convenient to think of avidyā has neither ontic nor epistemic, but māyā as both epistemic and ontic. While the terms are used to means different things in some contexts, they can also mean the exactly same thing in some other contexts. Then, both are used in the sense of causing the superimposition of the ego-mind-body complex on the supreme self.

6 “Comparative Bhāṣya Studies” and Other Such Diseases

Brahmavidyā is a result of hearing and cogitating over śruti vākyas. Bhāṣyas are merely meant to help understand some of the subtle points in the śruti, which we may overlook. One should not develop the disease of comparing different bhāṣyas, and cataloging every difference in their dotting of the i’s and crossing of the t’s. Such pedantic exercises merely serve to distract from the main thrust of the works, namely the advaita tattva. No doubt there are some differences found in the expositions of various authors. However, thinking that there is an “original and true” method to be found by such pedantic studies of various works is a mere chimera. It merely serves to reinforce the reality of Ambrose Bierce’s definition of learning as “the ignorance of the studios” [26]. It should be clear that different teachers can expound the same advaita tattva in somewhat different ways. But the basic teaching

ब्रह्म सत्य, जगन्मिथ्या, जीवो ब्रह्मैव न परः

is strictly upheld by all teachers. There is not always a complete unanimity in other points, and this is not a bad thing⁴⁰.

Implausibility of a Gap In Sampradāya: The main characteristic of a sampradāya is that it is living and adapts to particular situations, while not damaging the core values. So, followers of SSS should also question themselves whether the theory that no author has understood Śaṅkarācārya in the 1200 years after Śaṅkarācārya is even plausible. Would disciples of Śaṅkarācārya and Sureśvarācārya not have contradicted the writings of Padmapādācārya, if they felt he was misinterpreting Śaṅkarācārya? Are their teachings so fragile that the writings of a few authors like Padmapādācārya could lead all disciples of Śaṅkarācārya and Sureśvarācārya

astray? Note that even if Padmapādācārya were not a disciple of Śaṅkarācārya, he would still be very close in chronology, 100 years or less⁴¹. SSS is fond of pointing out that Śaṅkarācārya refers to his tradition of teachers and thus belonged to such a lineage. So are we to imagine that this lineage existed unbroken for many centuries, but was magically broken up by Padmapādācārya, and was “re-discovered” 1200 years later by SSS with mere study of the texts? The whole scenario seems incredible to me, and it is actually SSS who has misconstrued Śaṅkarācārya. I can think of some reasons why he misunderstood Śaṅkarācārya, but first we’ll look at the reaction of the traditional advaitic sampradāyavits.

Original Reaction of the Tradition to SSSs Works: SSS acknowledges one Krishnaswamy Iyer (KI) as his mentor, and that he played a major role in shaping his thinking. Śrī Virūpakṣa Śāstri, who was a teacher of both SSS and KI, after reading SSS’s original criticism of the sub-commentarial tradition, the Mūlāvidyā Nirāsa, is said to have cautioned him that he was criticizing the sub-commentaries without properly understanding them. This seems like an excellent observation to me⁴². Śrī Virūpakṣa Śāstri also seems to have tried to block the publication of the Mūlāvidyā Nirāsā. There was reportedly a falling out between the teacher and SSS over this, and apparently the relationship did not recover. It is certainly unfortunate that Śrī Virūpakṣa Śāstri did not put his opinions into writing, but merely tried to block the publication of the Mūlāvidyā Nirāsa.

Later Reaction of the Tradition to SSSs Works Śrī Virūpakṣa Śāstri was also closely tied to the Śṛṅgeri Maṭha, being a teacher for the celebrated Śrī Candraśekhara Bhārati Mahāsvāminaḥ. Śrī Candraśekhara Bhārati Mahāsvāminaḥ doesn’t seem to have given any opinions on SSS’s works. Later, his disciple Śrī Abhinava Vidyātīrtha Mahāsvāminaḥ had some interaction with SSS, offered to provide monetary support for publishing one of SSS’s books [28], and also wrote an appreciative foreword of SSS in a publication. However, he did not change his opinions on the suitability of the sub-commentaries. In 1989, a study of advaita was published at his command by one of his close disciples by the Śṛṅgeri Maṭha itself [29], and this follows the standard commentarial tradition, avidyā being bhāva-rūpā, etc. Both the Vivaraṇa and the Bhāmatī are presented as valid interpretations, but SSS’s interpretation is not even mentioned as an alternative viewpoint. So, scholars from the Śṛṅgeri Maṭha continue to use the sub-commentaries as before.

There is apparently some criticism of SSS, using techniques from navya-nyāya, by one Śrī Prajñānandendra Sarasvati Svāminaḥ⁴³. I have not studied this, and do not even have access to this criticism of SSS. I feel that using navya-nyāya techniques is both unnecessary and needlessly complicated. It also does not fit in with the general tenor of Śaṅkarācārya’s bhāṣyas. But it is very likely that Śrī Prajñānandendra Sarasvati Svāminaḥ has already identified the problems with the works of SSS that I have outlined in this paper.

In recent times, one Śrī Jñānaprasūnendra Sarasvati, initiated into sannyāsa by Śrī Jayendra Sarasvati of the Kumbakonam/Kanchi Mutt, is reported to be studying under disciples of SSS and has accepted SSS’s interpretations. It seems very likely that Śrī Jayendra Sarasvati himself was schooled only the traditional interpretations of advaita, but had apparently asked Jñānaprasūnendra Sarasvati to study with the disciples of SSS, before he initiated him into sannyāsa⁴⁴. It is unclear whether SSS’s interpretations will spread into the traditional circles via

interaction between Jñānaprasūnendra Sarasvati and the Kumbakonam/Kanchi Mutt scholars. Some students, studying under one of the great scholars of the present time, Śrī Kṛṣṇamūrti Śāstriṅṅaḥ of Chennai, have also recently taken up the task of comparing the interpretations of SSS with Padmapādācārya and Vācaspati Mīśra. No publications have resulted from these studies yet.

Lack of Formal Training of SSS in Sampradāyic Subjects: There are two main reasons which can be hypothesized for SSS’s misunderstanding of advaita. The first is that he and KI did not receive any rigorous training in advaita, unlike the advaitic sampradāyavits. Both do not seem to have undergone the required formal training in the nyāya or the pūrva mīmāṃsā⁴⁵. Followers of SSS frequently point out that he was taught by Śrī Virūpakṣa Śāstri, a traditional advaitic scholar of great repute. However, it seems clear from his biography that SSS and KI mainly performed joint self-study, and consulted with Śrī Virūpakṣa Śāstri at periodic intervals [28]. It must have been very exciting to both SSS and KI, when it seemed that they had discovered something 1200 years of advaitins had missed regarding avidyā, etc.

The second reason is that the basic training of both KI and SSS was a Western education. This, combined with their lack of a rigorous training in the traditional subjects, especially in the nyāya and the pūrva mīmāṃsā, seems to have lead them astray. Circular reasoning in many topics such as avidyā and deep-sleep, and lack of understanding of the importance of the śruti pramāṇa, are the most obvious results. This shows the advantage of a rigorous and formal training, versus self-study.

6.1 A Comparison of Hacker and SSS

Comans has examined in some detail the interpretations of SSS and Hacker, and comes to the conclusion that post-Śāṅkaran authors did not distort Śāṅkarācārya’s works. However, his work, unlike mine, still concentrates on philology than philosophy. But, Comans has a unique perspective; being a Westerner and also classically trained in Advaita and the related subjects. Thus Comans has been able to point out the Western influences on SSS, and especially his mentor KI, very well. I would like to point out that Hacker has been more careful than SSS when examining avidyā. Indeed Hacker accepts that Śāṅkarācārya uses avidyā in the sense of avyākṛta nāma-rūpa (something supposedly “ontic”) in some places [3, 8]. But, Hacker also points out that avidyā is used in a predominantly “subjective” sense, and so takes avidyā as something subjective.

I suspect that Hacker’s fundamental interest was philology, and historical dating of texts, and this has caused him to slightly mis-interpret avidyā. Sometimes he makes some interesting comments about the philosophy, but usually he is not very convincing when talking about philosophy. For example, according to Hacker and his followers, Śāṅkarācārya has used the word avidyā to mean something epistemic, and its relative frequency to the word māyā remains the same in all his “genuine” works. However Hacker presumes Śāṅkarācārya was first a yoga follower, who turned to advaita, and ended up as a bhakta. Of course, we are supposed to think that Hacker’s own allegiance to Christian theology did not bias him into thinking that the “mature” Śāṅkarācārya became a bhakta. Not to mention the utterly incredible hypothesis that

the term avidyā has been used in exactly the same way, with even the frequency of it relative to the word māyā being the same, while the philosophy has changed drastically.

Still, Hacker’s textual analysis is unbiased, and he reports the usage of avidyā to denote something ontic in Śāṅkarācārya’s writing quite impartially. That is commendable and very much unlike SSS, who merely “stoutly maintains that Śāṅkarācārya does not do so”, as well pointed out by Comans [8]. SSS’s response to problematic passages is to quote in great profusion other passages which seem to support his position. No doubt SSS’s textual analysis skills are excellent, but the problem I see with SSS’s writings is his obsession with terminology, rather than philosophy. Indeed none of his works are about the philosophy of advaita, *but are oriented almost exclusively towards contradicting previous commentators of Śāṅkarācārya.*

7 Conclusion

I have pointed out the problems associated with SSS’s interpretations of Śāṅkarācārya, and have demonstrated that SSS has misinterpreted Śāṅkarācārya. I have shown some serious philosophical problems; namely circular logic and lack of appreciation of the philosophical importance of śruti, in the works of SSS. The quotations I have used, with the exception of a single excerpt, are not translations of works written by SSS in any Indian language, but written in English by SSS himself. Followers of SSS claim that his command of the English language was very good, and it certainly seems so from his books. So, the error cannot be due to wrong usage of the English language. Any unbiased reader, will I feel, agree with me that the very first quotation I offered from SSS clearly shows that he thought avidyā is epistemic, which plainly leads to philosophically contradictions⁴⁶.

There are actually many places where SSS’s interpretations seem incorrect to me. But I have confined myself to the major philosophical problems I see in his works. In the future, I hope to complete a comprehensive study of the most profound works in advaita, namely the Pañcapādikā. I feel Padmapādācārya has been meted out a grave injustice by many authors, including SSS, who have largely misunderstood him. The difference between Padmapāda and SSS is that the former is a philosopher, while the latter is a textual analyst. Philosophy includes textual analysis, especially in the Indian tradition, but also goes beyond it. Padmapādācārya has pointed out all the presumptions in the advaitic philosophy, in his sub-commentary on just four Brahma-sūtras. Is it any surprise that he is held in great regard, and that his work has stood the test of time?

It is clear to me that Padmapādācārya is quite close to Śāṅkarācārya in philosophy, and has merely used slightly different terminology. The main terminological difference is restricting the fluidity of the term māyā. It is not entirely clear why he thought that was necessary. Perhaps, Padmapādācārya felt that a clearer terminology would be better than merely leaving it to the student to understand the meaning of terms such as avidyā and māyā from the context. Maybe, even very early on, students were misconstruing avidyā to be “epistemic”. Unfortunately, we have to be content with only speculations regarding Padmapādācāryas motivations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This small study is affectionately dedicated to my father Śri C. R. Balasubramanian who taught me advaita from the standpoint of logic, i.e., avasthātraya parīkṣa and from two important

texts of advaita, the Laghu Yoga Vāsiṣṭha, and the Dṛgdr̥ṣyaviveka of the great master, Śri Vidyāraṇya. He also encouraged me to read the Pañcadaśī, again by Śri Vidyāraṇya, and translated into Tamil by Śri Jñānānanda Bhāratī Svāminaḥ. Thanks of course to my mother and father for providing the environment where vedic learning was encouraged and valued. Thanks to the disciples of Śri Abhinava Vidyātīrtha Mahāsvāminaḥ, Śri Candrasekhara Bhāratī Mahāsvāminaḥ, and Śri Ramaṇa Mahārṣi for recording their conversations with various people. These have been invaluable in my studies. Indeed, a single sentence from jñānis cannot be equaled by reading even a hundred books. Thanks to my wife Anju for encouraging me to write this after hearing the basic ideas in this paper. Thanks to Śri Venkata Subramanian for asking me to critically evaluate the ideas of Śri Satcidānandendra Sarasvatī Svāmin, and while not agreeing with my ideas, for commenting on the first draft of this paper. Finally, thanks to Kartik Jayanarayanan for commenting on the second draft, which led to a massive reworking of sections 3, 4, and 5, and also for providing me with useful references on māyā from Śaṅkarācārya's works.

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A A Note on Reading Śaṅkaras Bhāṣyas

I present here my approach to reading Śaṅkarācārya's bhāṣyas. It is important to first study the Upadeśasāhasrī fairly thoroughly, especially the prose sections. After that, the Naiṣkarmya Siddhi of Sureśvarācārya should be studied. When any point seems unclear, these texts should be consulted first, and not any other bhāṣya, especially the Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya⁴⁷. The reasons are as follows:

1. Whether we agree with Śaṅkarācārya or not, it is clear that he thought what he wrote was of immediate soteriological value. For example, he ends the prose section chapter with the disciple declaring that he has been enlightened by the guru. It is clear that the disciple is not indulging in pariplava, or exaggeration for the sake of praise.
2. Since these are independent works, the authors were free to choose their own style of presentation and *deal with the points they consider as most important for advaita jñāna*. For example, in the third section of the Brahma-sūtra, the passage of the soul, method of rebirth, etc., are discussed in great detail and Śaṅkarācārya also explains them in detail in his bhāṣya. However none of this are to be found in Upadeśasāhasrī or the Naiṣkarmya Siddhi! It is easy to miss the remark by Śaṅkarācārya in his Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya that the description of the passage of the soul, etc., are mainly to create dispassion in the reader. Thus we may spend a lot of time on the third chapter of the Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya without realizing that for Śaṅkarācārya this material presented only to create dispassion, which he assumes is present in any of his students.
3. Sureśvarācārya also refers only to the Upadeśasāhasrī in his works and has written sub-commentaries only on the Taittirīya and Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad bhāṣyas. So it seems that Sureśvarācārya considered these the most important works of Śaṅkarācārya. Since he is only disciple unanimously attested by both traditional and modern scholars, it is important to understand these works first.
4. There are some unique features, both stylistic and philosophical, in the Taittirīya and Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad bhāṣyas, and these are not to be found in the other bhāṣyas. This indicates that the other bhāṣyas may have been compilations of other authors, most likely immediate disciples, under the guidance of Śaṅkarācārya. This has been pointed out with some very insightful stylistic analysis by SSS [30]. However, there has not been much research by scholars on this possibility.

Notes

¹Specifically, the so called “undisputed” works of Śaṅkarācārya are: Upadeśāhasrī, the brahmasūtra bhāṣya, the upaniṣad bhāṣyas and the bhagavadgīta bhāṣya. Many more works are attributed to Śaṅkarācārya, which may or may not have been actually written by him. Here “authorship issue” is completely bypassed [3].

²For example, he is popularly believed to be the incarnation of the God Śiva.

³Consider for example the statement in the taittirīya upaniṣad, सत्यं चानृतं च सत्यमभवत्. In a short sentence comprising of just six words, satyam is used twice, with a very different meaning.

⁴The reasons for choosing these two works in particular are given in the appendix.

⁵avidyā = a + vidyā. The most common meaning of vidyā is correct knowledge of something.

⁶I am not going to examine the Pañcapādikā or its treatment of avidyā in any detail here. It is sufficient for this paper that some interpret the Pañcapādikā as teaching avidyā to be ontic. I happen to disagree with this interpretation of the Pañcapādikā. But that is not relevant to the current discussion. The question to be answered is whether avidyā is epistemic or ontic.

⁷<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=epistemic&x=0&y=0>,
<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=epistemology&x=0&y=0>,
<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=ontic&x=0&y=0>,
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<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=objective&x=0&y=0>.

⁸They had reached their conclusions independently, although Hacker seems to have later read the early works of SSS, and quotes him approvingly in one of his papers under the title paṇḍita sammatih [3].

⁹SSS was an advaitin by conviction, while Hacker was an academician, and a believer in Christian theology. I’ll briefly comment on Hacker’s study towards the end of this paper. A more detailed examination of Hacker can be found in [8].

¹⁰I will examine the relationship between avidyā and māyā in detail in a later section.

¹¹I will summarize the interaction of the SSS school with traditional advaita at the end of this paper.

¹²I have chosen this stock example in the mīmāṃsā śāstra as an illustration, although not used here by Śaṅkarācārya.

¹³Previously, I had used the phrase “superimposition of an observer” as the fundamental error. It was pointed out to me by Sri Prem that the word observer corresponds to the Sanskrit word sāksī, which refers to the inner-self. I had actually intended observer to mean the Knower-I, which is sloppy terminology. So, I have changed my usage from “observer” to

“Knower-I”, or the ego-sense, and use these last two terms equivalently. This is the same usage followed by Śaṅkarācārya and Sureśvarācārya. Note that the knower-I is actually an object to the witness-self. However, there is a difference between the subject-object relationship of the knower-I and the objects it experiences, and the witness to which the knower-I is itself an object. In the latter case, there is no effect or change in the witness due to the object, namely the knower-I. The witness merely acts as the illuminator, like the sun unaffected by the various objects it illumines. The ego-sense, on the other hand, is indeed affected by the objects it is a subject to. In the commentary to the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.3.23, Śaṅkarācārya points out that the word draṣṭṛ refers to the inner-self, which is the witness and is unaffected, and contrasts it with words such as cetṭṛ, ganṭṛ, etc., which denote agents of temporary acts. See the translation by Svāmī Mādhavānanda, Advaita Āśrama, April 1993, pp. 469.

¹⁴Sri Venkata Subramanian, after reading the first draft claimed that these exact statements are to be found in SSS’s “*Shankara’s clarification on certain vedantic concepts* and more in *The Upanishadic approach to Reality*”. SSS does remark that time is due to avidyā, but that should be obvious to any advaitin. My point is entirely different, namely avidyā is fundamentally the superimposition of the Knower-I (not the mutual superimposition of anything by the mind), and that the word “before” refers to the logical priority of the superimposition of the Knower-I. This point has not been adequately addressed by SSS.

¹⁵Refer Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 2.1.2. This passage is used by Śaṅkarācārya in many places, e.g., verse section of the Upadeśāhasrī, 8.12, अप्राणः हि मनाः शुभ्र इति च-अथर्वनेः वचह्.

¹⁶Refer the Bṛhad-vārtika 2.4.454. In general advaitins use manas, buddhi, ahankāra, and antaḥkaraṇa interchangeably. However, Śaṅkarācārya and Sureśvarācārya use these words a little differently from other advaitins, including even Gauḍapādācārya. The usage of the terms by Śaṅkarācārya can be basically traced to the exposition of the pañca kośas in the taittirīya upaniṣad. I will publish in a forthcoming article a detailed examination of these terms in various bhāṣyas.

¹⁷SSS very carefully mocks writers like Maṇḍana Miśra for their theories on avidyā, and claims that avidyā as described by these authors implies the assumption of existence of time, which itself depends on avidyā. But he has completely missed the fundamental point that the mind itself is a result of avidyā and is superimposed on brahman, and hence avidyā cannot be the mutual superimposition of the real and the unreal by the mind. SSS has nothing other than contempt for advaitic authors other than Śaṅkarācārya, Sureśvarācārya, and Gauḍapādācārya, and is quite sure that he alone has understood advaita. For example he says [5] “Maṇḍana’s critical acumen seems to fail him when he argues that Avidyā and jīva belong to a beginless series . . . since it cannot account for the appearance of time, its own substrate.” In reality, Maṇḍana Miśra has been completely misinterpreted in this regard by SSS, and I suggest the excellent study on Maṇḍana Miśra’s Brahma-Siddhi by Prof. R. Balasubramanian [10]. The major difference between Maṇḍana Miśra and Śaṅkarācārya is that the former accepts the so-called jñāna-karma-samuccaya, while the latter rejects it. But, it is certainly ironic that SSS’s exposition of avidyā has the same problem, namely avidyā cannot account for its own substrate, namely the mind! Such are the pitfalls in reading bhāṣyas without taking the philosophy into account in a proper manner, and placing emphasis on terminology over philosophy.

¹⁸The entire quote from [12] (pp. 80) is: “Avidyā is an innate, beginless misconception due to a mental super imposition of the real and unreal, the self and the non-self as well as their properties on each other. This superimposition is the primus of all distinctions of pramāṭṛ, pramāṇa and prameya.” How a “mental superimposition” can precede the very notion of pramāṭṛ is blissfully ignored! I feel that if SSS had not been so eager to contradict previous sub-commentaries, and paused to think of philosophy instead of obsessing on terminology, this fairly simple error could have been averted.

¹⁹See Thibauts translation [13] “Thus the producer of the notion of the Ego (i.e. the internal organ) is superimposed on the interior Self, which, in reality, is the witness of all the modifications of the internal organ, and vice versa the interior Self, which is the witness of everything, is superimposed on the internal organ, the senses, and so on. In this way there goes on this natural beginning and endless superimposition, which appears in the form of wrong conception, is the cause of individual souls appearing as agents and enjoyers (of the results of their actions), and is observed by every one.” Thibauts translation is available in part on the web, see <http://www.archive.org/details/vedantasutrasofb027892mbp>.

²⁰See for example, the Dṛg-dṛśya-viveka of Vidyāraṇya. SSS not only has missed the point of this clarification, but has criticized later advaitins for rightly clarifying this point in many of his books!

²¹This was suggested to me by Kartik Jayanarayanan, after reading the second draft of this paper. I am am grateful to him for this insight.

²²A fascinating account of Schrodingers life can be found in [16]. An excellent introduction to vedantic thought by Schrodinger can be found in [17]. Short online biographies can be found at <http://www-groups.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/~history/Mathematicians/Schrodinger.html> and <http://nobelprize.org/physics/laureates/1933/schrodinger-bio.html>.

²³Some Buddhist systems actually adopt this viewpoint. Śāṅkarācārya contradicts these schools in the bhāṣya to Brahma-Sūtra 2.2.28.

²⁴The belief in the validity of time as having an absolute reality is especially pernicious. A very interesting issue of the Scientific American explores the different aspects of time, including the reality, perception and measurement [23]. Some of the articles in [23] argue that an time has no ontological reality. In this regard, I strongly recommend a very tightly argued paper by John Ellis McTaggart, a Western philosopher, on the illusoriness of time [24]. He shows that all arguments proving the existence of time pre-suppose its existence, and hence are circular arguments. An online version of [24] can be found in <http://www.ditext.com/mctaggart/time.html>. An account of his life can be found in <http://www.royalinstitutephilosophy.org/articles/article.php?id=2>. Among the Indian authors, a dvaitin writer comes up with an especially flawed argument to “prove” the existence of time. The argument is “A person goes into deep-sleep, wakes up and finds a certain amount of time has passed. So it has an absolute existence independent of any observer”. The author is quite unaware that his fundamental argument is comparing the time before and after waking up, and the concepts of “before” and “after” pre-suppose the existence of a time which he is trying to prove! Of course, he makes prolific use of navya-nyāya terms and the whole

argument sounds extremely impressive, and the author manages to confuse everyone including himself.

²⁵This is especially true in the non-advaitic vedānta systems such as bhedābheda, viśiṣṭādvaita, etc.

²⁶The śruti here is not to be confused with the veda itself. For a description of these techniques, see *Mīmāṃsā Paribhāṣā of Kṛṣṇa Yajvan*, translated by Svāmī Mādhavānanda, Advaita Ashrama, 1987, pp. 23-31.

²⁷See [12] pp. 14, in the chapter titled “Śāstra the One Means of Self Knowledge”: “Express statement and other textual aids (such as indicatory expression, syntactical relation, and so on are not the only means of valid knowledge in the case of enquiry into brahman as they indeed are in the case of enquiry into religious duty. But intuition (anubhava) and such others (as reasoning) should also where possible, be taken to be the means in this case. For the knowledge of Brahman is to culminate in a final intuition and relates to an already existing entity (Sbh 1-1-2)”. Padmapādācārya also interprets śrutyādayaḥ to mean the exegetical techniques useful in interpreting the vedas.

²⁸See [12] pp. 14, “The original Sanskrit term (anubhava) covers the whole range of sensuous experience, psychic experience as well as supramental intuition by means of which we directly intuit the three states of waking, dream and deep-sleep.

²⁹It is also interesting that SSS passes off this statement by Śāṅkarācārya about śrutyādayaḥ as “Śāṅkara is found to accept the individual view-point of the school with whom he happens discuss for the time being, and generally speaking he is seen to adopt the view of the Mīmāṃsakās in particular when he has to deal with the Vedic teaching from the empirical stand point.” In reality, Śāṅkarācārya is discussing with a logician and not a mīmāṃsakā here, and the logician considers he veda as subsidiary to logic! So, Śāṅkarācārya does not “accept the individual view-point of the school” as SSS glibly comments, and the statement by Śāṅkarācārya actually deserves very careful attention. It is in fact a tricky passage to interpret without having a good understanding of the advaita system. This goes to prove my statement about how the reading of philosophical texts is inevitably an iterative process.

³⁰See his book “*Śāṅkara in his Own Words*”.

³¹Indeed, SSS characteristically claims that scientists do not examine the dream state properly [22]. But he seems unaware that the fundamental premises of science and advaita are diametrically opposite, and the advaitin resorts to āgama as the arbiter in deciding the validity of the premises.

³²See a summary of the 66 defects enumerated in the Śatadūṣaṇi in “A History of Indian Philosophy, Volume 2,” by Surendranath Dasgupta. The objections 29 and 30 mistakenly assert that advaita considers śruti to have superior validity compared to perception. This is quite wrong. Secondly, the analysis of the three states shows that the reality of the objects in the dream and waking are contradicted in the other state. So the actual argument against that would be that “I went to sleep, and after waking up I see the same objects, and also confirmed by other people”. This of course assumes the category of time, and hence is not śruti validated

logic. In the case of the Indian logicians, they are definitely philosophically astute to understand the assumptions they make, and try to justify them. But here the assumptions are unstated and taken for granted.

³³nanu dr̥ṣṭa-darśana-dr̥ṣyānām jāgrat-svapna-suṣupteṣu āgama-āpāya-darśanāt yat sākṣikau teṣām-āgāpāyau, sa āgāmāpāya-vibhāga-rahita ātmā yathā yannibandhanau jagataḥ prakāśa-aprakāśau, sa prakāśa-aprakāśa-vibhāga-rahaitaḥ, sūrya iti. yadā ca evaṃ tadā vākya avagamyasya arthasya anudita-anastamita-vijñānamātra-svabhāvasya anumānena eva pratipannatvāt punarapi vākyaṣya nirviṣayatva-prasaṅgaḥ. na eṣa doṣaḥ. liṅgavyavadhānena tat pratipatteḥ. nanu sākṣād aparokṣād ātmasvabhāvena anātmanaḥ hānopādanayoḥ sambandha-grahaṇāt, kaṃ atiśayaṃ vākyaṃ kuryāt? mā evaṃ vocaḥ. liṅgādhīnatvāt tat partipatteḥ. na hi liṅgavyavadhānena ātma-pratipattiḥ sākṣāt-pratipattiḥ bhavati. As A. J. Alston correctly notes, śruti alone gives direct knowledge, whereas the three state analysis is dependent on liṅga, or inference [25]. I would like to point out here that a good understanding of what makes śruti eternal according to Śaṅkarācārya is essential to really understand this passage by Sureśvarācārya. I shall discuss this extensively in a future publication.

³⁴Note that anubhava is also used in many places to mean direct experience of samyag-jñāna also. I am not considering this usage of anubhava here, as it is somewhat tangential to the main discussion.

³⁵Some scientific minded individuals may point out that some interpretations of the quantum mechanics may justify the premise of not separating the observer and observed. Needless to say, scientists are hardly in agreement over this issue, once again validating Śaṅkarācārya's comments about independent logic and lack of certainty from it! Sometimes what is familiar, e.g., three-states analysis to advaitins, has a subtle premise which is easy to miss. I submit that SSS has missed this śruti validated premise, which Śaṅkarācārya has most carefully pointed out.

³⁶See the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad passages 6 and 7.

³⁷<http://www.quotationpage.com/quote/661.html>.

³⁸This logical error may be summarized by the simple statement that he is jumping arbitrarily between the vyavahāra and pāramārtha viewpoints. This has also been pointed out by [8]

³⁹I am ignoring here the other prominent use of avidyā to mean the combination of rites and meditation.

⁴⁰Śrī Bhāratī Tīrtha Svāmināḥ expresses it succinctly in his foreword to Appayya Dīkṣhitas Siddhāntaleśasaṃgrahaḥ, published by Vedanta Bharati, Krishnarajanagar, Mysore District, 2001: “परमशिवावताराः श्रीमच्छङ्करभगवत्पादाचार्याः प्रस्थानत्रयभाष्याणि विरचय्य अद्वैत-अत्मज्ञानमेव कैवल्यसाधनमिति स्पष्टं प्रत्यपीपदन् । तदनन्तरकालिका अद्वैताचार्याः सिद्धान्तमिमं ऐककण्ठेन प्रतिपादयन्तोऽपि प्रतिपादनप्रकारेषु वैविध्यं अन्वसरन् । तदिदं वैविध्यं सिद्धान्तस्य न क्षतिकरं किन्तु पुंसां प्रत्यक्-प्रावण्य-संपादनायैवेति.” I am grateful to Sri Anand Hudli for this reference and the following translation: “Śrī Śaṅkara Bhagavatpāda, an avatāra of Parama Śiva, authored the bhāṣyas on the prasthānatrayī (Brahma-sūtras, Upaniṣhads, Gītā) and clearly established that the means to liberation is the knowledge of the nondual self. Āchāryas of later times, while *unanimously propounding the same conclusion, followed a variety of methods in explaining it*. This variety (of methods) is not damaging to the siddhānta, rather it is meant for

achieving inclination (becoming absorbed) in the self by people.”

⁴¹Note that Vācaspati Miśra contradicts Padmapāda and he can be reliably dated to mid-900CE. Śaṅkarācārya is generally assigned the date 788CE-820CE. Even if he were to be dated 650CE as suggested by Nakamura, it would still be only about 150 years more. Politically motivated dates like 500BC, as the data of Śaṅkarācārya, need not be considered by anyone interested in solid historical analysis. See [27] for details.

⁴²I am grateful to Dr. S. Vidyasankar for this giving me this piece of information, during a personal conversation.

⁴³I am grateful to Śri Venkata Subramanian for this information. He also kindly informed me that this author criticizes the commentary of SSS on the Naiṣkarmyasiddhi, which is known as the Kleśāpahāriṇi, as kleśakāriṇi!

⁴⁴I am grateful to Stig Lundgren and Dr. S. Vidyasankar for this information. I personally suspect some political motivation behind Śri Jayendra Sarasvati asking his disciple to study in Māthur. Note that Polakam Rāma Śāstriṇaḥ, a famous and influential scholar who belonged to the Kāñci Maṭha, published an article alleging that SSS had plagiarized his writings from Bhaṭṭa. This also elicited a strong response from SSS, who maintained that his interpretations were completely original, and not dependent on any one else. Śri Jayendra Sarasvati cannot, but be aware of this. As noted previously, the scholars from the Śṛṅgeri Maṭha still follow the traditional interpretations, and I have to wonder if his motivation was merely to counter the influence of the Śṛṅgeri ācārya in Karnataka. The Kanchi Mutt has previously aligned itself with maṭhas opposing Śṛṅgeri Maṭha in Karnataka, notably the Kūḍalī Maṭha which claims itself to be the original South Indian maṭha established by Śaṅkarācārya.

⁴⁵Note that the training in just the pūrva mīmāṃsā and nyāya typically lasts 5-7 years of intensive study, for future ācāryas of the Śṛṅgeri Maṭha.

⁴⁶I have read all books of SSS, published in the English language and also large parts of [4], multiple times. SSS consistently argues avidyā is epistemic in all books. As an aside, when I mentioned that I had read all books in English to a follower of SSS, he mentioned that I would have to read his books in Kannada also. My question is how many books would you need to read, or for that matter write, to “prove” avidyā is epistemic, or that “māyā is not the same as “avidyā”?

⁴⁷Note that this is directly opposite the methodology of both Hacker and SSS who define Śaṅkarācārya as the author of the Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya.