CHAPTER TWO

Ādi Śaṁkara: Vākyārtha-Vicāraṇa

Vākyārthavicāraṇa-adhyāvasāna-nirvṛttā hi brahmāvagatiḥ
nā anumānādi-pramāṇāntara-nirvṛttā

Ādi Śaṁkara

( The comprehension of Brahman is effected by the ascertainment, consequent on discussion, of the meaning of the [the Vedānta] statements, not either by inference or by the other means of right knowledge.)

Introduction

In the foregoing chapter, I made an attempt to engage the problematic of religious language and argued for the conceptual relevance and significance of the hermeneutic character of understanding and meaning in religious language. Further, to instantiate this problem and to draw the contours of

elucidation, I proposed that we shall engage some chosen writings of the trinity of philosophers, namely Ādi Śaṅkara, Wittgenstein and Derrida. In this chapter, my aim is to engage the first of this trinitarian ladder, Ādi Śaṅkara (c.788-820 C.E.). I do this by attempting a conceptual mapping of the interpretative contours that elucidate the most discussed Upanisādic mahāvākya ‘tat tvam āsi’ (‘thou art that’) in some selected writings of Ādi Śaṅkara.

Ādi Śaṅkara - who is also called Śaṅkara or Śaṅkarācārya or Śrī Śaṅkarabhagavadpāda - is generally regarded as one of the greatest philosophical and religious thinkers of India and is credited to have laid strong foundation for the philosophically pre-eminent and religiously unparalleled thought-system called Advaita Vedānta. There exists a sort of ambiguity with regard to the historical periodization of his life and the exact number of his authentic works. More than 300 works are attributed to him! Most scholars agree that Ādi Śaṅkara lived from c.788 to 820 C.E. According to critical scholarship, undoubtedly the following works can certainly be ascribed to him: Brahmāsūtra-Śaṅkarabhāṣya, Upadeśasāhasrī, Bhagavadgītā-Śaṅkarabhāṣya, and the Śaṅkarabhāṣyas on the following
principal Upaniṣads: Brhadāraṇyaka, Chāndogya, Aitareya, Taittirīya, Kena, Īṣa, Kaṭha, Muṇḍaka, Praśna and Māṇḍūkya.²

The exploration into the hermeneutic understanding and meaning of religious language in Ādi Śaṅkara, I contend, is to be located within the framework of Ādi Śaṅkara’s foundational project called Brahma-jijñāsā or Brahman-inquiry. By implication I also intend to engage critically the very idea of constructing the categories of the Self and its Other, their identity and their ensuing significance within the problematic of religious language.³


**Brahma-Jijñāsā as Investigation into the Ultimate Reality**

In the light of the foregoing discussion, one could raise this legitimate question: how does one locate the project of Brahman-inquiry within the problematic of religious language? In order to understand this question further, I think, one needs to ascertain the very nature, meaning and significance of Brahman-inquiry in Ādi Śaṅkara. Of course, this idea is premised on the presupposition that Brahma-Jijñāsā is an instantiation of religious language.⁴ Even a cursory analysis of the major works of Ādi Śaṅkara would undoubtedly show that the very fundamental question he to the *Mahāvākyā ‘Tat Tvam Asi’* (Thou art That)” in George Karuvelil (ed.) *Romancing the Sacred? Towards an Indian Christian Philosophy of Religion*, Bangalore, Asian Trading Corporation, pp. 423-45 and Devasia M. Antony (2009a) “Self and the Subaltern in the Advaitic Religious Language” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 73, No. 4, pp. 266-74.

wrestled with was that of investigating the nature, meaning and significance of the ultimate reality called Brahman or the Self. Etymologically the word ‘Brahman’ is derived from the Sanskrit root verb *bṛḥ* or *brūḥ* meaning ‘to grow great’, ‘to increase’ etc. Its earliest use is found in the Vedas taking various shades of meaning like ‘mysterious force’, ‘sacred utterance’, ‘source of power’ etc. And in Advaita Vedānta, Brahman is said to be the impersonal absolute, the essence, or the Self or Ātman of all beings.\(^5\) Most of the scholars writing on Ādi Śaṅkara’s advaita theory claim that his central teaching can be summed up in three basic propositions contained in a popular Sanskrit saying given below:

1. *brahmasatyaṁ* (Brahman is the sole reality)
2. *jaganmithyā* (the world is *mithyā*\(^6\) )

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\(^6\) Usually the word ‘mithyā’ is translated as ‘illusion’ meaning ‘a false idea, belief, impression or appearance’. To my mind this does not bring out the conceptual complexity of the meaning of ‘mithyā’, that is, *sat-asat-vilakṣaṇa* (neither real, nor unreal, nor both) found in the Advaita literature. For Ādi Śaṅkara, the primary meaning is that since
(3) jīvobrahmaiva nā paraḥ (the individual self [jīva] is not different from Brahman).

It is beyond the scope of our present discussion to critically evaluate the significance of this claim and the justifiability of its philosophic and religious significance. I have discussed it elsewhere. For our purpose suffice to know that Brahman-inquiry (brahma-jijnāsā) constitutes the Brahman alone is the ultimate reality, any other reality if comprehended as different from Brahman, then that reality is of the character of mithyā. In other words mithyātvam means brahma-bhinnatvam, that is, otherness from Brahman. In this sense, the Vedāntins should be called Brahma-vādins and not Māyā-vādins as the latter is usually pejorative in its use. And for Ādi Śaṅkara, mithyā, avidyā, adhyāsa and māyā are cognate-correlative terms. He elaborates it in these words: “…the superimposition of the object, the sphere of the concept of ‘Thou’ and of its attributes, on the subject, the intelligent self, the sphere of the concept of ‘I’ and contrariwise the superimposition of the subject and its attributes on the object…” Again he says: “the term mithyā has two meanings: One, deceit and two, the inexplicable…” For the Bhāmatī tradition “the word mithyā signifies concealment” – See K. Jayammal (1998), A Glossary of Technical Terms in the Commentaries of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and Madhva on the Brahma-Sūtras, Part Two, New Delhi, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, p. 190. The author of the Vedāntaparibhāṣā puts it succinctly: brahma bhīnaṁ sarvāṁ mithyā – See the section on Anumānaṁ, verse 17 in Dharmaja Adhvarin (1984) Vedāntaparibhāṣā, ed. and trans. S. S. Suryanarana Sastri, Reprint edition, Madras, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, p. 57.

central motif in the writings of Ādi Śaṅkara. Responding to the query regarding the justification and appropriateness of brahma-jīvāsā, he clearly lays down its rationale in these words:

Since Brahman is the object most desired to be comprehended through knowledge, It must be the [principal fact in one’s life]. …And the realization of Brahman is the highest human objective; for it completely eradicates all such evils as ignorance etc. that constitute the seed of transmigration. Therefore Brahman should be deliberated up on.8

Further, in response to the logical and epistemological query regarding the knowability of Brahman, he says that a cognitive analysis of the use of the indexical first-person utterances in human linguistic behaviour shows that Brahman is the presupposed ‘transcendental signified’:

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…the existence of Brahman is known on the ground of its being the Self of everyone. For everyone is conscious of the existence of (his) Self, and never thinks ‘I am not’. And this Self (of whose existence all are conscious) is Brahman.\(^9\)

In the above quoted passage, Ādi Śaṅkara is making very important conceptual moves. At first he contends that Brahman is the object of the notion of self, that is, \textit{asmat-pratyaya-viśaya}. And it is known to exist because it immediately presents itself to our consciousness, that is, \textit{aparokṣatvāc ca pratyagātma-prasiddheḥ}.\(^10\) Then again, the Self cannot be proved because it stands as the basis of all proof and thus is established as the logical postulate of all proof: \textit{ātmā tu pramāṇādi-vyavahāraśrayatvāt prāg eva pramāṇādi-vyavahārāt siddhyati}.\(^11\) Further, Ādi Śaṅkara clarifies the notion of the Self and says that the proof of the reality of Brahman is that


\(^10\) Ādi Śaṅkara (1998), \textit{Brahmasūtra with Śaṅkarabhāṣya}, I.i.1.

\(^11\) \textit{Ibid.}, ii..3.7.
it is the ground of the self of everyone: *sarvasyatmatvāc ca brahmāstitvoprasiddhīḥ*.\(^{12}\)

Here arises a significant problem. If Brahman is thus already known, then one might ask: Is it not logically redundant to take up Brahman-inquiry all over again? In reply, Ādi Śaṅkara says that there exists conflicting opinions regarding the distinctive nature of Brahman/Self in diverse schools of thought. And he mentions about eight different and often contradictory conceptions of Brahman available in such traditions. Hence he says that one should investigate the true nature of Brahman by determining the true meaning of the Upanisadic texts.\(^{13}\) But Ādi Śaṅkara categorically says that such an investigation has to be preceded by the appropriation of certain pre-requisites by the inquirer. He calls these pre-requisites *sādhana-catuṣṭaya* and introduces this term while explaining the contextual meaning of the word ‘*atha*’ of the very first sūtra in his *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya*. He elucidates these conditions in this way:

\(^{12}\) *Ibid.*, i.1.1.  
1) *nityānityavastuvivekaḥ* (discrimination between what is eternal and non-eternal),
2) *ihāmutrārthbhogavirāgah* (renunciation of all desire to enjoy the fruit of [one’s actions] here and hereafter),
3) *śamadādi-sādhana-sampat* (the acquisition of tranquillity, self-restraint and other means),
4) *mumukṣutvam ca* (and the desire for liberation.)  

### The Praxis of *Vākyārtha-Vicāraṇa*

From what we have seen thus far, what has become clear is the centrality of the project of Brahman-inquiry. This leads one to ask a further question: How does one go about it? In taking up this question, Ādi Śaṅkara introduces the concept of *vākyārtha-vicāraṇa*. It signifies the conceptual, logical and linguistic analysis of the meaning of a given Vedānta statement about Brahman. In his own words:

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14 Ādi Śaṅkara (1998), *Brahmasūtra with Śaṅkarabhāṣya*, 1.i.1, p. 5.
Vākyārthavicāraṇa-adhyavasāna-nirvṛttā hi brhmāvagatiḥ nā anumāṇādi-pramāṇāntara-
nirvṛttā [It means: The comprehension of Brahman is effected by the ascertainment, consequent on discussion, of the meaning of the (the Vedānta) statements, not either by inference or by the other means of right knowledge.]

Such an understanding of vākyārtha-vicāraṇa, to my mind, becomes a praxis when it is instantiated in the triple steps of śravaṇa (hearing), manana (reflection) and nīdidyāsana (meditation). By ‘praxis’ I mean the general theory of thought and action that comprises among others the ethical and religious dimensions of human life. And I use it to transcend the vexed issue of theory and practice that characterizes the predicament of being human in some philosophical debates. In fact, Ādi Śaṅkara himself alludes to it

15Ādi Śaṅkara (1998), Brahmasūtra with Śaṅkarabhāṣya, 1.1.2, p.7. For the English translation see Ādi Śaṅkara (1996), The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya, p.17.

16 The word ‘praxis’ comes from Greek prasso, which literally means ‘doing’, ‘acting’ and is generally taken to mean ‘practice’ as opposed to ‘theory’. This is not the meaning I intend here. My intention here is precisely to transcend the conceptual and logical
when he remarks that what sets apart the life of a Brahman-realized person
(Brahma-vid or Ātma-vid), who is not merely a possessor of theoretical
knowledge about Brahman (śāstra-vid or mantra-vid), is the child-like
spontaneity that nullifies any false dichotomy between theory and practice.¹⁷
The primary text that can be cited in support of such an interpretation is a
piece of Upanisadic dialogue that takes place between Yājñavalkya and
Maitreyī and commented up on by Ādi Śaṅkara. The text goes like this:
ātmā vāre dṛṣṭavya śrotaṇyo mantavyo nidadhyāsitavyo Maitreyī.¹⁸ It
dichotomy between the duality of theory-practice relationship. To my mind, this
philosophical motif is central to the domain of religious discourse. See “praxis” in Robert
University Press, p. 731.
¹⁷ Ādi Śaṅkara (1996), The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya,
Part - II, III.4.50, pp. 325-26. Further, Ādi Śaṅkara takes the distinction between para-
vidyā (higher knowledge) and aparā-vidyā (non-higher knowledge) of the Muṇḍaka
Upaniṣad to signify the radical difference between mere knowledge of the text (mantra-
vid) and the actual knowledge of the Self (ātma-vid) - See Ādi Śaṅkara (2001) Eight
Upaniṣads with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya, Vol. II, trans. Swami Gambhirananda,
13th Impression, Kolkatta, Advaita Ashrama, pp. 80-2.
¹⁸ Ādi Śaṅkara (1997) The Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of
Śaṅkarācārya, II.iv.5, trans. Swami Madhavananda, 4th edition, 9th Impression, Calcutta,
Advaita Ashrama, pp. 246-47.
means: the Self, my dear Maitreyi, should be realized - should be heard of, reflected on and meditated upon.

Adhyāsa: The Hermeneutic and the Logical Category

Given the hermeneutic pluralism and the diverse and often contradicting interpretations of the mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’ available in the various schools of Vedānta¹⁹, it is imperative that we preface our analysis of the Śaṅkara interpretation of this mahāvākya with a brief note on the philosophy of language and meaning with specific reference to the conception of Brahman-language in the ādvaita-vāda of Ādi Śaṅkara.

It is rather difficult to summarise Ādi Śaṅkara’s view of language, especially his conception of Brahman-language, as it involves elucidation of complex concepts that stand inter-connected pertaining to the domains of

language, knowledge and reality. For Ādi Śaṅkara, the hermeneutical and the logical pre-supposition for the very possibility of linguistic activity and discourse is adhyāsa or superimposition. To my mind, adhyāsa serves as the fulcrum in the advaita-vāda of Ādi Śaṅkara. He analyses it in detail in his introductory remarks called upoddhātaḥ, generally known as the adhyāsa-bhāṣya, in the Brahmasūtra-Śaṅkara-bhāṣya. He makes the following three statements to define it:

[1] …smṛtirūpaḥ paratva pūrva-drṣṭāvabhāsaḥ
(...the apparent presentation, in the form of remembrance, to consciousness of something previously observed, in some other thing.)
[2]…atasmin tad-buddhiḥ (...[the] cognition of something as some other thing.)
[3]…anyasya anyadharma avabhāsatā. (...[the] apparent presentation of the attributes of one thing in another thing.)

—Śaṅkara (1998), Works of Śaṅkarācārya in Original Sanskrit, Vol. III, Brahmasūtra with Śaṅkarabhāṣya, 1.i.2, pp.1ff. For the English translation see Ādi Śaṅkara (1996), The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya, pp. 3ff and
Here it is very important to note that, for Ādi Śaṅkara, the conception of *adhyāsa*\(^{21}\) serves as the very logical basis and the possibility-condition for any given human cognitional activity and discourse. What he is saying is that this coupling of the Self and not-Self, ‘I’ and ‘You’, the Real and the not-Real makes possible the predication of the Self, the embodiment of the Self and all that follows. That is why it is important to understand that *adhyāsa* is a logical concept and not a psychological one. For Ādi Śaṅkara the empirical reality of language is evolved and moulded by the intellect, and is adapted for the practical affairs of life which he calls *lokavyavahāra*.

In our linguistic behaviour, descriptive statements involve the use of a class-idea. And this class-idea which is a function of the intellect falsely presents the unique character of the unique individual. If it is so, further it can also be argued that any attempt at classifying or describing necessarily implies the logical possibility (and not psychological actuality) of misclassification and wrong description as exemplified in the case of the paradigmatic rope-snake

illusion. On my view, the contention of Ādi Śaṅkara is that ascription of general characteristics is contrary to the very unique nature of the thing described. But our empirical language-use gives us no other option. And this activity of describing the unique particular by the universal class-concept is called avidyā. If so, one might ask: What is the nature of true cognition? In reply, Ādi Śaṅkara says that true knowledge, that is vidyā, consists in what he calls vastu-svarūpa-avadhāraṇam.\(^{22}\) That means knowing the unique as the unique by its very essence and not by means of a genus. And further it implies that language cannot represent the uniquely real. This problematic can further be elaborated in this way:

The true cognition… consists in knowing the \textit{that} by thatness alone and not by the what. Since language necessarily employs the class concept, it brings more and more of the what to determine the nature of the \textit{that}. Language can give the \textit{taṭastha lakṣaṇa} and not the \textit{svarūpa lakṣaṇa}. Language necessarily falsifies in as

much as it represents the unique, the brahman or the ātman, by means of class characteristics… By attributing characteristics it brings in plurality into that which is advaya, asanga and nirguṇa. Language represents the unique as the instance of a class, the non-relational as the relational, the non-qualified as qualified. This definitely, according to [Ādi] Śaṅkara is nescience. Language represents the real as what it is not... it gives the idea of a thing which is foreign to it. It brings the characteristics which are not there in the thing itself.\(^{23}\)

In the light of such a description and analysis of language and cognitional ability of the humans, one can understand the justifiability of the radical claim Ādi Śaṅkara makes when he says that in the ultimate analysis even the Upaniṣads and the mahāvākyas too are false because they are linguistic

expressions and as such are products of avidyā! This can be characterized as a sort of antinomy in which contradictory conclusions can be drawn with equal propriety if one fails to distinguish between what is called ‘regulative principles of reasoning’ from ‘constitutive principles of reasoning’.  

Here arises an important problem. If for Ādi Śaṅkara the category of Brahman is not amenable to the subject-object linguistic construction, then what is the status of Brahman-language? To respond to this problem, Ādi Śaṅkara employs the Kena Upaniṣadic conception that

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24 Ādi Śaṅkara (1983) Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, IV.i.3, p. 821 and II.i.14, p. 330. To the objection that if the Vedānta-texts are untrue, how they can give rise to Brahman-knowledge, Ādi Śaṅkara replies that one can be liberated by hearing a falsehood like the dream–experience of a man who imagines himself to have been fatally bitten by a poisonous snake! – see ibid., p.330.

25 Formally speaking, it is in Kant’s critical philosophy that one comes across what is known as ‘antinomies of pure reason’, or the perceived conflict of reason with itself. Each antinomy has a thesis and a contradictory antithesis. The solution to this conflict lies in making the distinction between two types of principles of reasoning: constitutive (showing us how the world is) and regulative (embodying injunctions about how we are to think of it). Antinomies result when regulative principles of thinking are taken outside their realm of theorizing about the world as a whole – See “Antinomy” in Simon Blackburn (1994) The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, Oxford / New York, Oxford University Press, p. 19 and “Kant, Immanuel (1724-1804)” in Robert Audi (ed.) (1995) The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 463.
Brahman is different from the known as well as above the unknown; the dictum of ‘net neti’ propounded by Yājñavalkaya; and the Taittirīya Upaniṣadic idea that Brahman is that ‘from whence all speech, with the mind, turns away unable to reach it’. He then takes recourse to the dialogue that takes place between Bhāva and Vaśkali. Vaśkali the inquirer asks Bhāva to instruct him on the nature of Brahman. Vaśkali puts the question repeatedly but Bhāva remained silent. On being inquired further, Bhāva said: “I teach you indeed, but you do not understand; the Ātman is silence.” That is, upaṣānto-ayamātmā.26 Elsewhere, in one of his prakaraṇa works, Ādi Śaṅkara indicates the significance of contemplative silence as the primordial instantiation of religious use of language in this way:

It is rather strange that under the [yonder] banyan tree a youthful teacher [is sitting surrounded by] disciples who are aged! The

Guru’s comment is silence. And yet, the disciples have their doubts dispelled!  

Delineating this problem in the context of the applicability of the categories that constitute thought-construction to Brahman, Radhakrishnan brings out its intricate hermeneutic texture in this way:

[Ādi] Śaṅkara …enforces his conclusion that all thought is vitiated by a central flaw, by a mass of subtle dialectic, which aims at showing the unintelligibility of every concept which the human mind employs. Though we talk freely about experience, it is impossible for us to understand the true relation between consciousness (dṛk) and the objects of consciousness (dṛśya). Consciousness must be admitted to have some kind of connection with the object which it illumines. Were it not so, there could be any kind of knowledge at any time regardless of the nature of the objects. The kind of connection between consciousness and its objects is neither contact (samyoga) nor

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inherence \((samväya)\), i.e., neither external nor internal. Objectivity does not consist in the fact that \(jñätatā\) (known-ness) is produced in the object … for this effect is not admissible. To say that the objects are those which are practically useful is not permissible … Objectivity cannot mean that the thing is the object of the function of thought \((jñänakaraṇa)\), since it applies only to perceived objects and not those remembered or inferred. …Strictly speaking, all the life and movement belong to the object side, with which, we can only say, consciousness is compresent … and this compresence is assumed as intelligible, since subject and object are not opposed to each other but fall within the universal consciousness.²⁸

From what is said above, one may be tempted to conclude that since Brahman-language operates in the domain of subject-object duality, it is completely pointless. This is a case of over-exaggeration. Though Ādi Śaṅkara says repeatedly that linguistic constructions cannot denote

Brahman, he is not saying that words cannot be used to signify Brahman at all. The implication is that words – including the word ‘Brahman’- cannot denote the reality of Brahman directly. They do it only indirectly.29

The Mahāvākya ‘Tat Tvam Asi’

It is in this context of interrogating the meaning and significance of Vedānta-vākyas or the Upaniṣadic statements that the most celebrated mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’ becomes very important. The term mahāvākya means ‘great sentence’ and any one of the principal great sayings in the Upanisads that signify the unity of the individual self, that is the Ātman, with the ultimate reality called Brahman is said to be a mahāvākya.30

There is a controversy with regard to the number of the mahāvākyas. Karl H. Potter mentions a work called Mahāvākyavivaraṇa in which one is

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told that there are 12 *mahāvākyas*.\(^{31}\) Without going into this controversy, I go by the general assumption that there are four *mahāvākyas*. However, in some writings, one comes across five *mahāvākyas*.\(^{32}\) The four celebrated *mahāvākyas* are the following:

1) ‘*tat tvam asi*’ = Thou art That (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VI.8.7); 2) ‘*aham brahmāsmi*’ = I am Brahman (*Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, I.4.10); 3) ‘*prajñānam brahma*’ = Brahman is wisdom. (*Aitareya Upanisad*, III.5.3); and 4) ‘*ayam ātmā brahma*’ = This Self is Brahman. (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, IV.2)

The *mahāvākyas* ‘*tat tvam asi*’, the chosen *Vedānta-vākyas* for our study, originally appears in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. It occurs nine times in a dialogue that takes place between Uddālaka, the father who in turn becomes the teacher; and Śvetaketu, the son who becomes the student


\(^{32}\) Some sources also add a fifth one: ‘*satyaṁ jñānam anantāṁ brahma*’(*Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, II.1.1)
desirous of liberating religious knowledge.\textsuperscript{33} Heeding the advice of his father Uddālaka, Śvetaketu sets out for religious education. On completing his education he comes back home, rather conceited and arrogant about his new learning. At this juncture, Uddālaka questions him with regard to the knowledge of the Self and contends that all learning is useless unless one has this knowledge of the Self. There is irony, surprise, and challenge in the dialogue between Uddālaka and Śvetaketu. Uddālaka proceeds to instruct Śvetaketu on ‘the one without a second’, that is, \textit{ekam eva advitiyam}, with regard to the religious knowledge of the Self. To elucidate the teaching of non-duality, he uses the parable of deep sleep, the parable of the tied bird, the parable of the bees making honey, the parable of different rivers flowing from different directions and merging into the sea, the parable of the life-giving self that does not die, the parable of the fruit-seed of a tree, the parable of salt and water, the parable of the blindfolded man who reaches the destination on being released from his bondage and finally the parable of the

heated axe meant to discriminate between truth and untruth.\textsuperscript{34} This heuristic device helps Śvetaketu to understand the full import of the utterance ‘*tat tvam asi*’.

**The Śāṅkara Interpretation of ‘*Tat Tvam Asi*’**

We come across the Śaṅkara interpretation of ‘*tat tvam asi*’ mainly in his three works: *Brahmasūtra-Śāṅkara-Bhāṣya*, *Upadeśa-Sāhasrī* and *Vākyavṛtti*.\textsuperscript{35} My aim is not to go into the details of the interpretative scheme available in each of these works separately. Rather I shall critically engage the linguistic meaning-construction and the indicative conceptual structure available in the Śaṅkara argument available in these works.

Ādi Śaṅkara’s discussion of the problem of the nature and meaning of words is found in all of his above mentioned works. In *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya*, the discussion is mainly indicative of the problem of


\textsuperscript{35} See Ādi Śaṅkara (1983) *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, II.i.14, pp.327ff and IV.i.2 & 3, pp. 815-821; Ādi Śaṅkara (1992) *A Thousand Teachings*. *The Upadeśasāhasrī of Śaṅkara*, especially the section called *Tat tvamasi-prakaraṇnāṁ*, pp. 172-202 and Ādi Śaṅkara, *Vākyavṛtti of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*. Among these works *Vākyavṛtti* is generally considered to be not an authentic work of Ādi Śaṅkara.
appropriating the direct or the implied meaning in understanding the import of the Upanisadic utterances. Ādi Śaṅkara does it in the context of determining the meaning of the word ‘atīvādin’: an atīvādin’ is the one by means of the Truth, that is, Brahman. Further we find an elaborate discussion of the problematic of hermeneutic meaning and understanding in his Upadeśa Sāhasrī especially in the section called Tattvasāprakaraṇaṁ, using the exegetical method of anvyaya-vyatireka, the method of positive and negative concomitance. Ādi Śaṅkara does not define it but describes it a logical means by which when on hearing the words in a sentence, one can recollect the word-meanings, discriminate and ascertain the sentential meaning.

This hermeneutic problem of understanding and meaning has been further accounted for in a systematic way in a later Vedāntic work called

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36 Ādi Śaṅkara (1996), The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya, I.iii.8, pp.166 ff.
The word-sense or *padārtha* is divided into two: the direct or the express meaning (*śakti*) and the indirect or the implied meaning (*lakṣaṇā*). *Śakti* or the express sense of the word is seen as the primary denotative capacity of words in relation to the objects. Further *lakṣaṇā* means implied meaning or secondary meaning. And it is conceived in a threefold manner: *jahallakṣaṇā*, *ajahallakṣaṇā* and *jahadajahallakṣaṇā*.\(^{39}\)

Another way to engage the problem is to picture words as sounds associated with meanings. Further meanings are said to be of three kinds. First, the conventional meaning enjoyed by the word in its usual employment is the primary meaning called *abhidhā*. Second, the technical meaning given to words by the experts in different disciplines (e.g., ‘article’ in grammar, ‘premise’ in logic etc.) is what is known as *paribhāṣā*. Third, besides these two types of meanings, words also sometimes have contextual or implied meaning and this is seen to be either partly or wholly different from their primary meaning. This meaning arises due to the metaphorical use of words. This secondary meaning is known as *lakṣaṇā*. Parenthetically

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39 Ibid., pp. 69ff.
I wish to add that in all this, Ādi Śaṅkara does emphasise repeatedly that the primary meaning of a word stands for the class-characteristics. And if it is thought that the word stands for the individual (for example, the word ‘cow’ thought to be standing for the individual ‘cow’) then one can never know the full significance of a word because of the infinite number of such particulars. The upshot of this argument is that words are connected with the species and not with the particular individuals which are incapable of entering into that connection.40

**Exclusive and Non-Exclusive Metaphorization of the Self**

It is this secondary meaning called *lakṣaṇa* (implied meaning or contextual meaning or metaphorical meaning) that is important in the context of our discussion. It can be divided into three types41:

1) Exclusive metaphorization (*jahallakṣaṇa*) where the primary or direct meaning is completely given up for the contextual meaning. For example, in the sentence ‘The village is on the Ganges’ the phrase ‘on

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the Ganges’ is interpreted to mean metaphorically ‘on the bank of the Ganges’.

2) Non-exclusive metaphorization (ajahallakṣaṇā) where the original meaning in its entirety is not only preserved but also extended. For example, the sentence ‘lances enter’ is taken to mean ‘men with lances enter’.

3) Exclusive-non-exclusive metaphorization (jahadajahallakṣaṇā or bhāgtyāgalakṣaṇā) where one part of the original meaning is superseded and another part is retained. For example, the sentence ‘The village is burnt’ means not that the whole village is burnt but that some house are completely burnt, others partly burnt, and some others not affected by fire at all. That means the phrase ‘the village’ means ‘a part of the village’.

The Śāṅkara tradition takes recourse to the exclusive-non-exclusive metaphorization (jahadajahallakṣaṇā) to interpret the mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’. They treat this mahāvākya as a non-tautological identity-

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statement. Elaborating further, Ādi Śaṅkara says that the identity propositions provide answers to the fundamental problematic of conceiving reality as the non-dual Self. To illustrate this, he gives the parable of ten people crossing a river. On reaching the other side, they try to make sure that all the ten have arrived safely. Each one starts counting and finds only nine persons, because one who was counting was leaving himself out. It takes a passer-by to point out that the man counting is the tenth man (daśa mastu)! Thus the declaration of the stranger ‘You are the tenth man’ is significant because it removes the missed identity of the tenth man and this leads to illumination. In the mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’ ['thou art that’], ‘tvam’ ['thou'] is taken to mean ‘the embodied individual’ and ‘tat’ ['that’] ‘a bare particular’, the ‘logical subject’. And as a consequence of doing away with differences as fundamentally non-relational on both sides, one is

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43 Ādi Śaṅkara uses the parable of the tenth man at least 5 times in his writings while explaining the import of the mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’- See Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya,1.iv.7; Taittirīyaopaniṣad-bhāṣya, II; and Upadeśasāhasrī, XII 3, XVIII.174 and XVIII.202.
led to the identity of meaning that stands for ‘pure consciousness’, ‘the unqualified non-dual absolute subject’.

Here one can raise a pertinent problem. Is the intended non-otherness of ‘Thou’ (jīva) and ‘That’ (Brahman) a metaphorical and figurative category? For Ādi Śaṅkara, the use of figurative language presupposes that the speaker knows that the things identified by him are radically different. For example, in the figurative linguistic construction ‘Devadatta is a lion’, Devadatta is not identified as the animal lion. This is not the case with ‘tat tvam asi.’ Here, what is emphasised is the movement from the perceived apparent radical alterity of tat and tvam to their real radical non-alterity. An analogous case in ordinary language would be the expression ‘This is that Devadatta’ and it’s implied meaning. In the words of Ādi Śaṅkara:

…For if the knowledge of the identity of the Self and Brahman were understood [as a figurative conception of identity], violence

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44 Ganeshwar Mishra (1999), *Language, Reality, and Analysis*, pp. 33ff. Another example Ādi Śaṅkara cites as a case of identity–proposition is the statement ‘This is that Devadatta’.
would be done thereby to the connection of the words whose object ... clearly is to intimate the fact of Brahman and the Self being really identical; so, for instance, in the following passages, “That art Thou” (Chāndogya Upaniṣad VI.8.7), “I am Brahman” (Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad I.4.10); “This Self is Brahman” (Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad II.5.19). …Nor, finally, would it be possible, in that case, satisfactorily to explain the passages which speak of the individual Self becoming Brahman: such as “He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman” (Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad III.2.9). Hence the knowledge of the unity of Brahman and the Self cannot be of the nature of figurative combination…

Self and its Other: The Problematic of Predication

In such an understanding of the mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’ as a significant identity-statement, it is important to take note of the fact that lest

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this *mahāvākya* be turned into an empty and meaningless tautology, one has to keep in mind that what gives significance to the identity–statement character of the *mahāvākya* is that the words ‘Thou’ [*‘tvam’*] and ‘that’ [*‘tat’*] hermeneutically retain initially their perceived differences in meaning. Then through the process of exclusion as well as inclusion, the non-difference in their meaning is apprehended. To my mind, this is the pivotal issue on which divergent and often radically different conceptions of the Self and its other do occur. I want to qualify this as the problematic of Self-predication. By implication I have already noted this problematic in the discussion on *adhyāsa*. To pinpoint the problem, the question is that of meaningfully comprehending the connectedness of the individual embodied Self (*jīva*) with the ultimate disembodied Self called Brahman with specific reference to the given, earthly experience of the individual self in its embodiment. In other words, the issue is that of constructing the Self and its predication, that is, the Self and its embodiment that does make sense of being human-bodied in this world without taking recourse to a reductionist hypothesis. William James (1842-1910) addresses this problematic rather concretely and forcefully in these words:
In its wider possible sense … a man’s self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works. …if they wax and prosper he feels triumphant, if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down.\cite{James1950}

Such an understanding of the Self can be characterized as one of direct realism. Against this, one can also speak of what is called ‘the bundle theory of the Self’ as shown by David Hume (1711-76). On Hume’s account, our beliefs in our own continuing selves are beliefs in ‘fictions’. For in introspection we appear to ourselves to be merely “a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” Hume’s contention is that neither reason nor the senses, working with impressions and ideas, can be said to provide us with compelling proof for the existence of a

continuing, unified self. The conception of the early Buddhism that the ‘Self’ is only a conventional linguistic symbol and hence does not refer to a permanent reality (anātmavāda) is also significant in this regard. The problem becomes all the more labyrinthine when one considers the Cārvāka’s affirmation of the empirical Self but the absolute denial of the transcendental Self-as contained in this aphorism: caitanya-visiṣṭa deha eva āṭmā. And the Nāgārjunian conception that reality is beyond the domain of thought-construction and discursive thinking offers another radical claim. Further he says that it is of the character of niḥsvabhāvatā and can therefore be comprehended only by prajñā or transcendental insight. My aim here is not to offer a critical analysis of these varied conceptions of the Self but

rather to indicate the possibility of some radically different conceptions of the Self and the ensuing problem of its predication.

As I have already noted in the beginning, Ādi Śaṅkara engages this problematic of the Self and its predication in his *adhyāsa bhāṣya*. He elucidates the perceived duality that is constitutive of the human predicament and conceptually structures it on the binary between the two notions: that of *yusmad*, that is, ‘thou’, the ‘viṣaya’, the object on the one hand and ‘asmad’, that is, ‘I’, the *visayin*, the subject on the other. I have also argued that his interpretation of the *mahāvākya* ‘tat tvam asi’ is intelligible in this predicament of subject-object duality. The point Ādi Śaṅkara makes is that the practical and everyday life of the humans - which he calls *lokavyavahāra* - undoubtedly presupposes the predication of the Self as a natural activity. An analysis of the everyday linguistic utterances, for example, ‘I am fat’, ‘This is mine’, ‘I am a ‘brāhmaṇa’, ‘I am a husband’ etc. of the humans shows that particular conditions such as caste, stage of life, age, outward circumstances etc. are superimposed on the non-dual Self. This activity of ascription or predication takes place in various ways. They are: intra-personal attributes are superimposed on the
Self (e.g. ‘I am happy because my wife / children are happy’ etc.); attributes of the body are superimposed on the Self (e.g. ‘I am stout / lean / fair’, ‘I am walking’ etc.); attributes of the sense-organs are ascribed to the Self (e.g. ‘I am mute’, ‘I am blind’ etc.); and attributes of the mind are predicated of the Self (e.g. ‘I desire / intend / doubt’ etc.).

The most important question that comes up in the above discussion thus far is this: How can one qualify this natural empirical process of predicating the non-dual Self? In other words, we are asking question regarding its philosophic and religious signification. To my mind, the answer to this question fundamentally depends up on how one constructs the tripartite relatedness and situated-ness of the embodied individual Self, the practical reality of this given empirical world and the ontological reality called the non-dual Self. In other words, the crucial question is that of connecting two seemingly conflicting imaging of the non-dual Self, one which is context sensitive (Ātman) and the other that is context-free (Brahman). In the words of Ādi Śaṅkara:

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Had the names and forms not been differentiated, developed or unfolded, then the nature of the \textit{ātman} as the mass of consciousness devoid of all limiting conditions would have remained unknown or unmanifested.\textsuperscript{52}

Here one needs to take note of some important distinctions employed by Ādi Śaṅkara in his conceptual framework.\textsuperscript{53} A very important heuristic distinction drawn by Ādi Śaṅkara is that of the empirical and the trans-empirical or transcendental Self. The very idea of the empirical Self is necessarily premised on the duality of the subject-object in the sense that it belongs to a subject, the embodied self, who is conscious, and is object-oriented that is ego-logical or intentional. And further this empirical Self is a

\textsuperscript{52} Ādi Śaṅkara’s \textit{bhāṣya} on \textit{Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad}, 2.5.10.

\textsuperscript{53} See Bina Gupta (2003) \textit{Cit: Consciousness}, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp. 8ff. See also Devasia M. Antony (2010e) \textit{A Note on the Metaphysics of Consciousness in Advaita Vedānta}, Unpublished paper presented in the Colloquium on \textit{Reading of Discourses on Consciousness} held at Centre for Philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
temporal entity. That is to say, the empirical Self is context-dependent whereas the trans-empirical or transcendental Self is thought of as context-independent.

Another related and significant distinction is that of the objectual and the subjectual modes of the Self. In the objectual mode the emphasis is on the objective conditions that cause the Self to be. And further in this understanding, the Self itself is looked upon as an object, like any other object. Contrary to this, the subjectual Self means the Self in its non-objectual mode, that is, the Self without locus (āśraya) and not object-oriented (visaya). In this subjectual mode, the Self is seen to be of the nature of self-luminosity (svaprapkāśa) and is understood as the very condition of the possibility of manifestation of all other entities.\footnote{Ādi Šaṅkara (1940) \textit{Brahmasūtra-Catuḥsūtrī: The First Four Aphorisms of Brahmasūtras along with Šaṅkarācārya’s Commentary with English Translation, notes and index} by Pandit Har Dutt Sharma, Poona, Oriental Book Agency, pp.1ff.}

In the light of these above mentioned distinctions, one might raise a very legitimate query: is the Šaṅkara conception of the Self, transcendent or transcendental or both? If by ‘transcendent’ what is meant is the whole range of possible entities or things that exists beyond the limit of
possible experience and by ‘transcendental’ what is meant is the horizon of principles that constitute the very conditions of the possibility of experience, then one can say that the Self is both transcendent and transcendental. It is transcendent in the sense that the Self *per se* goes beyond all possible sensuous experience; it is transcendental in the sense that it is the very condition for the possibility of all knowledge. This is what Ādi Śaṅkara means by the term ‘śvarūpa lakṣaṇa’ or essential definition of the Self. And this is used in contra-distinction to ‘taṭasta laksana’ or non-essential definition in describing the nature of the Self. At this juncture one might legitimately raise the question of the criteriological framework by which the Śaṅkara tradition is purportedly able to determine the very nature of consciousness *per se*. The Advaita literature speaks of three characteristic marks: *aparokṣatvāni* or immediacy, *svayaṁprakāśatvāni* or self-luminosity and *abādhitvatvāni* or non-sublatability. This would mean that the non-dual Self cannot be predicated at all in an important sense, for any predication or

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55 Ādi Śaṅkara (1996) *The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya*, 1.3.9, p.186.
adjectival qualification is a linguistic move that presupposes the operation of the hermeneutic and logical category called *adhyāsa*.

My contention is that the trajectories that emerge from the analysis of the Śāṅkara interpretation of the *mahāvākyya* ‘*tat tvam asi*’ indicate a kind of hermeneutic vagueness and ambiguity. This, as I have noted earlier in Chapter 1, is a constitutive characteristic of the very ‘religious view’ itself. On my view, this gets translated into various ways of conceiving the connectedness between the ontologically real and the empirically real, the context-free and the context-sensitive. This explains why the reflection theory (*pratibimba-vāda*) of the *Vivarana* school, the limitation theory (*avaccheda-vāda*) of the *Bhāmatī* school and the semblance theory (*ābhāsa-vāda*) of the *Vārttika* school available in the Śāṅkarādvaita tradition have all sprouted in the fertile ground of hermeneutic fluidity and ambiguity. It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to explore their nuances regarding the Self and its predication.\(^\text{57}\)

In the domain of the Self as a socio-cultural and religious construct, it is possible that such hermeneutic fluidity and ambiguity can also be misconstrued as the category of exclusive predication. I call it the act of ‘hermeneutic violence’. There exists the possibility that such a misconstrual can be exploited as an ideology to sanctify, legislate, domesticate and support a given socio-cultural oppressive system. And one needs to critique it. This problematic is perhaps best echoed in these words of Ambedkar addressed to his fellow Mahars in 1936:

Why should you remain in a religion that does not value your manhood? Why should you remain in a religion that does not let you enter its temples? Why should you remain in a religion that does not let you get water to drink? Why should you remain in a religion that dishonours you at every step? …That religion which teaches that the unlearned should remain unlearned, that the poor should remain poor, is not a religion but a punishment. …Those who say God exists in all beings and yet treat men as animals are hypocrites. Don’t associate with them. Those who feed ants with
sugar and let men go without water are hypocrites. Don’t associate with them.\textsuperscript{58}

I have attempted elsewhere to bring out the implied philosophical and religious trajectories of the possibility of this type of ‘hermeneutic violence’.

And I have done this by philosophically analysing a Vedāntic dialogue that takes place between a \textit{Brāhmaṇa} and a \textit{Caṇḍāla} with reference to \textit{Maniśāpancakam}, a \textit{prakaraṇa} text ascribed to Ādi Śaṅkara.\textsuperscript{59} It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to go into the details of this philosophical attempt.

\textbf{Concluding Remarks}

My aim in this chapter has been to explore the hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language with reference to Ādi Śaṅkara. I did this by engaging the conception of \textit{vākyārtha-vicāraṇa} in comprehending the interpretative contours that shape the Śaṅkara elucidation of the most


celebrated mahāvākyā ‘tat tvam asi’. I contextualised this mahāvākyā within the wider framework of the pivotal relgio-philosophical inquiry called brahma-jījñāsā in the thought-world of Ādi Śaṁkara. Then I discussed the Śaṁkara argument that Brahman is the most desired object to be comprehended and that the realization of Brahman is the highest human objective. In this connection, I also pointed out the significance of the cluster of eligibility conditions known as sādhana-catuṣṭaya. Further I went on to discuss the problematic of Brahman-knowledge in the context of the logical and the hermeneutic category called adhyāsa. Then I focused my attention on the logical, the conceptual and the linguistic analysis of the mahāvākyā ‘tat tvam asi’ as a significant identity-statement. After locating it contextually in its original home, that is, the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, I made an attempt to elucidate the Śaṁkara interpretation of ‘tat tvam asi’ and the significance of exclusive-non-exclusive metaphorization (jahad-ajahallakṣaṇā) in this context. By implication, this took us to the interconnectedness of language, analysis and reality within the problematic of the philosophic and religious construction of the Self and it’s perceived Other. This, as I have argued, leads us to ask some critical questions with
regard to the ‘connectedness’ between the ontologically real and the empirically real, the context-free and the context-sensitive, the disembodied and the embodied, *Brahman* and *Atman*. An analysis of this problematic, as I have shown, indicates a sort of hermeneutic ambiguity, fluidity and indeterminacy. This, I conclude, is a genuine semantic characteristic of any problematic that is at once religious and philosophic. And there exists the possibility that this available hermeneutic ambiguity is exploited to construct a given socio-cultural and religious system in which there is hegemony and exclusive appropriation of power. Hence the significance of the religio-philosophical challenge to critique it as the case may be.

Now, after having philosophically climbed up the first step of the ‘trinitarian ladder’, I move on to the second step of the ‘trinitarian ladder’, that is, Ludwig Wittgenstein.