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### Conceptions of Brahman: Comparing and Contrasting Sankara and Bhartrihari

Sankara and Bhartrihari are two central philosophers of Vedanta thought. They share common beliefs on the authority of the Vedas and the importance of Brahman as the ultimate, unchanging reality. However, Sankara and Bhartrihari have different understandings of the concept of Brahman and the implications that can be drawn from its existence. Their opinions on Brahman differ in three fundamental ways. Firstly, Bhartrihari places specific importance on grammar and language as the central way to understand Brahman. Bhartrihari believes that Brahman can be understood as having inherent creative qualities, due to Brahman's synonymous relationship with language, while Sankara believes that Brahman is pure consciousness. The second way in which Bhartrihari and Sankara find themselves opposed is in the definition of consciousness. Sankara believes that true consciousness is pure and one in nature, Bhartrihari insists on sabda-tattva or the essence of the word. Bhartrihari believes that words are fundamental to understanding consciousness and Brahman itself. Lastly, Bhartrihari and Sankara differ in their beliefs in the relationship between the self and the ultimate. As a fellow proponent of an astika reality, as well as an affirmer in the authority of the Vedas Bhartrihari's writings, seem to support many of Sankara's central doctrines. However, Bhartrihari may share similar beliefs on a few overarching theories with Sankara; their differences exemplify the careful distinctions that must be made when studying Indian Philosophy.

Bhartrihari, also known/referred to as Harivrsabha<sup>1</sup> (I will use these terms interchangeably when it comes to understanding Bhartrihari's texts), first conceives of Brahman in reference to the word in the Vakya-padiya.<sup>2</sup> Bhartrihari evolves this perspective and starts to create the idea of Brahman as the "essence of the word".<sup>3</sup> Bhartrihari expands upon this stating that Brahman is "prakriya jagato yatah"<sup>4</sup> which means that the world starts from Brahman. This way of understanding Brahman puts Bhartrihari closer to the Samkhya school than the Advaita Vedanta school of thought as it seems to point to the theory of real transformation. However, Bhartrihari also references Brahman as vivartavada or unreal manifestation by stating that Brahman is "'manifested' (vivartate) through worldly objects; it merely puts forth an 'appearance' (vivarta)".<sup>5</sup> This can be seen as a direct reference (although they did not live in the same time period) to Sankara and the Advaita Vedanta concept of Maya or illusory experience. As a Vyakarana (grammar) philosopher it is important to understand that Bhartrihari believes in sabda-brahman which is the ultimate word or sound.<sup>6</sup> He conceptualized sabda-brahman through his belief that language is not simply a means to an end, language is not just the vehicle for thought, thought and language are essential to each other and one cannot exist without the other.<sup>7</sup> Bhartrihari pictures words as vibrations of the universe. He sometimes refers to this as sphota which can be understood as the divine spoken language. He expands on the theory of sphota by

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<sup>1</sup> Natalia V. Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism: Gaudapada, Bhartrhari, and Abhinavagupta*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995) 77.

<sup>2</sup> Natalia V. Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism: Gaudapada, Bhartrhari, and Abhinavagupta*, 78.

<sup>3</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 79-81.

<sup>4</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 81.

<sup>5</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Bimal Krishna Matilal, *The Word and the World: Indias Contribution to the Study of Language* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2017), 84.

<sup>7</sup> Bimal Krishna Matilal, *The Word and the World*, 85.

creating additional concepts such as varna-sphota (a way of measuring the sound of language in units)<sup>8</sup> as well as vakya-sphota (the form of divine language in a sentence).<sup>9</sup> While language is also important to Sankara in many ways, he does not hold it to the same regard as Bhartrihari does. Instead of referencing words to define themselves Sankara views the vedic texts (particularly the Upanishads) as ultimate because they bring about the understanding of Brahman and Atman.<sup>10</sup> Sankara believes that specific phrases within the Upanishads provide tangible value and insight such as “tat tvam asi” or thou art that, which depicts the relationship between the self and the ultimate.<sup>11</sup> This marks an important difference between the two thinkers, Bhartrihari believes that language and grammar are both the way to understanding Brahman and exist fundamentally as Brahman itself, while Sankara contrasts this idea by stating that language is a way to understanding Brahman. In Sankara’s eyes, once one understands pure Brahman and ultimate reality there is no need for word or language anymore because everything that is not Brahman is maya. In Coward’s words, “the Vedas will have been superseded since Sabda pramana is meaningful only when one is in the bondage of avidya”.<sup>12</sup> Another way to understand this is that the vedas, as well as the linguistic (grammar) concepts one receives from studying the vedas, is only important when one is blinded from ultimate reality. Sankara also believes that Brahman is, “beyond attributes and limitations”,<sup>13</sup> and even goes as far as saying that Brahman comes in both real and apparent forms similar to things that appear in our dreams.<sup>14</sup> On the other

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<sup>8</sup> Bimal Krishna Matilal, *The Word and the World*, 84.

<sup>9</sup> Bimal Krishna Matilal, *The Word and the World*, 85.

<sup>10</sup> Harold G. Coward, *The Sphota Theory of Language: a Philosophical Analysis* (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Privated Limited, 1997), 46

<sup>11</sup> Harold G. Coward, *The Sphota Theory of Language*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Harold G. Coward, *The Sphota Theory of Language*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 82.

hand Bhartrihari views Brahman as something conscious and alive with sarvabhīh saktibhir or “manifold powers”.<sup>15</sup> This differs from Sankara’s conception of Brahman because it implies that Brahman splits into many different divisions even though it is one. Instead of unreal manifestation this seems to take on the form of real transformation. While Bhartrihari does not completely subscribe to the theories of either real transformation or unreal manifestation he gives his own solution as Brahman as sabda-tattva or the “essence of the word”.<sup>16</sup> He views each division of Brahman as a distinction of prakriti stating, “the words depend on the objects, when they are trying to express the essence of the universe, but the object, in turn, depend on the words, which provide inner support and foundation...”.<sup>17</sup> This means that words and objects are two parts of Brahman that cannot exist without each other. The word (ultimate consciousness or purusa) relies on the object (prakriti) and the object relies on the word. Bhartrihari views Brahman as the essence of the word and uses the two almost interchangeably stating that the word and objects are “opposing and self-contained powers (saktayah)”.<sup>18</sup> The importance of the word is a primary distinction between Bhartrihari and Sankara. Although Bhartrihari initially seems to be in agreement with many central Advaita Vedanta notions he takes a completely different turn when it comes to the significance of the relationship between divine language and Brahman.

The second main distinction between Sankara and Bhartrihari is their differing perspective on consciousness (caitanya). Sankara’s idea of consciousness can be clearly

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<sup>15</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 82.

<sup>16</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 82.

<sup>17</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 84.

understood in his writings in *A Thousand Teachings*<sup>19</sup>. Sankara tackles the idea of consciousness in his first section of this work titled pure consciousness (caitanya prakarana). After acknowledging pure consciousness Sankara states, “Since the root cause of this transmigratory existence is ignorance, its destruction is desired”.<sup>20</sup> Sankara believes that our current state of consciousness is a transmigratory existence or a passing state. He believes that this state is necessary to rid oneself of ignorance. Sankara takes his point further stating that true consciousness must depend solely on knowledge and renunciation of actions.<sup>21</sup> Sankara then compares the understanding of ultimate consciousness (Brahman) to the performance of a vedic agnistoma sacrifice. Such a sacrifice requires various actions which Sankara believes are a hindrance to attaining the highest consciousness. Sankara notes that actions have the final objective of attaining a particular result.<sup>22</sup> Knowledge on the other hand must be sufficient because knowledge does not require anything to support itself on and knowledge has no pre-ordained destination besides attaining the ultimate. However, knowledge and the pursuit of Brahman only represent one half of Sankara’s idea of consciousness. Atman must also be taken into account for one to understand how to attain ultimate consciousness, it is necessary for one to understand the concept of tat tvam asi (that thou art). In chapter 8 of part 1 (the metric part) of *A Thousand Teachings* Sankara expands on the concept of pure consciousness. He states that Brahman is, “like the sky, is all-pervading, imperishable, auspicious, uninterrupted, undivided

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<sup>19</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings: the Upadeśasahasri of Śaṅkara* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992)

<sup>20</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 103.

<sup>21</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 105.

and devoid of action”.<sup>23</sup> Sankara believes that one can “ponder”<sup>24</sup> on the mantra given in chapter 8 “The Nature of Pure Consciousness”<sup>25</sup> and attain freedom from ignorance and desire which is essentially moksha. Sengaku Mayeda writes that Sankara believes that the understanding of Brahman-Atman identity (consciousness) is the means to attaining final release.<sup>26</sup> This conception of consciousness can be paralleled with Bhartrihari’s understanding of consciousness pertaining to speech and the world. At first Bhartrihari’s view of consciousness seems to coincide quite well with Sankara’s (and other Advaita Vedanta philosopher’s) understanding of consciousness. In the first few verses of the *Vakya-padiya* Bhartrihari’s views seem to align with Advaita Vedanta’s unreal manifestation stating that Brahman “seems to divide itself, assuming different and unreal forms”.<sup>27</sup> However, this does not mean that Bhartrihari necessarily agrees with Sankara’s idea of consciousness as purely based on the pure knowledge of the relationship between Atman and Brahman. Instead Bhartrihari states his own view of consciousness and in the *Vakya-padiya*. Bhartrihari states in verse 1.129, “Whether (everything is presented) as (coming from) the (inner) Self (svamatra) or as (coming from) the higher Brahman (paramatra) it is still defined by the word”.<sup>28</sup> To put this more clearly Bhartrihari believes that whether consciousness is perceived from one’s innermost being (Atman) or from the ultimate perspective of reality (Brahman) it is still reliant upon the divine word. The word is the conduit for understanding the meaning of both self and ultimate, it also “exists without ever being

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<sup>23</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 120.

<sup>25</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 120.

<sup>26</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, *A Thousand Teachings*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 110.

materialized”.<sup>29</sup> Bhartrihari views divine language as something that “thinks itself” or “utters itself”,<sup>30</sup> which means that language exists without ever being created. Bhartrihari sees ultimate consciousness as a creative being and language as eternal. This goes against Sankara’s idea that Brahman is Atman and that Brahman is pure consciousness in itself. Bhartrihari later depicts language as a “vibration” or a light which is constantly made visible.<sup>31</sup> Another noteworthy point is that Bhartrihari believes that meaning can only be understood through a complete phrase. This means that no one part of a phrase can be individually understood to be the whole. Bhartrihari states that speech is the inner consciousness of beings caught in samsara (the endless cycle of birth and rebirth)<sup>32</sup>. He states that if speech (the divine word) did not exist, everything would be as lifeless as stone which is caught in samsara. Bhartrihari’s understanding of consciousness exemplifies the distinction between his ideas of Brahman and Sankara’s ideas of Brahman. While Sankara asserts the position of nirguna-atman (the atman which has no personal attributes)<sup>33</sup> Bhartrihari creates a philosophical system which necessitates an original being that is inherently creative in its consciousness. To reiterate Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta philosophy does not negate the importance and effectiveness of using language to understand the ultimate. In his book Coward states “Sankara maintains that the Vedanta sentences are ultimate”.<sup>34</sup> Sankara believes that the language of the Upanishads are sacred in nature but only because they lead to the ultimate, he believes language to ultimately be maya when compared to the relationship between Atman and Brahman. One might ask, “How can that be so? If the Vedanta sentences are

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<sup>29</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 112.

<sup>30</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 112.

<sup>31</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 113.

<sup>32</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 116

<sup>33</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 118.

<sup>34</sup> Harold G. Coward, *The Sphota Theory of Language*, 46.

ultimate how can they also be maya?” Sankara answers this through an allegory of a prince who is captured in his youth. The prince who is captured does not know who he is, but when he is told that he is a prince he instantly knows his role and purpose, “so also an individual ego (jiva) realizes himself to be Brahman as soon as he hears the mahavakya”.<sup>35</sup> Sankara asserts that the Upanishads open the metaphysical door to understanding the consciousness of self as Atman and the ultimate consciousness as Brahman. A prince does not need to be told twice that he is a prince in order to grasp his own nature, in the same way speech and texts are no longer necessary to Sankara after one understands the ultimate. Bhartrihari retorts concluding that “pure Speech is not only the foundation of the whole inner structure of the universe-it is also the only base and support of all human knowledge”.<sup>36</sup> Speech and grammar are both considered necessary for the reality of consciousness. Speech in of itself cannot be expressed in its pure form so grammar is used to filter and conceptualize speech in a way that can be understood as conscious thought. Both philosophers produce solid theories on the effects of language on the foundation of consciousness in Hindu thought. Sankara’s theory promotes Brahman as formless and pure consciousness whereas Bhartrihari conceives of Brahman ultimately a creative force.

Another part of understanding Brahman (and Atman) that the two philosophers do not see eye to eye on is the concept of the role of the individual in the universe. As understood from previous analysis Sankara believes Brahman to be “devoid of attributes”<sup>37</sup> while Bhartrihari understands Brahman to be the “inner core of the Word”<sup>38</sup>. Each philosopher has their own view on how one should view themselves from the perspective of the individual and should also

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<sup>35</sup> Harold G. Coward, *The Sphota Theory of Language*, 47.

<sup>36</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 118.

<sup>37</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 121.

<sup>38</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 121.



contemplate what it means to live correctly according to this perspective. Natalia Isayeva states in *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism* that, “Bhartrihari’s Brahman, it is swelled up from inside, it is surging by its own potencies, with the ‘seeds’ (bija) of things and meanings”.<sup>39</sup> It is important to note because Bhartrihari’s emphasis on Speech as part of the ultimate means that he implies a different type of self. Sankara’s self is defined in the first person which can be understood as the pure “I”.<sup>40</sup> There is no need for someone who subscribes to Sankara’s theories to rummage for another person other than the ultimate self or the Atman. Therefore one who agrees with Sankara would also agree that anything that is not the ultimate first person or Atman can be thought of as the “non I” or “alter- Sein”.<sup>41</sup> Isayeva uses this term to describe the third person which is non-existent in Sankara’s view (as the self is Atman and Atman is Brahman). Anything that falls within this category of “alter- Sein” can be thought to be maya (illusory) in the eyes of Sankara. Bhartrihari posits that there must be a second person and not simply a first person. The reason for this is the unshakable idea of Speech as the ultimate. Speech cannot speak without communicating to someone or something that can understand it.<sup>42</sup> Although this does not completely disjoin Bhartrihari’s views from Sankara’s views (as one could note Atman and Brahman to be understood in the second person referencing each other), it removes the possibility of Bhartrihari’s conception of the individual directly paralleling Sankara’s conception. Aside from the understanding of Brahman there is another central reason that Sankara’s understanding of proper action is different from Bhartrihari’s understanding. Isayeva states on page 128-129 of her book that, “Bhartrihari fully agreed with the tenets of Mimamsa

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<sup>39</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 124.

<sup>41</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 124.

<sup>42</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 126.

followers in giving priority to the vidhi formulas”.<sup>43</sup> Both Vedanta and Mimamsa schools agree on the authorities of the Vedas for understanding the ultimate. However, the Mimamsakas (or followers of the Mimamsa school) believe in “vedic injunctions”<sup>44</sup> (vidhi) which are direct, clearly stated actions that one should perform in a ritual for a specific result. Sankara on the other hand believes in “explanatory”<sup>45</sup> (arthavada) sayings which view many of the passages metaphorically and indirectly. Even so Bhartrihari’s agreement with the Mimamsa school is not outwardly obvious. He does not explicitly state full agreement with the Samkhya Karika and its 25 (or 26) fundamental elements since he believes in the Word as the most fundamental unit. Instead he maintains that one must perform vidhi in order to create a relationship with Speech (the ultimate). Isayeva notes that this can be understood on a “biblical” parallel where one performs a ritual in order to communicate with the ultimate.<sup>46</sup> By performing the vidhi Bhartrihari believes that one can move from being a stranger to Speech (the ultimate/Brahman) and become a “addressee”<sup>47</sup> who is recognized by Speech. The vidhi opens the door for conversation with the eternal Word, therefore vidhi are of utmost importance to Bhartrihari. Bhartrihari searched for a way to communicate with the ultimate through ritualistic action while Sankara believed that the way to the ultimate was to realize that the true nature of the self was to recognize themselves as the ultimate. The more minute difference theories on the role of the individual lead to a great rift between the followers of the two thinkers and a clearer contrast between the two conceptions of Brahman.

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<sup>43</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 128-129.

<sup>44</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 128.

<sup>45</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 128.

<sup>46</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 129.

<sup>47</sup> Isayeva, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism*, 129.

As the ultimate entity which encompasses all things both real and illusory the concept of Brahman is essential to understanding Hindu thought. However, the qualities of Brahman remain highly debated amongst philosophers even to this day. Advaita Vedanta thinkers that follow the logic and beliefs of Adi Sankaracharya believe that Brahman is ultimately pure consciousness. They believe that the Vedas are to be used as a path to understand ultimate self (Atman) and how it pertains to ultimate reality (Brahman). What the Advaita philosophers don't believe in is a version of Brahman that has inherent qualities. They do not believe that Brahman can be inspired or moved to action. Followers of Sankara also do not believe anything that the eye can see is truly real. There may be use for everyday objects and sensory perception but only in that it allows for the ultimate to reveal itself. Nevertheless, not all Hindu thinkers have congruent beliefs. Bhartrihari is an example of such a philosopher who views Brahman in a different light. Bhartrihari believes that Brahman is equivalent to the Word or in other words divine language. Bhartrihari's views Brahman as something that is more personal with inherent qualities. He also believes to some extent that the sensory world is not maya as the rituals described in the Vedas can be used to contact the divine Word or Speech and therefore are not completely illusory.. It is impossible to oversimplify the important variations of the fundamental principles in Hindu philosophy. Each view holds its weight and is adapted by the generations to come. It is not the unity but the constant discourse on important concepts such as Brahman that make Indian Philosophy truly fascinating.

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