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Vedānta and the Western History of Ideas: A Comparative Study of Critical Approaches

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Abstract

This research article explores the approach of the Western philosophical tradition to understanding the nature of the self and existence and contrasts it with the Advaita Vedānta philosophy. While Vedāntic views are not identical, they reveal the limitations of rationality in knowing the nature of the self. To analyse literature from a Vedāntic perspective, it is essential to explore the literary text's underlying assumptions and evaluate its representation of the self and human existence based on concepts of Vedāntic philosophy. The article then traces the evolution of metaphysical and epistemological problems concerning the self and reality in Western thought from Plato to Jacques Derrida. Additionally, it investigates the similarities and differences between Western literary criticism and Vedāntic philosophy concerning the status of literature as a discourse of knowledge. The article concludes by emphasising the potential benefits of considering alternative philosophical approaches beyond the Western intellectual tradition.

Keywords: Self, existence, Vedānta, knowledge, reality.

Scholars of Indian philosophy have long grappled with reconciling the speculative with the empirical. However, there are points of convergence concerning the philosophical problems in Indian and Western philosophical thought. This is mainly because Indian philosophy is not merely rooted in intuition and speculation. The philosophies can be transformed into theoretical frameworks with concrete logical structures.

At the core of every Indian philosophical school is the premise of spiritual liberation, while there is also a logical framework of concepts, notions, and ideas. While beginning a detailed study of both philosophical traditions, one is confronted with the palpable difference in how ideas of self, consciousness, being, existence, and time are treated in each.

In the Western tradition, the approach to attaining knowledge about the nature of such aspects is based on mind and intellect, whereas the Indian tradition considers consciousness as being beyond everything and, at the same time, all-encompassing.

The caveat in comparing Indian philosophy with Western philosophy is that both seem incommensurable. Western metaphysics concerns itself with the waking consciousness,

which causes it to be pragmatic, particularistic, and analytic, while Indian philosophy is contemplative, imaginative, speculative, and practical, all at the same time. The introspective nature of Indian philosophy focuses on the nature of the Absolute Self, understood as pure, undivided, non-dual consciousness in the Vedāntic tradition. It is of consequence to draw comparisons between the intellectual traditions of India and the West based on their treatment of the nature and status of self and reality, as doing so has exposed to us the finitude of mind and reason. It was found that the extent of mind and intellect is limited and minimal as opposed to that of consciousness, which is infinite.

Vedānta is a branch of Indian philosophy that concerns itself with the ultimate nature of reality and the relationship between the individual self, *ātman* and the ultimate reality, Brahman. Advaita Vedānta is one of the most dominant sub-schools of Vedānta that teaches the identity of the individual self and the ultimate reality. The term 'Advaita' translates to non-duality, meaning that the individual self and ultimate reality are the same. The philosophy is based on the ancient Hindu śāstras called Upaniṣads, which form the concluding part of the Vedas, the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism. The oldest and most influential commentaries on Advaita Vedānta were written by Shankara, an Indian philosopher who lived in the 8th century CE. Advaita Vedānta teaches that liberation from worldly bondage (*mokśa*) can be attained through self-knowledge (*ātmā jnāna*) and that the goal of human life is to realise the non-dual nature of reality.

In Advaita Vedānta, the ultimate reality is understood as a non-dual, unchanging, absolute consciousness known as Brahman. The Self, or Atman, is said to be identical to Brahman and is eternal, unchanging, and infinite. The knowledge that the individual self is a temporary illusion created by the mind comes from realising the non-dual nature of reality and the self. According to Adi Shankaracharya, there is no difference between Brahman and the individual self. While one is ignorant and has not realised the Self, the individual existence of the self appears to be real, but it is not. The Self is neither ātman nor soul. It is Brahman. Brahman is existence. Brahman is consciousness. Brahman is bliss. This does not mean that Brahman exists, Brahman is conscious, or Brahman is blissful. Instead, it means that Brahman 'is' these things. Existence, consciousness, and bliss are not the Self's attributes but aspects that represent its very nature. The Self in Vedānta is the substratum upon which all action happens.

Although Western literary criticism and Vedāntic philosophy are fundamentally different fields with distinct goals and methods of interpretation, both intersect in that they are concerned with understanding the nature of reality and the human condition. Literary criticism aims to understand how literature reflects and shapes our understanding of the human experience. In the West, literary criticism probably began twenty-five hundred years ago in ancient Greece when Plato, Socrates' most well-known student, expressed his vehement disapproval of poetic writing and advocated banishing the poets from his utopian world of the Republic. Plato expounded a theory of Forms to tackle the problem of appearance and reality. Splitting the world into an ideal world and a physical world, he asserted that the world of objects as it appears to the senses is defective and does not correspond to reality as it is not independent and self-sufficient. A higher, spiritual realm subsists with unchanging eternal 'Forms' or 'Ideas' knowable only through reason. The ideal Forms in this transcendental realm comprise blueprints of pure objects. Their qualities are reflected as characteristics of the objects in the physical world, a world which draws its

existence from the higher realm. The true essence of worldly objects also lies in the ideal Forms. Before an object becomes an object, its Idea exists. This Idea is the essence of the object and is not merely conceived in the mind of a human being but has an independent existence. This renders the tangible objects of the world inferior to the Forms or Ideas existing in the ideal world and hence imperfect, 'twice removed from reality.' The true nature of specific mysterious ideal Forms even eludes the intellect. Ontologically, for Plato, the intelligible realm is higher than the visible realm, which means that appearance is lower than the idea.

For Plato, literature was not a valid means of knowledge as mimesis could only furnish objects of opinion, which were opposed to the objects of knowledge, the only custodians of the truth. The Idea is the pure original, the object merely its distorted copy. The pure Self was perfect. The individual self was an imperfect reflection with perfect characteristics. Art was further a product of an imitation of any already imitated object and was farther from reality. This appears to be in tandem with the Vedāntic idea of the Ātman and Brahman. The Form corresponds to the ever-present, unchanging reality or the Absolute Self, Brahman. The objects are the individual selves that are subject to death and decay.

While Plato regarded art as a mimetic representation of reality, his student Aristotle accepted the idea to a certain extent and considered mimesis a superior quality. He believed that art could represent the truth and did not invalidate the act of imitation. In contrast to Plato, who believed that sense perception and imagination were faulty means of arriving at the truth and that intellectual understanding and *a priori* reasoning were superior faculties, Aristotle believed that sense perception and induction were the means of acquiring knowledge of the particulars. Deductive reasoning, in turn, leads one to the knowledge of universals. The Vedāntic understanding of the Absolute Self is that it lies beyond the reasoning of any kind and can only be known through direct experience by the discerning intellect. In contrast, Aristotle claimed that the truth of existence is founded on reason. Vedānta insists that reality can only be known through pure intelligence.

For Aristotle, literature was a valid means of knowledge. He believed that, at intellectual and conceptual levels, art as a reflection of nature served as an instrument to perfect the senses. Sophisticated art imitates nature's organic unity and has the power to evoke strong emotions in the viewer. Like the nature of Aristotle's philosophical treatises on the subject, his views on the function of art were prescriptive since, in his mind, art, as opposed to being something far removed from reality, was instead that which served to enhance the perception of reality. In his *Poetics*, a treatise on tragic poetry, Aristotle defines the idea of *catharsis* not as a specific function but as a product of 'tragedy' capable of leading the reader to a heightened understanding of the world. Tragedy has a curious function of presenting things for what they might be, not as they fundamentally are. Interestingly, this is how he also defines the metaphysical concept of 'essence': "as it might be.'' According to Aristotle, Art's function is not to present a view of reality that is definitive but that which is suggestive. He further used the philosophical idea of 'universals' to illustrate the poetic process involved in reading and writing. According to Aristotle, the writer uses the universals to imitate and write, and the reader, in turn, uses them to interpret the poetry.

As opposed to the mimetic criticism of Plato and Aristotle, pragmatic criticism evaluates the literary work based on the 'purpose' served by it in terms of engaging readers

with aesthetically pleasing effects and eliciting interpretative responses or providing moral guidance on how to lead life. Horace of Rome and Longinus of Greece insisted that poetry is meant to 'teach and delight.' However, in his critical expositions, Longinus went beyond this primary function to a loftier, more intense ideal of sublimity. In dealing with a writer's relation to his work, Horace talked about the social and religious function of literature. He accorded a moral function to literature. Good literature should give honest advice and teach one to be ethical. Longinus had a relatively modern approach that opposed the classical views of both Aristotle and Horace in that it regarded the quality of the 'sublime' as spiritual rather than technical and linguistic. The irresistible sublime, which inspires awe, overpowers reason, and has an everlasting impact on the mind, was deemed superior to the intellectually appealing and persuasive language. From the loftiness of powerful ideas to the creative expression of pure emotions epitomising nature, the sublime could even emanate from the artistically organic arrangement of words in a paragraph. The central purpose is to evoke a sense of wonder in the reader's mind and find a connection between the human and the divine by means of literature.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, the English Renaissance brought about the intellectual movement of humanism in which the human being became the centre. The focus shifted from religion to the individual. Alexander Pope advocated reading the self and gave the concept of 'wit' as a tool to know and understand. Like Aristotle, Philip Sidney asserted that poetry was an imitation of nature superior to nature itself. Poets made nature look more beautiful. This implies that to Sidney reality was inferior to the ideal world poets portrayed in their works. Poetry, with the help of powerful words, could transform a simple scenery of nature into fanciful and idealistic worlds: "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden" (Sidney 85). He also agreed with Horace and Longinus that the purpose of literature was to teach as well as delight. A good poem must inspire the reader to act morally.

Ben Jonson held the view that knowledge was founded on reason. Senses only played a minor role. The soul refined the input gathered by the sense organs and employed reason to acquire knowledge.

> Knowledge is the action of the soul and is perfect without the senses, as having the seeds of all science and virtue in itself; but not without the service of the senses; by these organs the soul works: she is a perpetual agent, prompt and subtle; but often flexible and erring, entangling herself like a silkworm, but her reason is a weapon with two edges, and cuts through. (Swinburne)

Jonson felt that poetry could not be spontaneous. A masterpiece could only result from outpouring the 'treasures of the mind' combined with an exercise of the 'natural wit of the poet'. The mind of the poet, tempered with experience over time, was reflected in the poem's language. John Dryden also believed that poetry could not be spontaneous. In crafting literature, he believed that the poet did not imitate but represented nature and life. In so doing, the poet added his/her personality to the literary work and crafted it to perfection.

In the age of enlightenment (or reason, as the eighteenth century was alternatively famous in Europe), critical thinkers initiated "an era of humanitarian, intellectual and social progress, underlain by the increasing ability of human reason to subjugate analytically both the external world of nature and the human self" (Habib 114). A clear line was drawn between mind and matter. Francis Bacon devised the method of inductive reasoning and contended that the world should be viewed objectively and accurately. The sceptical thinker René Descartes expressed his 'doubt' with respect to sense perception and rational understanding and became an exponent of mind-body dualism, thus declaring, *"cogito, ergo sum"* or "I think, therefore I am." The mind was the individuated substance that thought and, therefore, was more intimate and genuine. At the same time, the body was an external, spatial, temporal, and material extension and hence, distant, and less reliable.

Another prominent thinker of the age, Benedict Spinoza, believed that the entire world was made of one supreme, infinite substance, God, "refracted differently in the attributes of mind and matter" (Habib 116). Space, time, causality and all the objects of the material world are dissimilar modes of the supreme substance, hence unreal. Advaita Vedānta holds a similar view in which there is no place for spatiality, temporality, and causality for the one who has realised the true Self. However, these attributes shape the reality of the mind limited by ignorance for the one who has not realised the Self yet. Since the mind and matter are made of the same substance, they cannot affect each other. In his commentary on the *Ashtavakra Gita*, Swami Chinmayananda explains a similar phenomenon in Vedānta:

> This 'relationless relationship' is the only relation between the Real and the unreal, between true and the false. The post supports the ghost; yet, the post never touches the ghost. The dreamer suffers, struggles, endures and weeps in his sorrows and tragedies; yet I, the waker, is not affected by tragedies of the dreamer in me. When we reflect upon this unique relationship, our reverence for the Self increases. The equipments of experience project their fields of experiences and create for themselves a world of joy and sorrow, success and failure, birth and death and in the midst of it all, unaffected by them, stands the Self. This Self am I; the word play derives its existence from Me, the Self. Indeed I am the most worshipful, the eminently adorable factor in existence. (65)

Thus, the Absolute Self lies independent of the individual self in the Vedāntic understanding. Every phenomenon, including the play of language, appears in the all-pervasive, eternal, and infinite Self. Spinoza understands the substance or the essence as the cause and the material reality as the effect. In Shankara's Vedānta, Brahman is the essence of all reality, but it is not the cause, nor is the apparent world the reality. The world never exists. It is only an appearance. Like the Vedāntins, Spinoza proclaims the existence of eternity. However, as Durant points out, his eternity is not the same as "ever-lastingness" (242). In his *Ethics*, Spinoza explains that human beings can experience an eternal dimension of eternity in the mind which need not be confused with memory or imagination. Spinoza called for developing a means to refine the intellect to reach a precise understanding of the truth.

John Locke studied the extent of human understanding and determined what was knowable by humans and what was not. According to Locke, the human mind is devoid of any knowledge at the time of birth, as he proposed through the concept of *tabula rasa* or the

mind as a blank slate. "There are no inborn truths for Locke" (Krishnananda). Only experiences in terms of sensations and reflections can provide authentic knowledge, sensation being the perception of the external world through the senses, and reflection as the contemplative function of the mind that gives information about the mental processes and operations going on in the mind. Locke, however, held that the sense experiences that could provide knowledge had their cause in material substance, which was ultimately unknowable. For Locke, the world and the mind were two separate entities. The personal identity of a 'being' depended on consciousness, not substance. This consciousness was derived from memory and was a psychological entity, a faculty of the mind. However, in Vedānta, consciousness is not dependent on memory but rather the underlying essence of everything. It encompassed both mind and matter.

In literary writing, Locke favoured using traditional language, which was more precise and unambiguous in expression. For him, literary language was an authentic means of acquiring knowledge. He militated against using figurative language, employing metaphors and allegories, and proclaimed its significance in imparting knowledge. Perhaps, in his time and age, Locke had anticipated Derrida's argument concerning logocentrism and had hence called for clarity in language and coherence of expression. This is opposed to the Vedāntic idea of using language in a literary text. Vedānta employs suggestive, metaphorical, allegorical, and analogical language to indicate the truth. This is attributable to the fact that the reality that Vedāntic literature serves to indicate has a nature different from that of the empirical reality, the expression of which has been advocated by Locke to be unambiguous and devoid of the creativity and artistry of language that might divert the reader's attention away from the object of discussion.

David Hume, a Scottish thinker, modified Locke's claim that gaining knowledge of the external world was possible through ideas and argued that it was only feasible for the human mind to know the 'ideas' and not the external world. The external objects, whether real or illusory, could only be known through perception. Hume gave importance to rationality, common sense, and reason in the aesthetic judgement of a work of literature. However, here, the significant problem is that nothing can be known for sure because the mind stands as a separate entity regarding the world. The ideas existing within the mind can know the external world but can never have "self-evident knowledge of anything" (Krishnananda). Hume was thus against the idea of the existence of universal knowledge. "Both Locke and Hume rejected the Aristotelian concept of 'substance' or essence as the underlying substratum of reality" (Habib 117). Vedānta, on the other hand, presupposes the presence of an 'essence' underlying all the objects and phenomena that appear in the world. The primary subject matter, as well as the focal point of the entire Vedāntic discourse, is the transcendental essence, ultimately the true nature of the Absolute Self or Brahman.

While Locke and Hume did not deny the presence of a substance beneath the objects of reality, they did not consider it a term of importance in the definition of the Self:

> *Self* is that conscious thinking thing, (whatever Substance made up of whether Spiritual or Material, Simple or Compounded, it matters not) which is sensible or conscious of Pleasure and Pain, capable of Happiness or Misery, and so is concerned for its *self* as far as that consciousness extends. (Stanford)

To understand the difference between the ideas of Self in Locke and Vedānta, it is crucial to define what consciousness means in the two intellectual traditions. In Vedānta, consciousness is not a mere awareness of the rational Self because the Self is not rational at all. The Advaita Vedāntic Self is a transcendental entity that lies beyond the rational mind. Anything that can be perceived as one's identity cannot amount to the Self since the Self is not qualified in Advaita Vedānta. It is pure and attributeless. This is why the Self or the consciousness cannot be reduced to a "thinking thing," only the mind can be identified and differentiated from others in such a manner. Locke, on the other hand, tries to define consciousness as an attribute of personal identity:

> … to find wherein personal identity consists, we must consider what PERSON stands for; which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it … For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes every one to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done.

The ontological hierarchy of Vedānta is different from that of the empirical philosophy in that Vedānta treats the Absolute Self as the highest and the individual self as the lowest. In contrast, empiricist philosophical thought considers the individual self as the highest. While Vedānta understands the consciousness to pervade all reality and contain within it the mind, body, and everything else there is, the Western idea of consciousness is limited to the awareness of the body-mind complex and the space and time in which it is located. To a Vedāntin, consciousness is not a characteristic/faculty of the mind but an all-pervasive, eternal, and infinite Self that can be known only through direct experience.

Immanuel Kant's thought probably comes the closest to Indian philosophical systems in epistemology and metaphysics as he draws clear binaries between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds, knowable and unknowable objects, and experiential knowledge and faith. A thing-in-itself, separated from such aspects as its spatiality, temporality, and causality, is a noumenon, and its appearance available to human experience is a phenomenon. *A priori* judgements or reasoning can only determine the phenomenon through the superimposition of concepts onto the objects of knowledge. Noumenon lies beyond human experience and can, therefore, not be known. However, it is the substratum of all experiences and provides sensory information to facilitate the construction of appearances in the mind. The established fundamental laws of nature also subscribe to the phenomenon and not the noumenon as they describe the nature and structure of reality filtered by the assumptions and perceptions of the human mind.

Kant's transcendental idealism, therefore, denies both empiricism and rationalism as absolute sources of knowledge. Instead, Kant puts forth the concept of judgement. The mind, for him, is not merely an 'experiencer' of sensations but an active contributor to the

production of meaning, thus resolving the problem arising due to blind faith in the material of the senses. The subjective material of the senses is converted to objective knowledge through understanding which takes place at the level of the mind due to "the presence of a unifying consciousness or synthetic unity of apperception" (Krishnananda). Kant considers the pure concepts or categories of understanding as *a priori*, which means that concepts precede experience and are universal, independent of and necessary for experience. The concepts provide the *a priori* element to the mind to rearrange the sequence of atomistic sense impressions into cause-effect relationships, further leading to the cause-effect duality in the experiencer's mind (Lavine 195).

The Kantian idea of reality differs from Vedānta in that it presupposes the unknowability of 'things-in-themselves' or the noumena. Vedānta, on the other hand, affirms that reality is knowable even though one must go beyond reason and the intuitive dimension of consciousness to realise its eternal, infinite, causeless and changeless existence, only to realise that one is forever one with that pure consciousness. One implication of this idea is that the world's objects merely appear in the mind. Vedānta claims that even the mind is unreal and simply an illusion that momentarily arises and later dissolves into the substratum of consciousness. The mind is a stream of thoughts. A break in the stream is equivalent to the transcendental condition of 'no mind' when the mind has dissolved into the endless sea of consciousness. It is important to note here that, as in the Kantian philosophy of knowability, the reality in Vedānta goes beyond reason and sensible intuition. It cannot be understood as a part of the psychological map of the mind. In Kantian metaphysics, there is no connection between the categories existing in the mind and those from the standpoint of absolute reality. This is due to the inherent lack of a universal substratum underlying all phenomena in the ontology and epistemology of the Kantian position.

A remarkable similarity between Advaita Vedānta and Kantian idealism is that both would agree that the mind is responsible for causation. However, while on the one hand, Kant believes that though pure concepts of understanding are within the mind, there is a world 'out there', a separate reality that can be perceived and cognised, on the other, Shankara proclaims that the entire world is a lie. Only the essence or the Absolute Self truly exists. There is no distinction between the noumenon and the phenomenon. This difference in perspective again stems from the fact that the Kantian understanding is still rooted in the Western philosophical tradition, which regards consciousness as specific to an individual. This is opposed to the idea of consciousness as accepted in the Vedāntic philosophy: all-pervading and all-encompassing. The mind is within the consciousness and not vice versa. These concepts of understanding are hence "significant only epistemologically, that is, in relation to our knowing; they have no significance metaphysically, or ontologically, that is, in relation to reality" (Lavine 196).

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel completes the metaphysics of Kant by keeping the 'mind and matter' principle and touting 'reason' as the essence of reality. Rationality is supreme. The world is a logical system characterised by 'internal relations' in Hegelian philosophy. He puts forth the argument of phases. Nothing remains the same forever. Everything undergoes a gradual transformation. Every part significantly contributes to the whole. Independently, the theses, antitheses and syntheses are incomplete and insufficient with no individual meaning, but together they form the Absolute. However, this Absolute of Hegel stands in stark contrast with the Absolute of Advaita Vedānta as it is mutable. This

Absolute also depends on the material world for its existence and evolution. In Advaita Vedānta, the pure consciousness or the Absolute Self is immutable and devoid of any dependencies on the material or abstract world, with it being the only non-dual reality. Another significant difference is that Hegel's idea of the Absolute is centred on reason. It does not accommodate the concept of intuition as a valid means of knowledge. However, in the epistemology of Advaita Vedānta, 'reason' is inferior to 'intuition.' Intuitive knowledge gained through direct experience is used to verify and validate the reasoning given in empirical language.

In opposition to the Cartesian position, Jean Jacques Rousseau discarded reason as an effective tool to understand and develop the self and gave the idea of an 'atomistic' self. According to him, one's identity could be derived from one's emotions at the level of the individual. To Rousseau, 'feeling' was superior to thought. Arthur Schopenhauer also believed that rationality was not the hinge on which the entire world was pivoted. Instead, he gave importance to the 'Will' - a mindless, aimless, non-rational impulse at the foundation of our instinctual drives and the foundational being of everything (Wicks). He contended that there was unity in the essence of the universe. To know oneself to the core would imply knowing the whole universe. This comes closest to the Vedāntic view of the Self. Schopenhauer's view profoundly influenced Friedrich Nietzsche that the self could be understood in terms of the 'will', but he rejected it as a pessimistic perspective to understand existence. The reason behind this was that this 'will to life' was also the cause of sorrow in this world as it eternally remained unfulfilled. Everything that is born must face death. Therefore, to improve upon this idea and cleanse it of this impurity of impermanence, Nietzsche gave the concept of 'will to power', which is a psychological principle that states that what drives the world is the urge to dominate over the other. There is an evident disparity between Nietzsche's philosophy of the 'will' and Advaita Vedānta in that the former involves a dualistic worldview. Nietzsche believed that the traditional concept of the self is an illusion and that the true nature of the self is a "will to power" constantly striving to assert itself and overcome limitations.

The existentialist philosophers came quite close to Vedānta in that they focused their discussion on the nature and status of being. However, there are differences between the two philosophical standpoints in the basis on which they approached the concept of the being. Existentialists had the contention that existence came before essence. Jean-Paul Sartre famously said, "Existence precedes essence," and argued that human nature was not founded on an immanent, universal ground. He regarded existentialism as a sort of humanism and argued that individuals were equipped with choices and free to act as they wished. External entities like fate, genetics or social factors did not govern them.

Sartre explained consciousness as nothingness. He believed that the self is not predetermined, but actively created by the individual. Individuals are fundamentally free and responsible for their own existence. The self is always in a state of becoming and not a fixed and static entity, and individuals are always aware of their own freedom, which results in anxiety. On the other hand, Advaita Vedānta teaches that the individual self is not separate from ultimate reality, and therefore, the concept of free will is understood differently. In Advaita Vedānta, free will is seen as an illusion caused by *māyā*. The goal is to transcend *māyā* (which causes them to experience a sense of separation from ultimate reality and to believe in the existence of a separate self with free will) and realise the non-dual nature of

reality which leads to the understanding that the individual self is not separate from ultimate reality and, therefore, not capable of independent action or free will.

Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher, was considered one of the most influential figures in existentialism and phenomenology. He was the first philosopher in the Western tradition to have discussed the concept of the ontological entity *Dasein*. Like Vedānta, Heidegger believed in the transcendental nature of the being. The difference between the Heideggerian conception of being and the nature of the Self in Advaita Vedānta is that while Heidegger considers the being to be in a dynamic progression towards the Being, for Shankara, the realisation of one's essential nature as the Absolute Self does not involve a gradual process of awakening but is only the dawn of knowledge via the removal of ignorance.

Both Heidegger and Advaita Vedānta stress the importance of being present and aware of one's existence. Both also emphasise the importance of self-awareness and the need to raise doubts about one's existence. However, there are also some significant differences between the two. Heidegger's work is often seen as a critique of traditional Western metaphysics, while Advaita Vedānta is rooted in the ancient Indian tradition. Heidegger believed that human existence is characterised by a sense of "thrownness" and "fallenness". At the same time, Advaita Vedānta teaches that the goal is to realise the non-dual nature of reality and to be liberated from the cycle of rebirth. Heidegger's understanding of human freedom is rooted in the idea of *Dasein* (Being) and its possibilities. In contrast, Advaita Vedānta's understanding of freedom is rooted in liberation from the illusion of the individual self.

In existentialism, individual freedom is understood as freedom to make choices and create one's own meaning in life. Existentialists believe that human existence is inherently meaningless and that individuals must create their own purpose and meaning through their choices and actions. They also believe that this freedom brings a sense of responsibility and accountability for one's actions. So, while both Vedānta and existentialism emphasise individual freedom, in Vedānta, the goal is realising the ultimate reality of Brahman (objective truth), whereas, in existentialism, it is creating one's own meaning in life (subjective truth).

In 1966, at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, USA, Jacques Derrida, while critically engaging with the structuralist ideas, inaugurated the paradigm of poststructuralism in a lecture titled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," delivered at an international colloquium on "The Language of Criticism and the Science of Man." This lecture was later published, in 1967, as a part of his collection of essays, *L'écriture et la différence* (*Writing and Difference*). At the beginning of the essay, Derrida necessitated the "interpretation of interpretation" (351) rather than the interpretation of things while quoting Montaigne. In critically reading classical Western philosophy, Derrida inferred that epistemology construction in the Western tradition had always been pivoted on the concept of structure. In this context, he attended to the slipperiness of language. He hence called for looking at the presumptions that went into arriving at any signifier's content, meaning, or referent. He asserted that the contingent, dynamic, and pluralistic nature of language, could only enable the construction of an abstract collection of signs instead of a concrete structure of philosophy. Derrida advocated that philosophy did not need a centre, as

it largely depended on language, which was essentially mythological. Vincent B. Leitch, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, explains this sensibility of Derrida, "Existing languages constantly try, and constantly fail, to present the "truth" or "Being" that is assumed to be behind or beyond language (1815).

In his celebrated work *De la grammatologie* (*Of Grammatology*), Derrida rigorously contemplated the binary of 'speech' and 'writing'. He observed that throughout the history of philosophy, writing had been subordinated to speech. Even Jean Jacques Rousseau favoured the idea of the binary opposition between virtuous and innocent nature and corrupt and perverted culture, and that writing was a perverted supplement of speech. Derrida showed how Saussure had also favoured speech over writing in his *Course in General Linguistics* as he recognised that language is made up of signs, and the sign was further made up of the signifier and the signified, with the signifier corresponding to the sound. Saussure held that the sound gave way to meaning, thus venerating signified over signifier. Derrida referred to this predisposition *logocentrism*. The root of *logocentrism* is the Greek word *logos* meaning "word, truth, reason, and law" (Powell 33). It means relying on a transcendental signified, which in turn means believing in the metaphysics of presence, as Saussure thought that speech was present to meaning. 'Speech' was associated with 'presence', whereas 'writing' was associated with 'absence'. Hence, Derrida contended that the entire Western philosophical tradition was a 'metaphysics of presence'.

Derrida challenged all the metaphysical philosophers from Plato to Rousseau and from Descartes to Husserl in assuming the supremacy of good over evil, positive over negative, pure over impure, simple over complex, essential over accidental, and imitated over imitation, asking: why is every succession hierarchical and not linear? He explained this attribution of the underprivileged term in every binary to a secondary status as 'the lack of presence', thus pointing out the human mind's understanding of an object in terms of its opposite. He contested the notion of a thing having its essence 'by itself' in the Western tradition, which had thus far been accepted as based on metaphysics. Niall Lucy explains that this was "to acknowledge that the 'interior presence' of good depends on a relationship with the 'exterior absence' of evil. Without that relationship, good could never be imputed to exude a presence" (103).

The Advaita Vedāntic position holds that the 'real' has no beginning and no end and continuously exists; the 'unreal' never exists. Causes and effects are unreal and merely appear to exist. Ignorance is the cause of the emergence of duality. The distinction between the real and the unreal is only known upon realising the true nature of the Self. In his commentary on the second chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Shankara explains that every experience is a two-fold consciousness of the same substratum. The consciousness of existence is absolute and unfailing, while the consciousness of the object is unreal and temporary. This understanding is comparable to the hierarchical binary of appearance and essence fundamental to metaphysics or Platonism. Appearance is an epistemological concept, and essence is a metaphysical concept. Platonism supports the view that essence is more important than appearance. However, a deconstruction of this binary brings forth two ideas: first, that essence is dependent on the experience of appearance and second, that essence can be broken down into a variety of appearances, which in turn implies that 'essence' and 'appearance' might not need to be viewed as binary oppositions whatsoever. This goes on to prove the fluidity of the binary opposition.

In his book, *Indian Philosophers and Postmodern Thinkers: Dialogues on the Margins of Culture*, Carl Olson engages with the concept of the Absolute Self or Brahman, referred to as *sat-chit-ananda* in Advaita Vedānta. He points out the striking difference between the philosophy of Shankara and Derrida. For Shankara, Brahman is separate from the rest of the world. It might be the genuine controller of the world, but by no means is it a part of its existence. It is, instead the essence of everything. Brahman's definition includes being (*sat*) and non-being (*asat*). Brahman neither has a beginning nor an end. It is the substratum on which the play of all distinctions occurs. It is the eternal consciousness (*cit*) and the essence of being. It is also unconditional as bliss (*ānanda*). In this context, Carl Olson explains Derrida's predicament regarding différance. It does not have an essence. Thus, the ontological aspects of being, vis-à-vis consciousness, truth, reality, and bliss, cannot be attributed to différance. In that sense, it can be considered a Brahman-like concept that supersedes the world, and différance, in turn, supersedes Brahman itself. Even the Upaniṣadic description *neti, neti* (not this, not that) fails to make sense from Derrida's point of view as the idea of *nirguna* Brahman (indefinable, indescribable, non-relational, impersonal–the one that does not possess any qualities–positive definition of reality) and *saguṅa* Brahman (personal and describable–the one that possesses qualities–negative definition of reality) co-existing within a single entity called Brahman is unacceptable to Derrida. This is because, for Derrida, binaries are only in terms of opposition. The fluidity of binaries eludes him. "Within the context of Derrida's notion of différance, the Advaita Vedānta philosophy of Samkara is merely a prefatory exercise; it can never become final in any sense because we can never arrive at the truth from Derrida's perspective" (192).

In another paper titled "The Différance that makes all the Difference: A Comparison of Derrida and Samkara," Olson identifies the similarity between Derrida and Shankara concerning their understanding of language. While Derrida attends to writing as secondary to speech, Shankara also regards language as born out of ignorance that only distorts reality by building erroneous mental constructions. Olson brings together the contrasting concepts of 'différance' as given by Derrida, and sublation(*badha*), as discussed by Shankara. Différance is expressed as an ontically neutral finite movement preceding and structuring all opposition. Adi Shankaracharya, on the contrary, defines the ultimate reality as the realisation of Brahman, which is a non-dual state of being and cannot be contradicted by any experience–hence it cannot be sublated. Brahman, in the Indian tradition, is the underlying essence of everything. The play of difference is not extrinsic to Brahman. Derrida's différance does not make space for such logic as différance defines the structure of the mind. Différance cannot be equated with being, consciousness, truth, or reality as différance is without essence, whereas "the positive sat-chit-ananda definition of Brahman represents its essence" (249).

Likewise, Olson takes up the ideas of presence and trace, and being and alterity, and juxtaposes them in the light of the theories of each of the two philosophers. While the truth is singular for Shankara and his Vedāntic philosophy, it happens to be construed as plural by Derrida. Olson calls Derrida's works prefatory as they assign neither negative nor positive values to things; the essence is essentially absent. Shankara's philosophy has a centre as the immortal Self, whereas Derrida's philosophy has the centre in a contradictory position. "The centre is not the centre" (352) claims Derrida in his seminal essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences." While Adi Shankaracharya defines 'the other' as a product of ignorance, as there is no other to an enlightened being, Derrida places 'the other' neither inside nor outside but on the margin between the inside and the outside.

However, a comparison of the philosophies of Derrida and Advaita Vedānta is incomplete unless the distinctions between deconstruction, destruction, and dissolution are addressed. As Andrew Benjamin informs in his chapter "Deconstruction" in *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, Derrida, on being asked this question in an interview, responded by differentiating deconstruction from dissolution and destruction based on their philosophical method. He defined deconstruction as an analysis aimed at "the sedimented structures which form the discursive element, the philosophical discursivity in which we think." Therefore, it can be concluded that the Vedāntic dissolution of dualities differs from Derrida's deconstructive approach. The dissolution of binaries becomes impossible for Derrida. Even the deconstructive analysis has "implicated within it, at the very minimum, the interplay of language and culture" (Benjamin 82). This interplay is *logocentrism; thus*, he calls for awareness of language's slippery and incredulous nature. However, this awareness would never be able to lead him to the knowledge of the truth, as the awareness of one binary might lead to the formation of another. The oppression of one by the other would never end. Therefore, Derridean deconstruction is often criticised as pessimistic, as language, according to him, could never be transcended (82). The Advaita Vedāntic solution to this pessimism is transcending even deconstruction. In Advaita Vedānta, ignorance is the real cause of the emergence of such dualities. Ignorance and error in judgement are elementary to *māyā*, which is *asat* (unreal) according to Advaita Vedānta. Only knowledge can remove ignorance and lead one to the truth.

The philosophical approach to acquiring knowledge about the nature of the self and existence is primarily based on the intellect and the mind in the Western intellectual tradition. However, even though in the Western history of ideas surrounding the nature of self and the representation of reality in literature, none of the philosopher's ideas, from Plato to Derrida, is identical to the Advaita Vedānta of Shankara, it becomes crucial to study their views, because their intellectual and psychological understanding of the self demonstrates to the students of philosophy the limits of reason and logic. The farthest reach of the human mind is to the phenomenal world, as described by Kant, who said that the structures of the human mind always mediate our knowledge of the world. Perhaps the Neo-Platonist and mystical philosopher Plotinus comes closest to the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta by admitting that the knowledge of the fundamental nature of the Absolute is causeless, devoid of all binaries, and indecipherable. The nature of reality can only be described negatively, in line with the Advaita Vedāntic process of *neti, neti* (not this, not that). The Advaita Vedāntic Self lies beyond all philosophical ideas, concepts, reason, essences, substances, and universals. A method of literary criticism pivoted on the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta would entail unravelling the assumptions underpinning the literary text along with a study of the representation of the self and human existence in literature in agreement with the understanding of the concepts of self, language and meaning in the Vedāntic philosophy.

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