

THE CONCEPT OF SĀKṢĪ IN ADVAITA VEDĀNTA

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By

JANICE CAROL FORDE, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Janice Carol Forde, B.A. (State University College,  
New Paltz, New York)

SUPERVISOR: Professor K. Sivaraman

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: I want to trace the development of the concept of sākṣī in order to arrive at an understanding of its place and significance within the Advaita system of Vedānta. The main concern of the thesis will be to determine its importance as a counter to those who charge that Advaita philosophy allows for no logical transition from the empirical to the transcendental. The idea of the witness-self will thus be approached with a view towards demonstrating its viability as a point of contact between ordinary experience and the "higher reality" in Advaita.

## PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to elucidate and evaluate the Advaitin concept of sākṣī, or witness-self. Historical problems and questions about the relative faithfulness of various post-Śaṅkara Advaitins to Śaṅkara's own theories are not engaged. The scope of this thesis is strictly limited to an investigation into the value and significance of the witness-self as it developed in Advaita Vedānta.

Very little of a comprehensive nature has been written about the sākṣī. Even within the vast literature of Advaita relatively few works devote much attention to the concept. Among post-Śaṅkara Advaitins, Vidyāraṇya provides us with a notable exception in the form of the Pañcadaśī which was written as a book of instruction in Advaita. References to sākṣī run through all its fifteen chapters, and one chapter entitled "Kūṭastha-dīpa" is exclusively concerned with the witness. It is the sophistication of thought as well as the extensive treatment of sākṣī which recommended the Pañcadaśī as an important primary source. The Siddhānta-lesasaṅgraha of Appaya Dīksita provided a convenient



summary of various other post-Śaṅkara approaches to sākṣī and was heavily relied on for its overview of the major trends of thought.

In Śaṅkara's works the concept is only beginning to emerge and references to it are widely scattered and generally brief. The foundational theory of consciousness, however, out of which the sākṣī is specialized, is expounded in nearly all Śaṅkara's major commentaries. Those on the Brahma Sūtras and the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad were consulted most often. Among the Upaniṣads themselves, the Brhadāraṇyaka was unquestionably of greatest value to this study. The formulations of Yājñavalkya, which are found there, are referred to repeatedly in Chapter I.

Almost all considerations taken up in this thesis derive from primary sources. In some instances, notably Chapter IV, secondary sources were utilized when they provided direct quotes from works which were otherwise inaccessible. Only three secondary sources offered significant ideas and insights into the Advaita theory of consciousness and the issues involved in its formulation. These are The Nature of Consciousness in Hindu Philosophy by Saksena, The Nature of Self by Mukerji, and Ajñāna by T. R. V. Murthi. Only in the latter is the sākṣī concept discussed. I am especially indebted to Saksena for an informative evaluation of Sāṅkhya theory

of consciousness.

I am deeply grateful to Dr. K. Sivaraman for his invaluable advice and guidance. He introduced me to the sākṣī concept and its intriguing features, and directed me to those sources which proved to be of such importance for this thesis. Of even greater value to the successful completion of this undertaking has been his contagious enthusiasm for the project and his un-failing encouragement through the most difficult moments.

Thanks are also due to my friend and typist Sharon who devoted so many long hours to the cause.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<u>Ait.</u>	.....	<u>Aitareya Upanisad</u>
<u>Brh.</u>	.....	<u>Brhadāranyaka Upanisad</u>
<u>Chānd.</u>	.....	<u>Chāndogya Upanisad</u>
<u>S.B.</u>	.....	<u>Śāṅkara's Bhāṣya on the Brahma-Sūtras</u>
<u>R.B.</u>	.....	<u>Rāmānuja's Bhāṣya on the Brahma-Sūtras</u>
<u>Śvet.</u>	.....	<u>Śvetāśvatara Upanisad</u>

## INTRODUCTION

The teachings of Advaita have been summarized as "brahma satyam jagan mithyā jīvo brahmaiva nā'parah", that is, Brahman is the one reality, the world is 'false', and the individual self is non-different from Brahman. As a minimal definition of the system it indicates the essential underpinnings of Advaita thought. However, the real import of these ideas as they relate to the human situation, and to the spiritual quest which arises from within it, can only emerge when the subtler aspects of the philosophy are taken into full account. It is the essential framework or structure of Advaita, characterized as it is by apparent binary oppositions, that so often receives the attention of its opponents, to the exclusion of those features which serve to mediate those very oppositions and hence reconcile the idealism of Advaita with the world of empirical experience. Prominent in the list of "oppositions" are Brahman/māyā, mokṣa/samsāra, svarupa-jñāna/vṛtti-jñāna, and paramārtha/vyāvahāra (whose meaning will be discussed later in context). The following very brief summary of Advaita doctrine serves to underline the significance of

such "couplets" in the system.

The only reality is the non-qualified, homogeneous Brahman who may only be defined as pure thought or pure Being, all plurality being a mere illusion.<sup>1</sup> The appearance of the world around us and in which we exist as individual beings, is due to māyā or avidyā,<sup>2</sup> the principle of illusion with which Brahman is associated. It is because of this power of māyā that the one, indivisible Brahman is experienced as the diverse and individual forms of existence. Owing to the particular adjuncts into which māyā has specialized itself, the universal Being appears broken up into a multiplicity of individual sentient principles, that is, the so-called jīvas. At the ordinary or empirical level of experience we apprehend a number of individual souls engaged in various cognitions and actions directed towards, or concerned with, the external objects of the world. But the seemingly individual aggregates of mental functions and

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<sup>1</sup>The term "illusion" is used as the translation of mithya in the minimal sense of what is not real, but creates the illusion of being real. This is one of the key concepts developed and refined in the post-Saṅkara literature, e.g. Advaita Siddhi, Nirnayasagar Press, 1915, p. 48ff.

<sup>2</sup>The terms māyā, avidyā, and ajñāna will be considered as essentially synonymous. Some make distinctions (for instance Vidyāraṇya in Pañcadaśī 1-16 where māyā and avidyā are used in metaphysically different ways) but the positive projective māyā, and the individual ignorance, avidyā or ajñāna, may be considered as aspects of one principle of illusion from which false notions of reality arise.

physical attributes which we apprehend and which result in the discrimination of one jīva from another are the result of māyā, as are the multiple forms of the universe with which they are associated, and are, therefore, less than real. The unenlightened soul or jīva, which is in reality pure intelligence, is asleep, as it were, to its own nature, which is hidden by the veiling power of māyā. It identifies itself with its limiting adjuncts only and as such is said to be subject to the consequences of its actions, taking on the merits or demerits which accrue.

For the Advaitin, jñāna,<sup>3</sup> or knowledge, is the only true means to mokṣa (or release from saṃsāra),<sup>4</sup> which is, metaphorically, an instantaneous lifting of the veil which conceals the true identity of the Self or Ātman. It is direct and immediate knowledge and can only stand in contradistinction to normal experience, which is grounded in avidyā. It seems clear that we are not involved here with a notion of knowledge as a process or

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<sup>3</sup>Jñāna or wisdom means something more than conventional knowledge. It is closer to the Greek γνῶσις and usually refers to an intuitive insight or realization.

<sup>4</sup>The meaning of mokṣa is determined in accordance with the meaning of saṃsāra. The former is conceived of as emancipation from the latter, i.e. as release from the bondage of empirical existence, or the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. For an analytical elucidation of the term saṃsāra see Chapter I of Introduction to Indian Religious Thought, by Paul Younger.



as a growth in awareness, which culminates in Brahman knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The four qualifications set down by Sankara to be fulfilled by the aspirant are not meant to imply that the way to moksa is progressive or stadial in character. Rather, it would appear that proper discrimination, removal of desires, mental tranquility and the like, are presented as sharply delineated stages merely for the purpose of instruction. They neither form a continuum with moksa nor are responsible for its origination. By its very nature, moksa transcends the sphere of cause and effect; it is an eternal and ever-present truth. Since Brahman, or pure knowledge, is the timelessly self-realized, there is nothing to originate or attain. Likewise, the termination of avidyā may be said to be an eternal fact.

While the outline of Advaita presented above is generally accurate, the binary oppositions we encounter, when taken in their barest form, may seem to suggest that no provision exists in Advaita to bridge the gap between the empirical and the transcendental (since they are basically antagonistic in nature). Significantly, this point of view seems to capture the essential spirit

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<sup>5</sup>While growth or progress cannot be directly spoken of in relation to realization of Brahman it might be used in an inverted sense to indicate the progressive unveiling of that which is eternally present.

of most objections directed against the theory of avidyā, which stands at the center of the philosophical thought of Advaita. Bhāskara, for instance, one of Advaita's earliest opponents, charged that māyā stifles every effort to overcome it and "avidyā grows at the very root of reality."<sup>6</sup> This same line of thought, though undergoing much elaboration, is seen to form the central thrust of Rāmānuja's famous seven objections. The essential focus, then, is the apparent lack of any contact between ordinary experience (rooted as it is in ignorance), and the higher reality which it obscures.

Yet a more detailed and penetrating view of Advaita soon reveals that the apparent gulf is, in fact, quite adequately bridged at several points. The sākṣī concept, the subject of this thesis, stands out as the most important concept in this regard. As the witnessing-consciousness and ground of all knowledge, it manifests itself as "the pure element of awareness in all knowing".<sup>7</sup> Its existence is not only provided for by Scripture and established logically through a critique of knowledge but is implicit in all experience and cognition

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<sup>6</sup>P. N. Srinivasachari, The Philosophy of Bhedābheda (Madras, 1950), p. 53.

<sup>7</sup>M. Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy (London, 1967), p. 343.

as their very ground. It is the pure conscious background of the individual which during nescience appears in the seer aspect though in essence it remains without any reference in a determinate way to the experienced. The witness is pure relationless cit yet without being actively involved pertains to the empirical process in so far as it is the ever-manifesting on which all else depends. Sākṣī mediates the polarity of the Ultimate Reality and avidyā, for it is involved in the individual but more fundamental than the empirical. Further, sākṣī, as the fact of consciousness, or revelation, is equivalent to the self-shining Ātman, and is thus ever known though inaccessible to all modes of knowledge. It carries with it, then, the implication of an accessibility, as it were, which is not strictly linked to the concept of mokṣa as Brahman or Ātman tend to be. This feature of the sākṣī concept is often underplayed if not totally ignored, by the critic of Advaita. We will thus attempt to elucidate the important implications of sākṣī. We will note something of its background in the Upanisads and Śaṅkara's thought, and then turn to its elaboration by the post-Śaṅkara Advaitins, with special emphasis on Vidyāranya and Appaya Dīkṣita.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The works consulted are respectively the Pañcadaśī, especially Chapter VIII, and Siddhāntaleśasamgraha, the section on different interpretations of sākṣī.

To the tune of the Unknown I keep step  
Going from the far to the far beyond.

- Tagore, Flight of Swans

## Chapter I

### The Pre-Systematic Background

As a specialized concept the sākṣī properly pertains to the post-Śāṅkara development of Advaita Vedānta<sup>1</sup> where it is elaborated as a foundational principle of knowledge. It is seen as the pure conscious ground of the empirical complex of the individual (the body with its sense and motor organs as well as mind and intellect) and as such is the constant factor which is "known", not as an object is known, but as implicit in every act of knowledge as its indubitable ground. Its existence is demonstrated chiefly by way of arguments concerning the evidencing of mental states. These and related arguments commonly involve the refutation of opposing theories of consciousness and proceed by establishing the untenability of all attempts to account for empirical experience without reference to a principle of changeless consciousness. The primary

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<sup>1</sup>There are, however, certain oblique references to saksi (i. e. sections in Mandana's Brahma Siddhi and Suresvara's Naishkarmya Siddhi) conceptualized epistemologically as the solution implied in the question of error consciousness.

issue involved in establishing the reality and necessity of such a principle would seem essentially epistemological in nature. It is not quite proper, however, to assume that the sāksi, like its counterparts in Western philosophy (e.g. Kant's transcendental unity of apperception), is postulated on the basis of epistemological findings. Despite the fact that the Advaitin often seems to be setting forth the concept in this way, the sāksi never stands in need of logical justification. It is grounded in metaphysical truth as revealed by the Śruti and as such receives priority in epistemological matters. This is not to say that uncritical acceptance of authority is advocated. The common appeal to "proofs" for the existence of sāksi, based on an analysis of experience, serves to underscore the well-taken point that for Advaita, "...even scripture becomes authoritative only because its truth gets corroborated in one's own experience."<sup>2</sup>

That metaphysics and epistemology are to such an extent intertwined in Advaita (a feature whose most developed expression is the identification of Sat, pure Being, and cit, pure consciousness) is a fact to be

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<sup>2</sup>T. M. P. Mahadevan, Introduction to Methods of Knowledge by Swāmi Satprakāshānanda (London, 1965), p. 14. See also S.B. 2.1.4, p. 299, "...Śruti, if in conflict with other means of right knowledge, has to be bent so as to accord with the latter."

appreciated apart from its particular scriptural grounding. One may really concur with Advaita in its view that any really meaningful investigation into sense perception, cognitional process, etc., must ultimately take into account not only the particular phenomena under study, but also that which serves as the ground of the possibility of those things. Likewise, "Metaphysical investigation into the nature of Being or Reality cannot attain its goal unless consistent with sound epistemological principles."<sup>3</sup> The sākṣī concept and the arguments in support of it, epitomize this recognition by pointing to a level in experience in which knowledge and existence are identical. Though it is largely called on to perform an epistemological function by the post-Śāṅkara Advaitins, its more generalized equivalence to Self or Ātman, is retained and confirms its essential oneness with Ultimate Reality. Because the sākṣī, then, is not merely an abstract principle postulated on epistemological grounds, but approximates to Reality itself, we will begin our investigation with the Upaniṣads for which this Reality stands at the center of all speculations.

A precise delineation of the relevant Upaniṣadic notions in accordance with any progressive or developmental schema, would involve problems and complexities

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

that far outreach the scope of this thesis. Without effecting any rigorous structuring of the material, certain trends of thought bearing significantly on the sākṣī development will be presented. Far from being an original Advaitin creation, as will shortly be demonstrated, the sākṣī concept claims a clear grounding in the most prominent features of Upaniṣadic thought.

In the Upaniṣads, as in Śaṅkara's works as well, sākṣī is not present in a form sufficiently developed to distinguish it from Ātman. The term itself is not prevalent and when it appears serves as an alternate designation for Self, especially when viewed from the standpoint of mental functions. In fact, the term sākṣī does not actually occur in the earlier literature (first encountered at Śvet. 6.11) though the particular perspective on Self which it implies is already present and quite well developed in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. The teachings of Yājñavalkya, contained therein, are perhaps the richest source of Advaita philosophy and are especially pertinent to this study. Professor Ranade states, "Yājñavalkya regards Ātman as both the ontological substratum of all existence as well as the epistemological nucleus of all knowledge."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cited by V. M. Apte in his preface to Brahma-Sūtra Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya, p. xxv, by Ranade, "Yājñavalkya and the Philosophy of Fictions", in Jha Commemoration Volume.



The topics with which we will be dealing (mainly to be drawn from the Brh. Up.) are all closely allied in the sense that they represent alternative and complementary attempts to signify That which lies beyond empirical modes of description and comprehension. In fact, the most significant idea we encounter is already represented in the above, i.e. that the Self is different from and inaccessible to empirical modes of knowledge. The interrelated topics cannot properly be separated but for clarity's sake the most important are as follows:

1. the Self as beyond knowledge,
2. the Self as Transcendental Subject or Seer (Drastā),
3. the Self as of the nature of light, and as self-luminous (svayam-jyotiḥ),
4. the Self as cit or pure consciousness.

All of the above contribute significantly to the sākṣī conception. They can all be drawn together in the form of one composite statement, reading, "Ātman, of the nature of cit, is the Knowing Subject which serves as its own light, and is on this very account unknowable." For Advaita this line of thought would represent a most advanced understanding of Self but it is not, of course, everywhere in evidence. In the Mundaka Upanisad 1.1.4-5, all knowledge is classified into two categories. The

first is the higher knowledge, parāvidya, "by which the Imperishable Brahman is attained", and the second is the lower knowledge, aparāvidya, which refers to empirical things. This particular scheme, while it does admit of a higher order of awareness where the apprehension of Reality is concerned, nonetheless remains in keeping with a rather general tendency in the Upanisads to seek after and expound the knowledge of the Ātman. In the context of Yājñavalkya's teaching, however, we encounter another view which assumes great prominence, according to which Brahman, or the Self, transcends the very conditions of all knowledge and thus cannot be known. Deussen points to these teachings as "the primitive source of the entire conception of the unknowableness of the Ātman" and demonstrates the probable dependency of the further development of the doctrine on the text of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka.<sup>5</sup> That the Ātman is not to be grasped through an act of knowing is demonstrated by Yājñavalkya on the grounds that the Self is the knowing subject, persisting through the three states of waking, dreaming, and sleep (as well as in death and transmigration).<sup>6</sup> In his

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Deussen, The Philosophy of the Upanisads (New York, 1966), pp. 79, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Bṛh. 4, 3-4.

discourse with Maitreyi in passages 2.4.12-14, this idea is again taken up in conjunction with the additional consideration of the Ātman as the all-pervading essence of things. If the Self is unknowable as the Subject it is equally so as the All-Comprehending. (i.e. It comprehends the divide of subject and object.) The ideas are really one, for the Self, even in its capacity as Seer and Subject never relinquishes its identity with the cosmic and universal. The Reality which is the essence of the individual and the phenomenal world, neither is nor can be known since all knowledge involves a duality where in fact there is only Brahman.

For when there is duality, as it were, ...one knows another. But when everything has become the Self then...what should one know and through what? Through what should one know That owing to which all this is known - through what, my dear, should one know the Knower.<sup>7</sup>

This passage involves at least two very significant points. Knowledge properly pertains only to the dual structure of the empirical, but this duality itself is negated from the standpoint of release (paramārtha). "The experimental knowledge which reveals to us a world of plurality, where in reality only Brahman exists, and a body where in reality there is only the soul, must be

<sup>7</sup> Bṛh. 2.4.14.

a mistaken knowledge, a delusion, or māyā."<sup>8</sup> Though there is much controversy regarding the presence of the Māyā doctrine in the Upaniṣads, passages like the above ("duality, as it were") certainly seem to constitute evidence in its favor. Implied by the passage are the ideas that knowledge, as evidenced by its very structure, must take place in an illusion and could not possibly pertain to Ātman, which is its very ground, its essence, and in fact the only one and indivisible Reality. Numerous passages reinforce this fundamental conception of the Knowing Subject.

You cannot see the seer of seeing;  
 you cannot hear the hearer of  
 hearing; you cannot think of the  
 thinker of thinking; you cannot  
 know the knower of knowing. This  
 is your self that is within all;  
 everything else but this is  
 perishable.<sup>9</sup>

We encounter an important perspective on the Self when by way of explanation to King Janaka, Yājñavalkya refers to It in the following way:

(It is) identified with the in-  
 tellect and in the midst of the  
 organs, the (self-sufficient)  
 light within the heart. Assuming  
 the likeness (of the intellect)  
 it wanders between the two worlds;  
 it thinks, as it were, and moves,  
 as it were....<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Deussen, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup>Brh. 3.4.2. See also Brh. 3.7.23 and 3.8.2.

<sup>10</sup>Brh. 4.3.7. See also Kena 2-8.

Significantly, the Self is said to reside not in the head but in the heart, for in the identification of Self and intellect is the source of all delusion. This confusion occurs because the intellect, as Śaṅkara states, "...being transparent and next to the Self, easily catches the reflection of the intelligence of the Self."<sup>11</sup> The Self illumines the intellect but one often fails to distinguish light from that which is illumined. "Therefore through the similarity of the intellect, the Self assumes the likeness of everything."<sup>12</sup> To underline this problem and perhaps transcend it, a physico-psychological method is sometimes adopted (e.g. Tait. Up. 3.2-6) consisting of a successive unfolding of the essence of Ātman. In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, when Prajāpati is approached by Indra and Virocana for knowledge of the immortal Self, this kind of approach is employed. The Ātman is progressively identified with the physical self, the dreaming self, the self of dreamless sleep, until finally it is declared to be that which persists unaffected throughout all the changing states.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad with Śaṅkara's Commentary (4.3.7), trans. Swami Madhavananda (Mayavati, Almora, 1950), p. 614.

<sup>12</sup> Deussen, p. 614.

<sup>13</sup> Chānd. 8.7.13.

Of all these states, the phenomenon of dreamless sleep receives the greatest attention since it reveals an occasion when all mental activity, and therefore consciousness of individuality is absent. There is evidently a break or gap in consciousness, but as one's sense of identity remains intact, this must be true only in so far as particularized, or object consciousness is concerned. The importance of deep sleep lies in its demonstration of the fact that knowledge of distinction is only a temporary and conditional feature of our lives. Something unchanging, undivided, and foundational to all experience must be present even in the absence of experience. The epistemological importance of deep sleep is greatly stressed in Advaita and even in the Upanisads is recognized as revealing the Self in its unalloyed form. The Self is proclaimed as the "place" of deep sleep.

When a man is asleep, with senses withdrawn, and serene, and sees no dream - that is the Self. This is immortal, fearless. This is Brahman.<sup>14</sup>

...this infinite being, when fully embraced by the Supreme Self, knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Chānd. 8.11.1.

<sup>15</sup> Brh. 4.3-21.

Were it not for this consideration of deep sleep the Self, as Knower or Seer, could be mistaken by some as an agent of such activity. It becomes clear that the character of seer is assumed only as related to the act of knowing an object.

...It is seeing though it does not see; for there is no cessation of the vision of the seer, because the seer is imperishable. There is then, however, no second thing separate from the seer that it could see.<sup>16</sup>

Here the nature of the Self as Seer or Knower is clarified in order to avoid the implication of duality inherent in the terms. The Self "sees" during deep sleep because of its permanent sight. It is not a seer in the ordinary sense for activity pertains to the antah-karana alone, which is operative only in dream and waking.<sup>17</sup> The vision of the Seer is its very essence. Thus, the presence or absence of objects is of no consequence to It. It is for this reason that one can accept the Self as pure consciousness, or intelligence, and yet postulate a Self in deep sleep which is unconscious of anything. The appearance of unconsciousness is due to the absence of objects, of cognition, and not to the absence of consciousness itself.<sup>18</sup> If the Self

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<sup>16</sup> Brh. 4.3.23.

<sup>17</sup> Brh. 2.1.17.

<sup>18</sup> Brh. 2.4.12.

were not unceasingly and unconditionally conscious, if it could become extinct in deep sleep, how could it return?<sup>19</sup>

The designation of Self as knower or subject can only receive qualified acceptance, then, for this characterization can do no more than indicate and not represent directly the nature of the Self. This is equally the case when the Ātman is equated with light, but here the figurative image seems more appropriate for conveying something of the Self which is beyond all speech. In the Upanisads this philosophical idea is closely associated with the conceptions of the eternal day of Brahman (Chānd. 3.2.1-3) and His divine world as a place of eternal light.

Therefore, having reached this  
bridge, the night becomes day,  
for the world of Brahman is  
lighted once for all.<sup>20</sup>

And similarly,

The sun does not shine there, nor  
the moon and the stars, nor these  
lightenings - much less this fire.  
He shining, everything shines after  
Him. By His light all this is  
lighted.<sup>21</sup>

When the focus is more precisely "the Brahman that is

<sup>19</sup> Brh. 4.3.11-15.

<sup>20</sup> Chānd. 3.4.2.

<sup>21</sup> Svet. 6.14.



immediate and direct" (Brh. 3.4.2), i.e. the Self within, the idea of the sāksi is more directly anticipated.

Now, this serene being (i.e. the liberated man) after rising from his (physical) body and attaining the Highest Light, reaches his own (true) form. This is the Self.... This is Brahman.<sup>22</sup>

And, more explicitly, Yājñavalkya's explanation that even when the sun and moon have set, and the fire extinguished, there is something which yet serves as light for man:

The Self, indeed is his light, for with the Self as light he sits, goes out, works and returns. (That is, he passes through the three states.)<sup>23</sup>

The light metaphor is perhaps superior to the Seer designation for it underscores the constancy and freedom of the Self. The illuminating quality of light is its very nature, and not an activity whereby each object is illumined in a separate act. So too light requires no second light to render it manifest. That which reveals other things must of necessity be self-luminous (svayan-jyotiḥ). Advaita later builds on this basic conception, refining it considerably through a keener sense of the limitations inherent in the metaphor. Physical light, since it requires no other illumination outside itself

<sup>22</sup> Ghānd. 8.34.

<sup>23</sup> Brh. 4.3.6. Also Kātha 2.2.15, "He shining, everything shines after Him"; Ghānd. 3.14.12, "His form is light...."

in order to be seen, is apparently self-manifest. But of course, that which possesses no awareness can render neither self nor object known. Manifestation depends on consciousness. The light of the Self, its essence, is therefore none other than pure consciousness or cit.<sup>24</sup> This idea finds entrance into the Aitareya Upanisad. (The doctrine expounded seems to owe a great deal to Yājñavalkya's thought.)<sup>25</sup> Here the Ātman is represented as distinct from all organs of sense and is spoken of as prājñā or consciousness.

Everything that this heart and mind are, reflection, meditation, deliberation, invention, intelligence, insight, resolve, purpose, desire, suffering, recollection, idea, force, life, love, will - all these are names of consciousness.<sup>26</sup>

All the above listed are activities originating and terminating at distinct points in time. Their ultimate referent is that which remains constant throughout all of them, the pure consciousness to which all cognitions seem to point.

If the Self is pure consciousness in its ultimate and ideal essence (and this seems to be the final declaration of the Upanisads) how may It at the same time be

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<sup>24</sup> Brh. 2.4.12.

<sup>25</sup> Deussen, p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> Ait. 3.1.2.

regarded as related to the flux and flow of empirical experience? The problem is not ignored in the Upaniṣads but neither is it dealt with in a definitive way. We are told that the said character of "seeing" is not to be regarded as an activity, that it refers to the essence of the Self as cit. The seer aspect, because it only pertains to the seen manifold, must be a false construction imposed on the Self. The question of the relatedness of Ātman to the world is, finally, inadmissible. Though given in experience as the Supreme Subject, the Self only appears as connected and experience itself pales into negation from the standpoint of the Ultimate Reality. But it is within this area of "supposed relatedness" that all the facts of knowledge and experience lie. The task still remains, therefore, to make some sort of sense of cognitional process given the metaphysical structure that the Upaniṣads provide. Though the difficulties involved seem logically insoluble, with the development of the sākṣī concept and the concurrent refinement of the māyā doctrine we encounter a more systematic and thorough-going treatment of the problem.

By way of review, the Upaniṣads speak of the Self as fundamental and immutable Reality. It is the pure consciousness always present as the ultimate Subject, which is never caught in the act of knowledge. Though nothing else be manifest, the Self still exists as the

svayam-iyotih, by whose light all else shines.

The later transcendental theories of consciousness in Advaita and in Sāṅkhya as well, take their inspiration from these fundamental ideas.

## Chapter II

### The Nature of Consciousness in Sāṅkhya

Advaita epistemological theory is aimed not only at harmonizing the data of experience with monistic thought, but also at the reinforcement of non-dual metaphysics by appealing to empirical experience for its disclosure. Thus, the theory of transcendental consciousness in Advaita pertains as much to its doctrine of non-dual Reality as it does to the analysis of knowledge (through which means its existence may be indicated). Advaita must insist not only on the compatibility, but on the inevitable convergence, of the two standpoints. To uphold the notion of a distinctionless, eternal, and transcendental consciousness, while yet clinging to a metaphysics of duality, is for Advaita not only a perversion of ontological truth but a logical absurdity. Here, of course, the reference is to the Sāṅkhya school of thought, the first significant opponent which Advaita was forced to engage. A critical survey of its prominent features and the Advaitin response which it evoked, provide an excellent framework within which the value and significance

of the non-dual theory of consciousness might be appraised.

The fact that Bādarāyana and Śaṅkara were keen to express opposition to the Sāṅkhya doctrine indicates that the dualistic position must have enjoyed considerable prominence at one time.<sup>1</sup> Bādarāyana's repeated reference to Sāṅkhya as inconsistent with the teachings of the Upanisads,<sup>2</sup> indicates that it must have been accepted by many as compatible with, if not completely grounded in, the Śruti. It is, of course, quite possible to locate references to Sāṅkhya-Yoga in some of the Upanisads<sup>3</sup> but the claim that the dualistic position is ever really advocated is untenable in view of the undeniable prominence of the monistic position. The few passages in evidence, however, do hint at an array of ideas which are systematically elaborated into the Sāṅkhya philosophy. Śaṅkara bears witness to the influence of that philosophy by designating it the principal

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<sup>1</sup>Vide The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (London, 1970), pp. 60-61, where Kuri designates Sāṅkhya as a rival to Bādarāyana in the field of Upanisad-exegesis.

<sup>2</sup>S.B. 1.1.5-11 and 2.1.1-3, from The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyana with the Commentary by Śaṅkara, trans. George Thibaut (New York, 1962).

<sup>3</sup>E.g. Śvet. Up. 4.5, 10, 16 and 6.10, 13 and Ka. Up. 1.3.10-13.

opponent of the Vedānta<sup>4</sup> and by admitting its considerable appeal to those of undisciplined mind.<sup>5</sup> The fact that Sāṅkhya, despite its avowed dualism, shares many features in common with Advaita, merely increases the burden on Śaṅkara and his followers to diligently and systematically refute its views. The Sāṅkhya ideas which are consistent with Advaita, such as the description of soul as free from qualities, are readily accepted, of course,<sup>6</sup> and recast in terms of non-dual philosophy.

Without delving into all the specifics of Sāṅkhya thought, a critical outline of the system should serve to demonstrate the superiority of the Advaita position, to which all the inconsistencies and problems of dualistic philosophy seem to appeal for resolution. With emphasis on the unworkability of a dualistic interpretation of experience, it will be shown that the logical difficulties inherent in Sāṅkhya can only be rectified through a very natural movement in the direction of Advaita metaphysics. Further, it appears that within Sāṅkhya itself, attempts are made to temper the fundamental dualism on

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<sup>4</sup>S.B. 1.4.28.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 2.2.1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 2.1.3.

which the system is based. This tendency, if allowed to continue and reach its natural culmination, would result in the positing of a single Absolute in which all else is grounded. In the course of the following discussion these points will emerge more clearly and provide ample demonstration that Advaita metaphysics is implicit in Sāṃkhya-Yoga.<sup>7</sup>

The two ultimates in Sāṃkhya are Prakṛti, the source of the material world, and the Puruṣas, or plurality of selves. Though numerically separate the Puruṣas exhibit no real differences and so are subject to a "qualitative monism and quantitative pluralism."<sup>8</sup> The essence of the selves is one, i.e. consciousness, and so together they may be considered to constitute one entity in the dualistic scheme of Sāṃkhya. We may speak, then, of Puruṣa (singular) as the principle of pure consciousness. Like the Ātman in Advaita, it is the ultimate subject, the self-luminous, the uncaused and eternal, the foundation of knowledge, the witness, the unknowable, etc. As in Advaita, all change and activity is attributed to a principle other than pure consciousness but here that

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<sup>7</sup>Some modern scholars attempt to defend Sāṃkhya as a valid system in its own right, e.g. Dr. Anima Sen Gupta, Classical Sāṃkhya: a Critical Study and The Evolution of the Sāṃkhya School of Thought.

<sup>8</sup>Chandradhar Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy (Delhi, 1964), p. 157.



principle assumes the status of a co-present and co-eternal reality, i.e. the Prakṛti. The two principles represent independent, unrelated, and polar absolutes. The Puruṣa is ever sentient and inactive. Prakṛti is the insentient to which all change belongs. Out of this uncompromising duality, the world and man's experience of it, somehow unfold. The Sāṅkhya theory of evolution sets the stage for investigation of this problem.

Prakṛti, as the first cause of the universe (or Pradhāna), is the source of everything material. Even time, space, and mind which less obviously pertain to the physical, are considered to be aspects of it. It is perhaps most accurate to say that Prakṛti encompasses everything apart from Spirit. A fundamental postulate of Sāṅkhya holds that the effect is essentially the same as the cause, culminating in the view that Prakṛti consists of what is common to all aspects of the universe. The essential constituents of all objects are three - sattva, having the quality of fineness or lightness, tamas, which is coarse or heavy, and rajas, which represents whatever is active. Substance and attributes are considered to be identical. The three gunas (attributes or properties) which together account for the dynamic diversity of the phenomenal world are not mere qualities of Prakṛti, then, but are the components of it. They

form the substratum of all change but this change is never total. The gunas persist eternally while only their modes arise and disappear. Evolution in the Sāṅkhya scheme is grounded in a belief in the indestructibility of matter. The apparent origination and destruction of objects is understood with reference to a belief in the two-fold character of all things - i.e. potentiality and actuality. When the modes of Prakṛti are latent a state of dissolution or pralaya results. At other times evolution or sarga prevails and things assume their manifest form. The reasoning involved is supported by the observation of common things emerging from and later disappearing into their causes; e.g. the example of the clay pot.

The activity of Prakṛti is an eternal fact and even in pralaya, when the gunas assume a kind of equilibrium, it maintains its dynamic character. "Perpetual motion is a fundamental postulate of the system so far as the physical world is concerned."<sup>9</sup> Evolution, then, is cyclic or periodic, always alternating with periods of dissolution. The beginning of a sarga results from a disturbance in the dynamic harmony of the gunas. At this

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<sup>9</sup>M. Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy (London, 1967), p. 272. (Based on st. 5 of Sāṅkhya-tattva-kaumudī by Vācaspati Miśra.)

time sattva predominates and marks the starting point for the entire heterogeneous evolution. The question of how this comes about will be discussed shortly.

Evolution in Sāṃkhya is regarded as teleological but because Prakṛti is insentient it might better be termed "quasi-teleological", as Hiriyanna suggests.<sup>10</sup> There is a purpose which the whole process apparently serves, but conscious pursuit of a goal can in no way be attributed to Prakṛti. In so far as evolution is teleological, its reference is to the individual for whom the object may be either the securing of experience, bhoga, or liberation from samsāra. Puruṣa is that for which the entire creation moves. Yet Sāṃkhya cannot adequately account for this directional and purposive movement without tempering the character of its two absolutes.

Evolution, which results from a disturbance in the equilibrium of the gunas, arises through some type of influence from Puruṣa. As two separate, independent, and fundamentally opposed entities, Prakṛti and Puruṣa can never really unite to produce creation, nor is their contact with one another really feasible. Yet there is a strong tendency in Sāṃkhya to speak of their mutual dependence and cooperation. (Puruṣa without Prakṛti is

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 272.

lame, and Prakṛti without Puruṣa is blind.) Since this kind of reasoning comes into direct conflict with the strict dualism on which the system is based, other attempts at explanation arise. It is the proximity of Puruṣa which provides the initial stimulus for evolution, not actual contact, or alternately, evolution is due to samyogābhāsa, or the semblance of contact, resulting from the false identification of Puruṣa with its reflection in the buddhi, or intellect (regarded as the first evolute of Prakṛti). Neither of these formulations prove tenable. Puruṣa is constant and unchanging. If it were near to Prakṛti that nearness would be an eternal condition and evolution, therefore, never-ending. The logic of the second argument seems to impel Sāṅkhya towards the Advaita theory of māyā, for how can mere "semblance of contact" suffice to produce a real disturbance in the equilibrium of real gunas? If the efficacy of samyogābhāsa is to be accepted then the parināma-vāda theory, which holds the world to be an actual transformation of Prakṛti, should logically be replaced by the Advaita notion of the world as vivarta or appearance. Further, buddhi, since it is regarded as the first evolute of Prakṛti, cannot be considered available to catch the reflection of Puruṣa in order to initiate the creative process. If it be supposed that Prakṛti itself serves

as the medium of reflection, then the same difficulty as pertains to the proximity theory must result, i.e. a permanency of condition precluding alternating cycles of sarga and pralaya. The various arguments, as they build, merely serve to multiply and amplify the logical problems inherent in the foundational concept of duality itself. Sāṅkhya is continually forced into the position of compromising that duality, while yet maintaining an absolute insistence on its veracity.

The Sāṅkhya theory of evolution presents yet other problems for consideration, which have already been alluded to. How can the unconscious Prakṛti be regarded as responsible for a world of design and purpose, which evolves for the sake of Puruṣa? As Śāṅkara remarks, it is never observed that an unconscious thing spontaneously produces effects which subserve the purpose of a sentient and intelligent being, unless first guided or directed by some intelligence.<sup>11</sup> Activity bears reference to a purpose which is absent in the case of the insentient. "The conclusion therefore is that the unconscious cannot be related to the conscious by the relation of means and end unless it is the intelligence that is regarded as the spring of activity."<sup>12</sup> But this is only one part

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<sup>11</sup>S.B. 2.2.1.

<sup>12</sup>S. K. Saksena, Nature of Consciousness in Hindu Philosophy (Delhi, 1971), p. 198.

of a two-fold difficulty. Purusa, the conscious entity, cannot properly be spoken of as standing in need of anything. It is eternally free, isolated, self-sufficient, and self-complete. Bondage and release, as in Advaita, are falsely ascribed to it for liberation is regarded as an eternally accomplished fact. Even if Purusa were in some way dependent on Prakṛti, the latter would be in no position to help by reason of its unconsciousness. Again, the Advaita position seems to offer logical resolution of the problem. For the reasons already stated, the relationship of means and ends ascribed to Purusa and Prakṛti is unintelligible unless there is recourse to a third and higher principle. If the conscious and unconscious entities exhibit any degree of cooperation or dependency, if in fact they are related at all, then the two eternal opposites are more properly regarded as falling within one whole. It is also clear that "an unconscious teleology should point towards a deeper consciousness, within which alone, the fulfillment of both Purusa and Prakṛti should take place."<sup>13</sup>

The problem of evolution is only one aspect of the problem of relation in general in the Sāṅkhya system. According to dualism Purusa and Prakṛti exist independently

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

and eternally as polar absolutes. So long as they stand in perfect isolation and unrelatedness there is no creation, or speaking non-cosmologically (i.e. if we shift our focus to the individual) no possibility of knowledge or experience. Experience arises from a failure to realize the unrelated nature of cit, and when this realization comes about liberation results. But if experience is just this failure of discrimination the question naturally follows how experience arises in the first place granting that prior to its rise Purusa and Prakṛti exist in their pure and isolated natures, outside of any real or imagined relation (i.e. outside of experience). Directing attention specifically to the problem of knowledge, the question can be put, how is the "fall" from the transcendental Purusa to the empirical knower to be explained? Several different explanations of experience, through modification of the original Sāṃkhya position, are possible.<sup>14</sup> Despite the risk of some repetition, a brief mention of the theories helps to demonstrate further the inadequacies of the dual metaphysics which impel us with ever-increasing certitude toward the Advaita position.

In the Sūtras of Patañjali the focus is most clearly

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<sup>14</sup>I am indebted to Saksena for a thoughtful account of these modifications, found in Chapter VII.

the unattached nature of Puruṣa.<sup>15</sup> The problem of knowledge and experience is not really engaged. Experience is merely designated as a failure of discrimination between Puruṣa and Prakṛti.<sup>16</sup> Little is said about how the identification comes about. We are only told that Puruṣa exists in two conditions: its svarūpa or true nature prior to confusion and subsequent to discrimination ("Then there is an abiding of the spectator (Spirit) in its own pristine form."), and its untrue form, i.e. its erroneous identification with the mind (when "There is conformity to the functions in the other (active) state.")<sup>17</sup> The theory of the lack of discrimination is stated as dogma and remains to be worked out in some detail if experience is to be accounted for.

In the Yoga Bhāṣya this confusion between the two opposed entities, Self and mind, is sought to be explained with reference to the theory of proximity, mentioned earlier in connection with the Sāṃkhya notion of sarga. Proximity is presented as sufficient cause for "potentialities turning into actualities",<sup>18</sup> i.e. proximity endows Puruṣa with the quality of being the

<sup>15</sup> Yoga Sūtras 2.20, from The Yoga-Darshana comprising The Sūtras of Patanjali with the Bhāṣya of Vyāsa, trans. Gangānātha Jhā (Adyar, 1934).

<sup>16</sup> Yoga Sūtras 2.23-25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1.3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Saksena, p. 166.



owner, svamin, and Prakṛti takes on the quality of the owned, sva. In this way Puruṣa assumes the modifications that properly belong only to Prakṛti. In the same way a king takes upon himself the victory or defeat that accrues to his soldiers<sup>19</sup> though in his svarūpa he is totally unaffected. There is a confusion, then, between the natures of two separate and independent entities. But again, the original metaphysical position of Sāṃkhya is one of absolute isolation of Puruṣa and an adequate explanation of how, through confusion, its transcendental svarūpa becomes changed into an empirical experience, is still lacking. Why should Puruṣa, because of nearness to Prakṛti, necessarily think itself the owner of the other's nature?

Vācaspati Miśra attempts to close in on this problem by reinterpreting the theory of proximity into a particular kind of capacity on the part of the sattva of buddhi. Owing to its fineness and transparency it is able to catch the reflection of cit and in this way experience takes place.<sup>20</sup> This development can be seen to represent a significant modification of the dual position. Buddhi is made to assume the status of what

<sup>19</sup>Yoga Bhāṣya 2.18, p. 113.

<sup>20</sup>Tattva-Vaicārādī 1.4, from The Yoga System of Patanjali including the explanation, called Tattva-Vaicārādī of Vācaspati Miśra (Delhi, 1956).

amounts to an intermediate category between Purusa and Prakṛti, though this function is never explicit in Sāṅkhya. There is little doubt, however, that the outcome of the "suitability" theory is to modify the fundamental duality of the system by admitting to a compatibility between cit and buddhi. The latter is unconscious but possesses qualities owing to which it resembles the conscious Purusa. In effect buddhi partakes of the natures of both gross matter and luminous cit. But if this is to be accepted the dualism of Sāṅkhya must give way. Sattva, despite its fineness, is still a constituent of Prakṛti. Either it stands fundamentally opposed to Purusa, in which case no contact or reflection could occur, or the dual entities of Sāṅkhya are to be relinquished as separate, independent principles and recast as ontologically one.

In this characterization of buddhi we again encounter an immanent teleology in Prakṛti, for it evolves in such a way as to accommodate and conform to the needs of Purusa. The untenability of this idea has already been discussed.

Vācaspati's explanation of experience demands further attention. We have considered the specialized role which buddhi is pressed into playing but must further examine the mechanics involved. Because of proximity (suitability) the buddhi catches the reflection of the

Purusa and becomes intelligised. Buddhi takes upon itself the character of an agent and knower while Purusa remains a mere "on-looker" or witness.<sup>21</sup> Vācaspati sees an analogy with the moon which by its shining makes the river brilliant, while yet remaining isolated from and unaffected by any fluctuations of the water.<sup>22</sup> The Purusa remains unconnected with experience which is made possible for buddhi alone. The gain, therefore, is one-sided. But if Purusa is the ultimate subject, the supreme knower, some provision must be made for its appropriation of the experience of the buddhi. That is to say, it must be phenomenalized. Sāṅkhya is caught in an insoluble dilemma. If experience is truly to be accounted for, not only must the dual metaphysic be compromised, but the kevala nature of Purusa as well.

Vijñāna-bhikṣu's theory of a double reflection<sup>23</sup> epitomizes the degree of logical inconsistency to which Sāṅkhya philosophy is prone. He is right in considering the single reflection theory of Vācaspati to be an inadequate explanation of experience. There should occur not only the reflection of the transcendental Purusa on

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<sup>21</sup> Tattva-Vaicārādī 1.4 and 3.35, p. 264.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 4.22.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. section 4 (p. 145) of Yoga-Sāra-Saṅgraha, trans. Gaṅgānātha Jhā (Madras, 1935).

the sattva of the buddhi, but also a reflection of the latter on the former. So long as the intelligised buddhi is not in its turn reflected on the Purusa, no confusion between the two can result, and this is required if experience is to take place. Purusa must mistakenly take the fluctuations in the buddhi to be its own. Vijnana-bhikṣu's theory of mutual reflection is no doubt the most consistent explanation of the problem but it is achieved at great cost. There is almost a total undermining of the original position of the Purusa's eternal and unqualified isolation. If it not only casts a reflection, but receives one as well, it becomes little better than an empirical self. And because any relation involving Purusa must be acknowledged as eternal, its kevalin nature is lost. While earlier theories of Sāṅkhya stray very little from an uncompromising duality and thus fail to consistently account for experience, the later more consistent explanations attack the very metaphysical ground on which the system is based.

The fundamental mistake of Sāṅkhya, in the Advaita view, has been to separate Prakṛti and Purusa into two independent entities while logic suggests that the subject and object should be considered as two aspects of one Reality which binds them together and yet transcends

them.<sup>24</sup> The transcendental and empirical elements of experience should both be located within the Purusa itself by virtue of which it is free, in its essential nature, and "bound" (from a lower and conditional standpoint). The Advaitin doctrine of māyā, or avidyā, which is a necessary adjunct to this point of view, cannot be said to fully remedy the problem of the "fall" of a transcendental principle to the level of experience. In the last analysis, we can see that the problem is insoluble at the intellectual level. Yet, given the fact that the concept of consciousness as kevala (alone, complete) and śuddha (pure) is common to both the monistic and dual systems, it is certainly Advaita which emerges as faithful and consistent in its development and application of the implications inherent in the principle. An absolute insistence on cit as beyond the category of relation necessitates its further acceptance as the ground of all relations, which themselves must be viewed as only conditionally real (i.e. illusory and sublatale). The sākṣī concept in Advaita represents the most developed statement on this theory of consciousness as foundational to all experience.

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<sup>24</sup>"Consistency in a logical account of experience and absolute dualism of the transcendental and the phenomenal are not compatible." Saksena, p. 195.

He who Knows that the Consciousness  
of the Self never ceases to exist...  
is a real knower of the Self. Others  
are not so.

- Śankara, Upadeśasāhasrī 9.13

### Chapter III

#### The Sāksi in Śaṅkara's Thought<sup>1</sup>

In Śaṅkara's writing the sāksi, like the supreme knower of the Upanisads, is none other than the Ātman itself and the terms are used interchangeably.

(The Ātman) It is the witness, it is absolute knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

The Ātman is itself the witnessing essence for by itself it is perceived.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>References are here made to Śaṅkara's commentary on the Brahma-Sūtras and on the principal Upanisads, and in addition, some of his 'minor' works whose authorship is not generally questioned.

References to Śaṅkara's use of the sāksi notion in its adjectival or adverbial forms are provided in the Word Index, Vol. II, p. 1005, edited by Mahadevan, the Centre for Advanced Study in Philosophy, University of Madras, 1973, for use with the Anantakrishna Sastri edition of Śaṅkara's commentary on the Brahma-Sūtras, Bombay, 1938. At least fifteen instances are cited for the use of सक्सि saksat form alone, for instance:

- 1.1.12, p. 181, line 8
- 1.1.25, p. 213, line 7
- 1.2.22, p. 258, line 22
- 1.2.28, p. 265, line 12
- 1.3.14, p. 293, line 3
- 1.4.25, p. 427, line 11, etc.

<sup>2</sup>Śaṅkara, Viveka-Cūdāmani (212), text in Devanagiri and trans. Mohini M. Chatterji (Adyar, Madras, 1947), p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 218.

Yet, when the term sākṣī is used we normally encounter a certain perspective on the Self, one where particular emphasis is placed on its nature as cit, or pure consciousness. The main features of Śaṅkara's theory of consciousness are perhaps best approached within the context of a consideration of certain rival theories. An examination of the alternatives to Śaṅkara's position serves to underline the superiority of its analysis of experience.

Śaṅkara's commentary on Praśna 6.2 makes note of several theories of consciousness which contrast sharply with the Advaita insistence on the unchanging and foundational character of knowledge or cit.<sup>4</sup> The most radical of the positions mentioned is commonly associated with the Mādhyanikas, namely Nihilism. For Śaṅkara, as he observes elsewhere, it merits the least attention of any of the rival schools. "...that this world is empty (i.e. that absolutely nothing exists), is contradicted by all means of right knowledge, and therefore requires no special refutation."<sup>5</sup> His overall

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<sup>4</sup> Eight Upanisads, Vol. II, with the commentary of Śaṅkarācārya, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta, 1958). Śaṅkara's commentaries on other Upanisads (excluding Bṛhadāraṇyaka) are taken from this translation.

<sup>5</sup> Śaṅkara Bhāṣya 2.2.31, from The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyana with the commentary by Śaṅkara, trans. George Thibaut (New York, 1962).



assessment seems to be that Nihilism, because it never bothers to examine its own ground, and ultimately falls victim to its own denials, cannot really command much serious attention. How may we entertain a proposition which never comes to grips with the question of the existence of its own grounds? This is the substance of Śaṅkara's polemic in the few instances where he does, in fact, critically engage rather than perfunctorily dismiss, the view that consciousness is pure nothing. The Advaita response to Nihilism, while constituting what is perhaps the least significant of its refutations, is nonetheless an appropriate starting point for the present discussion. Prior to any discussion regarding the nature of consciousness or knowledge, knowledge itself must be accepted to exist. Otherwise we cut at the very root of all assertions. Such a recognition leads to an acceptance of the foundational character of cit. In the context of a critique of Nihilism the various corollaries of this position emerge.

"...anything, that is known in any way, emerges to consciousness only as such an object of knowledge."<sup>6</sup>  
 This is to underline the obvious fact, which the Nihilists yet fail to acknowledge, that no object, if known, can be anything but presented to knowledge. More

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<sup>6</sup>Prāśna-Bhāṣya 6.2, p. 486.

pointedly, none can prove something that isn't known.

The Nihilist should explain how he would argue away the presence of that knowledge by which he imagines the non-existence of that knowledge; for the non-existence of the knowledge being itself a knowable object, it cannot be cognized unless there is knowledge of it.<sup>7</sup>

Even the Nihilist is forced to concede that non-existence or abhāva is a knowable. There can be no doubt as to the absurdity of a position which asserts the knowability of abhāva while refusing to accept the existence of knowledge.

In a further reference to Nihilism Śāṅkara remarks that a significant denial is only made "...with reference to something real; the unreal snake, for example, is negated with reference to the real rope. But this is only possible when something is left."<sup>8</sup> A fruitful skepticism is one which proceeds on the basis of its doubt and dismissals to draw closer to that which always remains indubitable. Knowledge or cit, the very Self of man, is that ultimate entity, and the ground of all proof as well as denial. "An adventitious thing, indeed, may be refuted but not that which is the essential

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 485.

<sup>8</sup>S.B. 3.2.22, p. 168.

nature (of him who attempts the refutation)."<sup>9</sup> Self, simply because it is the Self, is beyond all doubt. There can only be an honest question regarding the existence of those things which require to be established. Cit, because it is the prius of reality and the ground of knowledge, is self-established and irrefutable.

S. K. Saksena suggests that "an absolute denial of cit is more of the nature of despair regarding the rational knowledge of its definite nature rather than a positive knowledge of its non-existence."<sup>10</sup> The fallacy of the position which is outlined above lies in its unwarranted assumption (even voiced by Rāmānuja in certain contexts) that only a defineable and knowable object can be considered to be real. The Self or cit, because it cannot be converted into an object of knowledge, is considered to be of the nature of an unknown and is, for that very reason, rejected as unreal. But this is to ignore the foundational nature of consciousness and all that it implies. It is quite unreasonable to ask that that which serves as the pre-condition of

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<sup>9</sup>S.B. 2.3.7, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup>S. K. Saksena, Nature of Consciousness in Hindu Philosophy (Delhi, 1971), p. 46.

all knowledge be itself presented as an object of that knowledge. Everywhere Scripture asserts the unknowability of the Self,<sup>11</sup> which as the revealer of all could never itself be apprehended as "this" or "that". But this claim of unknowability should never be taken to suggest that the Self is wholly or totally transcendent and remote and thus little more than a nought so far as our accessibility to it is concerned.<sup>12</sup> Cit is unknown in the sense that the eye is unseen in the act of seeing. The reality of cit is not only compatible with its unknowability as object but is the irrepressible fact of all experience. The Self is not within the category of knowables precisely because it is the transcendental consciousness, the witness, to which all else is presented. "...the Self is not presented like heaven or Mount Meru...for it is the very Self of those that (would) present it. A presentation by someone has for its object something to be presented, and this is possible only when there is difference."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>For example, Brhadāranyaka 3-4.2, 3.8.1, 4.4.20; Katha 6.12; Kena 2.3; etc.

<sup>12</sup>The expression 'tvam' (thou) used to refer to Self in contradistinction to 'tat' (that) shows that Self is precisely immediate (not so remote as tat).

<sup>13</sup>The Brhadāranyaka Upanisad, with Śaṅkara's commentary, trans. Swami Madhavananda (Mayavati, Almora, Himalayas, 1950), 4.4.20.

There is, of course, not that other thing by which the Self is to be known. Yet it is never "unknown", or more precisely, as Scripture states, "It (Ātman) is different from the known; It is above the unknown."<sup>14</sup>

This idea is developed into what is perhaps the most fundamental feature of Śāṅkara's Absolutism. Ātman is self-luminous, or put in another way, cit is "known" directly and immediately as the "element of pure awareness in all knowing."<sup>15</sup>

Despite the charges of Advaita's critics that an unknowable self is about as real as "the horn of a hare", the Self is in fact ever given in an immediate non-objectifying experience and is not something inconceivable which lies beyond all empirical experience. This is perhaps the most important idea connected to the concept of the witnessing-consciousness. It is always realized because it serves as the light by which all else is illumined. The sākṣī or conscious principle is invariably comprehended in association with all objects of knowledge. As Śāṅkara states, "Being the witness of all cognitions, and by nature nothing but the power of

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<sup>14</sup>Kena Upanisad 1.4, from The Upanisads, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, 1964).

<sup>15</sup>M. Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy (London, 1967), p. 343.

consciousness, the Self is indicated by the cognitions themselves."<sup>16</sup>

Rāmānuja, for whom consciousness is a mere attribute of Self, cannot accept the idea of a pure and unchanging conscious ground. Sākṣī is unequivocally rejected for reasons which bear consideration if only to point out the necessity of accepting such a principle. The criticisms levied against Śaṅkara's theory of cit not only fail to do it harm but demonstrate a number of weaknesses in Rāmānuja's own thought.<sup>17</sup> Probably as a result of his own religious predilections he is unable, or reluctant, to come to terms with the inconsistency of his own position.

First, for Rāmānuja the eternal Self is the knowing subject. As such it is not precisely pure cit since it possesses consciousness as an attribute. At the same time the Self is spoken of as "filled with consciousness."<sup>18</sup> Knowledge is distinct from the Self as its quality, yet appears also to form its svarūpa. It is a

<sup>16</sup> Kena-Bhāṣya 2.4, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> A. C. Mukerji has made much of this in his book, The Nature of Self, especially p. 248.

<sup>18</sup> R. B. 2.3.29, from Vedānta-Sūtras with Rāmānuja's commentary, trans. George Thibaut (Delhi, 1962).

curious line of reasoning that leads one to maintain that that which is essentially consciousness has consciousness as an attribute as well. If we consider cit to be a quality of Self then when devoid of that quality it must be non-conscious. But this is not acceptable to Rāmānuja who must then recognize the Self to be of the nature of consciousness. The logical identity of Self and consciousness is approached but never quite embraced by Rāmānuja. He wishes to maintain that the 'I-sense', far from being superimposed on the Self, is an essential feature of it, for otherwise there would follow such consciousness as "I am consciousness", rather than "I am conscious".<sup>19</sup> This reveals an "I" distinguished by consciousness, according to Rāmānuja,<sup>20</sup> and thus demonstrates that Self is a subject of consciousness and not precisely equivalent to it. This kind of criticism does not begin to come to terms with the meaning of the transcendental. It attempts to negate the possibility of the transcendental by appeal to the instance of a particular empirical consciousness. But of course, empirical consciousness and the subject/object duality it involves is not denied by Śaṅkara and other proponents of distinctionless

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<sup>19</sup>R.B. 1.1.1., p. 32.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

cit. The statement "I am conscious" is the only legitimate one given the very structure of phenomenal consciousness. But this in no way affects the Advaitin's position as to an eternal unchanging consciousness. In addition, the substrate intelligence could not possibly enter into the form "I am consciousness" since "I-ness" cannot pertain to what is subjectless and objectless cit. It is the jīva and not the witnessing self which undergoes modifications and to which egoity belongs. But Rāmānuja, for reasons into which we need not go, can never really get beyond the structure of the empirical and consequently cannot conceive of Self or consciousness apart from an "I".

His other criticism of Śāṅkara's distinction of Self and egoity is directed to the fundamental assertion that to be a knower is to be subject to change, and hence different from the Self which is eternal and unchanging. Rāmānuja, however, maintains a belief in a Self which is both a knowing subject and yet not really an active or changing principle. "Nor can it be maintained that to be a knower is something essentially changing, etc."<sup>21</sup> He does, in fact, admit of change in the Self, especially when he speaks of the contraction and expansion of consciousness. But this he

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 63.



explains to be due to the accidents of karma and further adds,

...the Self possesses the quality of an agent. As this quality is not, however, essential, but originated by action, the Self is essentially unchanging. This changeful quality of being a knower can belong only to the Self whose essential nature is knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

The inconsistency and contradictions involved in Rāmānuja's thinking derive from a confusion between two levels of experience which he himself is virtually forced to accept. He believes in an eternal changeless Self but wants to make it a knowing subject while yet preserving that changelessness. This is a logical absurdity unless the knower aspect of consciousness be recognized as different from the Self. Attempting to locate the source of change outside the Self can perhaps be construed as a move in that direction, though the problem is far from solved. The Self is still subject to changes and so should be logically recast along the lines afforded by a recognition of two orders of consciousness, one which persists unchanging and destructionless, and one which involves egoity and empirical knowledge.

The phenomenon of deep sleep, so important to the Advaitins for demonstrating a level of experience in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

which all distinctions fall away and pure consciousness itself remains, is of course otherwise interpreted by Rāmānuja. He maintains that the sense of "I" does persist in deep sleep though he admits "there is no consciousness of outward things, and thus there is no distinct and clear presentation of the 'I'."<sup>23</sup> He seems to be accepting therefore, one important feature of the Advaitin argument, that ego-consciousness is due to the mediation of external objects, wherefore it should more than just diminish but disappear entirely in the absence of these objects. As there are no objects in deep sleep, and hence no possibility of any mediation, the presence of egoity should not be maintained. We may either deny the presence of consciousness, which is quite unacceptable since it involves a rupturing of psychic continuity, or admit of an eternal, unmediated consciousness. It is clearly inadmissible to maintain that there is ego-consciousness even in the absence of an object-consciousness. The other outstanding problem of Rāmānuja's theory of deep sleep involves the contention that there are degrees of "I-consciousness".

If the 'I-consciousness' expands  
and contracts as he maintains,  
there is no reason why it should

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

not meet the minimum of contraction, viz, extinction and the maximum of expansion, viz, absolute I-less consciousness both of which are unpleasant alternatives to Rāmānuja.<sup>24</sup>

If the essential nature of a thing is thought to change it cannot be held to be eternal. Again it becomes clear that an adequate theory of knowledge or consciousness should allow for two levels of consciousness, one which undergoes modifications and another more fundamental one which remains eternally unchanging.

It has already been stressed (Chapter I) that the concept of the witness-self, or foundational consciousness, is set forth not only on the basis of its Scriptural grounding, but also as the demonstrably essential ingredient in any faithful and consistent analysis of experience. Acceptance of an immutable element of consciousness as distinct from a contingent and changing one (which Rāmānuja declines) is recognized by Śaṅkara as indispensable to an understanding of such common phenomena as recognition and memory, a sense of personal identity, and even the act of perception. If it were not for the transcendental consciousness, which serves as the substratum of the individual, there could

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<sup>24</sup> Saksena, p. 124.

be no sense of continuity to our experience, which would then take the form of a meaningless flow of disconnected contents. Vṛtti-jñāna, or empirical knowledge (produced through the activity of the antah-karana) cannot, in and of itself, provide for knowledge or experience in general. The Buddhists, who believe in the momentariness of consciousness, represent the strongest opposition to Śaṅkara and his foundational theory of consciousness. They maintain that their theory of a certain causal affinity between the various elements in a series of cognitions, or a sense of similarity where in fact there is only difference, is sufficient to account for all the phenomena which Śaṅkara points to as presupposing a permanent element of consciousness. The issue to be explored, then, is whether we should in fact have recourse to the Advaita principle of revelation, viz. sākṣī, in order to account for the data of experience, or whether, as the Buddhists maintain, the assumption of its existence is uncalled for.

. According to the Vijñānavādins all may be reduced to a series of momentary cognitions or ever-changing "flashes" of consciousness, each being distinct and separate from the rest. Thus knowledge and experience are seen to take the form of a stream of units that are constantly replacing one another. That knowledge seems

to be in continual flux, that it appears as a transient and fleeting thing, is not to be refuted by Śaṅkara. Rather, it is maintained that a changing and fragmentary knowledge presupposes as its ground the permanent knowledge, from which alone it may derive any meaning.<sup>25</sup> Apart from the eternal unchanging consciousness, the mental events of life would exhibit no coherence. But this is denied by the Buddhists who maintain that a synthesizing principle is not necessary. It is the succession of momentary ideas and impressions, which mutually condition one another, that accounts for a seeming unity of thought or sense of self. Śaṅkara attacks the theory of a serial flow of ideas primarily by exposing the incompatibility of the doctrine of momentary cognitions with the principle of causal determination that supposedly exists between them. Śaṅkara points out that the advocates of perpetual change admit to the fact that when the event of the second moment comes into existence, the event of the first moment ceases to exist. "On this admission it is impossible to establish between the two things the relation of cause and effect."<sup>26</sup> As the first momentary existence has perished prior to or at the same instant as the origination of

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<sup>25</sup> Aitareya-Bhāṣya 2.1, Brhadāraṇyaka-Bhāṣya 3.4.2.

<sup>26</sup> S.B. 2.2.20.

the second, it cannot logically be considered available to account for the rise of that second event. Sankara further asserts that if we do admit of a connection between the two entities the doctrine of momentariness has to be abandoned since "we cannot conceive the origination of an effect which is not imbued with the nature of the cause (i.e. in which the nature of the cause does not continue to exist)."<sup>27</sup> If the cause is considered to in any way last beyond the first moment the whole theory of flux must fall. And if this is not so accepted, then the theory of causality as operative in the endless series of cognitions, does not hold up. It is further noted that if entity be said to spring from non-entity then anything could produce anything for "non-existence is in all cases nothing else but the absence of all character of reality, and hence there would be no sense in assuming that sprouts are produced from seeds only, curds from milk only, and so on."<sup>28</sup>

The Buddhists think that recognition can be accounted for on the basis of the similarity of cognitions. A jar which we see time after time and which is naturally assumed to be persisting in its identity, is

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> S.B. 2.2.25.

really no more than a series of different ideas or impressions. Owing to the resemblance of these ideas, recognition of the identical object appears to take place. Śaṅkara criticizes this position on two fronts. First, such an explanation of recognition is at odds with the distinction we commonly make between judgments of identity and those of similarity. This distinction would seem to militate against the doctrine that recognition is due to similarity, "for (in recognising a thing) we are conscious of it being that which we were formerly conscious of, not of it being merely similar to that."<sup>29</sup> Even if it were possible to derive identity from similarity, the judgment of a case of similarity would point to a permanent subject capable of grasping and comparing two different entities.<sup>30</sup> To talk of universal flux and at the same time attribute recognition to similarity, is logically indefensible. Consciousness of resemblance implies a reference to that which is not itself part of a series of momentary impressions, but which is permanent throughout the changing impressions. If consciousness were a member of that series there could be no consciousness of it. "Changes

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<sup>29</sup> S.B. 2.2.25.

<sup>30</sup> Brh. Up. with Śaṅkara's commentary, 4.3.7, p. 625.

in consciousness cannot account for the consciousness of change."<sup>31</sup> This point is most important in relation to the identity of the Self which is regarded by Śaṅkara as the fundamental presupposition of all experience. If the Self were to be considered a stream of phenomena, as the Buddhists believe, the unity of personality would require explanation along the lines of the theory of causal influence between members of cognitional series, and this solution has already been refuted. If the Self were equivalent to a flow of changing ideas, there couldn't be any consciousness of the series as a unity. "Serial unity is entirely different from and points to the conscious principle within which there is no plurality."<sup>32</sup> Further, a continuously changing consciousness would make remembrance and recognition impossible. A permanently present principle (the sākṣī) is presupposed by our consciousness of personal identity.

The other important feature of Buddhist thought which comes into direct conflict with aspects of Śaṅkara's theory of cit, is the doctrine of the Vijñānavāda Idealists to whom reference was already made, who hold

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<sup>31</sup>Saksena, p. 157.

<sup>32</sup>Mukerji, p. 217.



that the subjective world alone is true. We have stated that in Advaita, as even in the Upanisads, consciousness is understood as the epistemological ground of knowledge and the prius of reality. The meaning of these and similar assertions is sometimes interpreted along idealistic lines in which case the material world is taken to have no independent existence apart from consciousness. The sākṣī concept more than any other, demonstrates the inaccuracy of this view. Śaṅkara is careful to distinguish his position from that of the Idealists, first, through a critique of their views and second, by a careful presentation of his psychological theory which centers on the Self as the witnessing-consciousness to which all else is presented. The assertion of the priority of cit is shown to be as compatible with a realistic view of the world as it is with the idealistic view.

For Śaṅkara perception is the most important of the means of knowledge owing to its relative immediacy. If a thing proves to be incompatible with what is readily perceivable, it is generally not to be accepted. Thus Śaṅkara states "when an inference contradicts perception, the ground of such inference becomes fallacious."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Brh. Up. with Śaṅkara's commentary, 4.3.7, p. 625.

Śāṅkara's first objection, then, to the Idealist view, is that in every act of perception there is an awareness of an external object which corresponds to our idea of it.

Why should we pay attention to the words of a man who, while conscious of an outward thing through its approximation to his senses, affirms that he is conscious of no outward thing, and that no such thing exists, any more than we listen to a man who while eating and experiencing the satisfaction avers that he does not eat and does not feel satisfied?<sup>34</sup>

That the external object exists apart from consciousness, is to be accepted in accordance with the nature of consciousness. When we perceive a thing we are conscious not of the perception only, but of the object of that perception. The object appears as something external, not like something external.<sup>35</sup> Further, for the Buddhist to contend that an internal object of cognition appears like something external is virtually to admit a basic acceptance of the existence of the external.

The Buddhist argument that the reality of consciousness alone follows from the fact of the ideas having the same form as the objects, is answered in a similar way. "If there were no objects the ideas could not have

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<sup>34</sup>S.B. 2.2.28, p. 421.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

the forms of the objects."<sup>36</sup> The distinction of thing and idea, in other words, is given in consciousness. Thus, the fact that a particular knowledge and its object always occur together cannot be taken as proof of their identity but rather demonstrates that the object provides the occasion for the idea.

For Śāṅkara, consciousness is the most fundamental category, though the world of appearance, however, unreal, is not to be assimilated to our consciousness of it. The entire complex of empirical existence is true in a sense (and thus far "there is no reason why the ordinary course of secular and religious activity should not hold on undisturbed."<sup>37</sup>). Śāṅkara's point is that all objects owe their significance (not existence) to the relations in which they stand to the Self which is cit. It is from this standpoint that the Self is described as sākṣī, or witness to all objects and their changes. It is the principle of revelation for which the world of objects has a meaning. This is the sense in which Śāṅkara speaks of cit as "the centre of the whole world."<sup>38</sup> Everything is revealed through the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 422.

<sup>37</sup> S.B. 2.1.14, p. 324.

<sup>38</sup> S.B. 1.4.19.

light of the Self, "just as the existence of the light of the sun is the cause of the manifestation of all form and color."<sup>39</sup> The appearance results from the modifications of māyā, the Advaitin principle of illusion which is said to be anirvacya, or indescribable in itself, but which is always related to cit through its various material forms as the cover of reality. It is important to Advaita that māyā, while indescribable, yet be regarded as an indescribable something. "The world has an independent existence apart from my sensations or ideas, but not from cit on which it is grounded"<sup>40</sup> in the sense that cit is the very condition of its manifestation. Perhaps the most important feature of the sākṣī concept for the present discussion is that the witness reveals whatever is presented to it. In normal perception a sense organ comes into contact with an object and the antah-karana goes out towards it and assumes its form. The theory is clearly realistic for the existence of the object prior to the appearance of knowledge is assumed. In the absence of the activity of the antah-karana (for instance during dreamless sleep) the revelation of particular things does not arise.

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<sup>39</sup>S.B. 1.3.22.

<sup>40</sup>S. N. Dasgupta, Indian Idealism (Cambridge, 1969), p. 180.

We may summarize now the main features of Śaṅkara's theory of consciousness as they have arisen in the course of this discussion. The main contention concerns the foundational nature of cit, which as the Self of all, is epistemologically a priori. There can be no object of knowledge without knowledge. Objects may undergo changes but cit is the permanent witness of all objects and always distinct from them. Therefore it can never be known as an object is known but is never doubted because it is self-luminous. It is the eternally unchanging ground of all the mental modifications and cognitions by which it is presupposed.

In anticipation of the next chapter which will deal with differing opinions regarding the nature of the sākṣī, we may consider one possible criticism of Śaṅkara's treatment of the subject. The sākṣī, despite its immutability and indifference to object, is nonetheless involved (though not actively) with the empirical. The Ātman is the sole Reality and admits of no distinctions, while the sākṣī, as the ground of all knowledge, allows for the consciousness of multiplicity. Further, from the standpoint of the Self there is not that other thing which might be revealed. The witnessing character of the sākṣī is necessarily dependent on the seen manifold which from the point of view of Self is eternally negated. For these reasons

the equation of Self and sākṣī is not the most exacting designation, though the ultimate nature of sākṣī, when ignorance has been removed, is certainly the Self which bears no reference to the world. These are considerations to be explored more fully in following chapters.

Whatever form the intellect creates  
the supreme Self illumines it as its  
witness, remaining itself beyond the  
range of speech and mind.

- Vidyāranya, Pañcadaśī, 10.23

## Chapter IV

### Post-Śaṅkara Views on sākṣī

Appaya Dīkṣita in Siddhāntaleśasamgraha makes note of some important differences in the conception of sākṣī among post-Śaṅkara Advaitins.<sup>1</sup> There develops at least three tendencies of thought concerning the witness-self. We encounter both a further elaboration of Śaṅkara's thesis according to which sākṣī is the Ātman, and a divergent trend which seeks, in some sense or other, to equate sākṣī with the jīva or with Īśvara. In the writings of Vidyāraṇya, as best exemplified by the "Kūṭastha-dīpā" (of the Pañcadaśī), a third and more

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<sup>1</sup>The post-Śaṅkara period extends over nine hundred years, from the 9th to the 18th century. It is marked by a detailed elaboration and systematization of the original teachings of Śaṅkara. Much of the refinement of concept which develops, does so in response to the growth of keen competition and controversy between different schools of Vedānta. Argument and counter-argument impelled the post-Śaṅkara Advaitins to raise, discuss and work through problems which are only vaguely hinted at in Śaṅkara's works. The fluid nature of many key concepts gave rise to differing interpretations. This is especially evident in the case of the māyā concept, perhaps the most controversial and subtle aspect of Advaita thought. Over time differences of opinion crystallized into separate schools of thought within Advaita itself.



sophisticated view of sākṣī emerges. Here on account of its nature as fundamental consciousness, sākṣī is shown to play a unique epistemological and metaphysical role intermediate to Ātman and jīva.

The following proposes to be a critical survey of these prominent views (based largely on the indications of Appaya Dīkṣita) and will devote special attention to the views of Vidyāranya as contained in the pertinent chapters of the Pañcadaśī (especially "Kūṭastha-dīpā" and "Nātaka-dīpā").

The author of Kaumudī, Ramadvaya, speaks of sākṣī as a mode of the Lord, Īśvara.<sup>2</sup> Aware of the jīva's activity, He himself remains free from and indifferent to any changes. The witness is not the abode of causality as is Īśvara, for it is a form of the Lord only, in which such attributes are not to be found. He is said to be immediate and is designated as prājña. As manifesting the nature of the jīva He is said to be proximate or inner to it.

One might legitimately question the purport of such a designation. What could be the value of assimilating sākṣī to Īśvara when to do so it must first be divested of those attributes by which the Supreme Lord is normally

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<sup>2</sup>Appaya Dīkṣita, Siddhāntaleśasamgraha, trans. S. S. Suryanarayana Sastri (University of Madras, 1935), 5.14112.

characterized? Obviously, without such qualification the position would be quite untenable for, as stated in the Tattva-pradīpikā, "in the case of the Supreme Lord, associated with māyā and endowed with attributes, the qualifications - pure, without gunas - would be unintelligible."<sup>3</sup> The more logical course would seem to be the positing of a direct equation between sākṣī and pure consciousness at the off-set. No other valid conclusion could be made concerning the meaning of the phrase "inner to the jīva", for only the changeless cit on which the empirical complex of the individual is superimposed, is open to such predication. Further, only distinctionless cit may be described as prājña, immediate, and free from attributes.

Sureśvara also holds that sākṣī is none other than īśvara.<sup>4</sup> If however, we examine his position, it becomes clear that, here again, a strict identification is not really provided for. The primal appearance of consciousness as qualified by avidyā and responsible for the outcome of the universe, is called īśvara. The same, as conditioned or qualified per accidens by avidyā is called

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 5.14111.

<sup>4</sup>Veermani Prasad Upadhyaya, Lights on Vedānta, A Comparative Study of the Various Views of Post-Sāṅkara-ites, with Special Emphasis on Sureśvara's Doctrines (Varanasi, 1959), pp. 118-19.

antaryāmin. It should be noted that a qualification or attribute enters into the very constitution of a thing like the color of a flower.<sup>5</sup> Thus Īśvara may be spoken of as "tainted" by māyā while sākṣī, as Sureśvara seems to recognize, must be characterized as free from qualifying attributes. In its cosmic character sākṣī can only be spoken of as in association with the māyā of Īśvara. What Sureśvara's position requires, then, is a more straight-forward acknowledgement of the difference between Īśvara, for whom māyā is an attribute, and what may be termed Īśvara-sākṣī, the cosmic witness for whom māyā is an adjunct only.<sup>6</sup> As the ground of the universe and the light by which it is illumined Īśvara-sākṣī remains uninvolved in and indifferent to the world-show which belongs to the functioning of the Lord.

Some Advaitins say the sākṣī is the jīva itself, which is understood to be the reflection of intelligence in nescience.<sup>7</sup> The character of being a witness is thought possible for the jīva "who is of the nature of unattached, indifferent manifestation." The agency, etc.,

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<sup>5</sup>Siddhāntaleśāsamgraha, note on p. 209.

<sup>6</sup>This is the formulation of Dharmaraja as found in Vedānta-paribhāṣā, trans. Swami Madhavananda (Belur Math, 1963), chap. 37, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup>Siddhāntaleśāsamgraha, 5.14121, pp. 207-8, translator's note.

of the jīva is superimposed owing to its appearing as though identified with the internal organ. The jīva in its own nature is free from attachments. What this position ultimately comes to is that sākṣī is the unchanging essence of jīva, and not the jīva as taken in its empirical form as a composite entity (spirit wedded to an antah-karana). To equate jīva and sākṣī, then, is in the final analysis legitimate, but it tends to confuse rather than clarify the function of sākṣī as a foundational principle of consciousness. Further, as noted above, this group of Advaitins defines jīva as consciousness reflected in avidyā, a view which poses problems in itself. Appaya Dīkṣita mentions the opinion of another school of thought which takes exception to this view.<sup>8</sup> Because avidyā pervades the whole world, the consciousness reflected in it should also be all-pervasive. This would allow for the antah-karana of one jīva to be manifested by another, which result is undesirable to any Advaitin. Therefore, it is maintained that sākṣī is consciousness with antah-karana as an unrelated adjunct, and is on that account different from the changeable cogniser whose nature gets determined by the internal organ. Now, from the prima facie viewpoint, the fact that sākṣī is to be defined by the numerous separate antah-karanas with which it is associated,

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 5.14122.

points to a multitude of different witness-selves. Thus Dharmaraja states "this witness in the individual self is different in each individual."<sup>9</sup> But this is only true in a limited sense, that is only in so far as the empirical use is concerned. The sākṣī, because it manifests itself as the owner of the limiting adjunct of mind, merely appears as if different in different individuals. In its ultimate nature sākṣī bears no relation to mind nor any other thing for there is only the one distinctionless cit. Even its function as the manifesting consciousness is finally to be relinquished.

At this juncture we may briefly comment on Vidyāraṇya's attitude towards the jīva or Īśvara designation criticized above. He quotes the Maha-Purana in support of the fact that sākṣī is "without particular characteristics as jīva and Īśvara."<sup>10</sup> Jīva and Īśvara are identified as products of māyā and thus rejected as improper designations for sākṣī. This insistence on the special character of the witness is not always properly understood or appreciated. In his introduction to the Siddhāntaleśāsamgraha, Suryanarayana Sastri completely discounts the importance of Vidyāraṇya's contribution to the development of the concept.

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<sup>9</sup>Vedānta-paribhāṣā, p. 38.

<sup>10</sup>Swami Vidyāraṇya, Pañcadaśī, trans. Hari Prasad Shastri (London, 1956), 8.59.

A great deal of unnecessary refinement was introduced about the time of Vidyāranya. Such, for instance, is the tendency to recognize a Kūtastha-intelligence or a witness-intelligence as distinct from the jīva, īśvara, and Brahman. Fortunately the interests of parsimony have repeatedly prevailed and we find the counter tendency to assimilate these extraneous entities to those already recognized.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Mahadevan holds that in the last analysis there are no significant conflicts between the various views since the final position of the Advaitin must be that īśvara, ultimately non-different from Brahman, is also non-different from jīva, which, when divested of all that is destructible in its nature, is really the sākṣī itself.<sup>12</sup> But this, it seems, it to beg the point. If the sākṣī is to have any real significance in the Advaitin scheme, it must lie in its disclosure as the ground or, as it may be termed, the "limit" in one's search for a foundational principle of knowledge. When the sākṣī is presented in the various guises we have mentioned above, this feature of the concept is largely obscured, if not totally lost. It is only as the pure consciousness which serves as a constant background to the mind's modifications that the sākṣī concept emerges

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<sup>11</sup>Siddhāntaleśāsamgraha, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup>T. M. P. Mahadevan, The Philosophy of Advaita (London, 1938), p. 178.

in all its significance.

The significance of sākṣī as the foundational consciousness is clearly brought out by Gitsukha. He starts from the point of view of the sākṣī as "Seer" or draṣṭṛ which he distinguishes from the cogniser or pramātr.<sup>13</sup> The former is independent of the instruments of valid knowledge, while the latter is dependent on them. In sleep, characterized by the absence of the means of valid knowledge, there is yet That which manifests nescience (on awaking one says, "I slept happily and wasn't knowing anything") - thus the witness's non-inclusion in the cogniser which knows through instruments of valid knowledge. He puts forth an inference as evidence for the existence of the witness-self.

Emotions such as the desire of Caitra are cognized by a direct perception of his which is different from his ephemeral perceptions, because they are directly perceived by him; just as in the case of a pot directly perceived.<sup>14</sup>

This is to say that emotions, etc., because they are considered to be states of the mind cannot be perceived

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., quoted from Tattva-pradīpikā, p. 373, ed. Pt. Paṅunāth Kasināth Sastri (Bombay, 1951).

<sup>14</sup>A. G. Krishna Warriar, The Concept of Mukti in Advaita Vedānta (Bombay, 1915), quoted from the Tattva-pradīpikā, p. 339.

by the mind. We cannot admit of subject-hood and object-hood in one and the same thing. If it be suggested that the mind itself is percipient, and as qualified by the perception is its own object then it is maintained one could equally assert, "Devadatta...is the agent of walking and as adorned with ear-rings, etc., is the goal of walking."<sup>15</sup> To avoid conflict of objectness and agency in the same thing, a perception brought about by other than the mind's activity must be accepted, which leads to recognition of the sākṣī. Mind functions as an agent in so far as it is responsible for empirical perceptions, but in relation to the sākṣī it may play the role of instrument or object.

Citsukha also mentions memory as an important reason for positing sākṣī-consciousness.<sup>16</sup> There must be a persistent consciousness which lends a coherence and continuity to the flux of cognitions and psychological states, or there would be no sense of their belonging to one's personality, no memory, no assimilation, etc. It is because of the sākṣī, the constant factor running through all experience, that life appears as a flow of events rather than as a series of disconnected elements.

Citsukha, like Śāṅkara, fails to distinguish the

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 340, quoted from Tattva-pradīpikā, p. 374.



sākṣī concept from Brahman, though in most other respects the implications of this foundational consciousness are in evidence. Apart from a summary review of the "Kūṭastha-dīpā", which will concern us in some detail, the Siddhāntaleśāsamgraha gives only one other indication of a possible attempt to bring out the unique status of the sākṣī. In the Tattvaśuddhi, it is reported, Jñānaghana tries to determine the nature of sākṣī with reference to common illusion.<sup>17</sup> The question arises, in the case of the illusion which results in the statement "this is silver", where in fact there is only shell, to what does the "this-ness" pertain? It cannot belong to the silver or it would be cancelled along with the erroneous cognition. Nor does it seem correctly to locate the "this-ness" with shell alone, for that would not account for its inclusion in the cognition of the illusory silver. Therefore it is asserted that although "this-ness" properly belongs to the shell, it is apparently of the constitution of silver in so far as in the illusory perception "this-ness" is the substratum of both the real shell, and the appearance of silver. In a similar way the witness is to be taken as different from both Brahman and jīva. In its real nature it is beyond

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<sup>17</sup> Siddhāntaleśāsamgraha, 5.14113.

the empirical but from the standpoint of the mind's modifications, etc., it must be taken as involved with the individual.

There is extensive treatment of the sākṣī concept by Vidyāraṇya. In the "Kūṭastha-dīpā" of the Pañcadaśī the witness is defined as the substrate intelligence of the individual. It is called kūṭastha since, although directly perceiving the two bodies, subtle and gross,<sup>18</sup> it remains immutable like an anvil. It is distinguished from the jīva and Īśvara since they are understood to be reflections in, and therefore products of, māyā.<sup>19</sup> But the kūṭastha is not a product of māyā though it is to be recognized as the substrate of the illusory reflection, jīva, which is associated with the body and senses. In the "Citra-dīpa" the distinctions drawn between Brahman, kūṭastha, Īśvara and jīva are explained by way of analogy.<sup>20</sup> Brahman is like the all-embracing ether while kūṭastha, which is also unconditioned, appears as though delimited like the ether in a pot. As already mentioned, both Īśvara and jīva are taken to be reflections of intelligence only. Jīva is compared to that aspect of the all-pervasive ether (or sky) which together with the

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<sup>18</sup> Pañcadaśī 6.22 and Siddhāntaleśāsangraha 5.146.

<sup>19</sup> Pañcadaśī 6.155, 7.3, and 8.60.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 6.18-22.

passing clouds, is reflected in the pot-water. In the clouds themselves, which are composed of subtle particles of water, there is a large reflection of ether and this latter example is likened to the case of Īśvara.

Vidyāranya makes considerable use of appropriate similes to illustrate the nature of the witness. Prominent among them are the similes of the ākāśa or ether (referred to above), the painting, the lamp of the theatre, and the sun shining on the wall.

As in the case of canvas on which a picture has been painted, pure consciousness serves as the background on which various forms are superimposed.<sup>21</sup> (Pañcadaśī 6.1-8). Just as there are four stages in the execution of a painting, one may speak of four stages in the modification of pure consciousness. One begins with the canvas as the unblemished and indispensable background, stiffens it with starch, draws in the various outlines, and finally applies the colors. Likewise kūṭastha is the pure consciousness which is called antaryāmin or inner ruler when associated with māyā, bears the name Sūtrātman when spoken of in relation to the subtle

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<sup>21</sup>Pañcadaśī 6.1-8.

<sup>22</sup>Vidyāranya uses this term as a synonym of Hiranyagarbha to refer to "the totality of subtle bodies... identified with all in the form of cosmic egoity." Pañcadaśī 6.200.

bodies, and is known as Virāt<sup>23</sup> when considered as related to the gross bodies. All created beings are compared to the painted figures which may appear as real as the canvas on which they are superimposed. Similarly the transformations and diversified characteristics of the jīvas are superimposed on the pure conscious substratum which is the one underlying reality.

In the "Nāṭaka-dīpa" the witness is likened to the lamp in a theatre which illumines everything without being affected.<sup>24</sup> The light manifests the director, the dancer and the audience and continues to shine even in their absence. They are compared, respectively, to egoity, the intellect, and its objects which are revealed by the light of the witness which continues to shine in its own right even when these others cease to be. Just as light illumines all the changing elements in the theatrical production, kūṭastha persists as the constant principle of revelation throughout all the mental modifications.

In the opening section of the "Kūṭastha-dīpā" the relation between the immutable consciousness and the reflection of consciousness, cidābhāsa, is explained

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<sup>23</sup>Virāt is an aspect of Īśvara in which "the world appears distinct and shining like the figures of a picture fully painted in." Pañcadaśī 6.204.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 10.10-15.

through the analogy of the wall and the reflecting mirrors.<sup>25</sup> Many mirrors may reflect the sun's light onto a wall which is already manifest by the sun itself. Thus, the spaces between the various reflections are illumined by the sun and remain so even if the reflections cease. In a like manner, both during the intervals between the modifications of the intellect (vyttis) and in their absence, the light of kūtastha persists. For this reason it is to be distinguished from the cidābhāsa which is merely the reflection of cit in the vyttis of which the mind is composed.<sup>26</sup> For cognition of an object both types of consciousness or knowledge are required. A cognized object is comparable to an area of wall which is doubly illumined, that is, which receives both the light of the sun and the reflected light of a mirror. Just as the mirror is non-luminous in itself and must depend on the reflection of the sun in order to cast light upon the wall, so too the intellect depends on cidābhāsa if cognition is to take place. Although it appears conscious, the intellect is "no better than a lamp of clay",<sup>27</sup> which is to say that apart from the reflection of cit it remains inert and

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<sup>25</sup>pañcadaśī 8.1-3.

<sup>26</sup>Of. Upadeśasāhasrī 14.33.

<sup>27</sup>pañcadaśī 8.9.

quite incapable of revealing anything.

There follows a more detailed consideration of the process of cognition, the structure of which is taken to reveal the foundational nature of cit. It is especially by reflection on the conditions prior and subsequent to a particular cognition that the kūtaṣṭha-intelligence becomes recognized. The most important passage in this regard is Pañcadasi 8.5 where it is explained that both the present knowledge of the pot as 'this' and its unknownness prior to it are experiences alike made possible by Brahman<sup>28</sup> (here to be understood in its sense of the foundational consciousness). This is to say that the witness manifests all objects either as known or unknown. Likewise it is said that kūtaṣṭha witnesses the mental modifications and also their non-existence.<sup>29</sup> This aspect of Vidyāraṇya's thought is exceedingly rich in implication and warrants careful consideration for the light it throws both on the nature of the kūtaṣṭha-intelligence and the way in which it is disclosed in empirical experience. The essential question is, what is the nature of the experience which in retrospect takes the form "I wasn't knowing the pot"? In what sense was the pot unknown prior to the rise of the

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<sup>28</sup> ajñātatvena jñātoyam ghato buddhyudayaṭpurā/  
brahmaṇaivopariṣṭāttu jñātatvenetyasau bhidā

<sup>29</sup> Pañcadasi 8.56.

particular knowledge of it, and to whom and in what form did this unknownness present itself? The answer provides an important "proof" both for the existence of the witness and the presence of ajñāna.

All particular knowledge is accompanied by an awareness of the fact that the object cognised was not before known in that specific way ("I was not knowing the pot before"). In some sense or other a consciousness of the unknownness of a thing prior to its cognition must be accepted if its "now-known" character is to be explained. One might be tempted to assume that before the emergence of the vṛtti which reveals the pot there is an experience which may be assimilated to the phrase "I am not now knowing the pot" and that this formulation of the situation would fulfill the condition of a prior knowledge of unknownness. But this is a faulty transcription of the experience. Prior to the rise of a vṛtti pure consciousness abides alone. A determinate content may never be assigned to the changeless cit but only to the mediate knowledge of the intellect for otherwise, the immutable ground of experience would be reduced to the level of empirical knowledge. Further, the knowledge in question cannot be thought to assume the form of an explicit perception of the absence of knowledge ("I am not now knowing the pot"). To perceive the absence of a thing it must be brought within consciousness which of

course prevents it from remaining unknown. Another explanation is required. As Murti so aptly expresses it, in the case of the cognition of an object,

the incoming knowledge breaks in upon us as a modification of a dim background. If this position be not acceptable, the object will either be always known without any specific functioning of knowledge, or be always unknown in spite of such a functioning - neither of which is tenable or even plausible.<sup>30</sup>

For this reason appeal is made to a conscious experience other than and prior to the rise of specific knowledge. Such a consciousness cannot be thought to know in an explicit way the absence of a particular cognition before its rise even though that is implied by our knowledge of its past absence later on. What is known implicitly, later assumes the character of explicit knownness. This is exemplified by the case of the blind man who suddenly is given sight.

One who is born blind has not consciousness of not seeing. But if such a man comes to see...he will have an explicit perception of the previous absence of seeing which will at the same time be recognition of the absence as that implicitly cognized during the absence.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>T. R. V. Murti, "Ajñāna", Chapter 3 of Ajñāna, the Theory of Ignorance, also by G. R. Malkani and R. Das (London, 1933), p. 152.

<sup>31</sup>Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya, "Studies in Vedāntism", in Studies in Philosophy (Calcutta, 1956), p. 19.



There was a general awareness of things as unseen and neither specific knowledge of the lack of visual input ("I am not seeing the pot", etc.) nor a total absence of knowledge of the unseenness of things. In the same way the kūtaṣṭha-intelligence (from the empirical point of view) provides a kind of primary acquaintance with the objective world apart from any determinant knowledge. Every specific act of knowledge arises as a modification of the primal nescience known directly and immediately by the witness.<sup>32</sup> The witness is, therefore, the pre-condition of all knowledge and not the special cause of any particular cognition.<sup>33</sup> It manifests in a general way the entire homogeneous ajñāna ("the dim background" of which Murti speaks), the primal presentation which is cognized as specific objects by the intellect. A knowledge of the whole is indispensable before distinctions can be made in it, i.e. before particular objects can be known. "A vṛtti arises dispelling the gloom in some small degree; a portion of the field is lighted, according to the nature of the vṛtti and set over against the rest of the dark background."<sup>34</sup> "I was not before knowing the chair" can

<sup>32</sup>Murti, p. 159.

<sup>33</sup>Pañcadaśī 3.10.

<sup>34</sup>Murti, p. 174.

only be accounted for if we assume that the ego has appropriated something of the experience of the sākṣī. Because the ego (of which the antah-karana is the essential constituent) is only equipped to handle determinate experience it must give a negative form to the indeterminate experience of the witness. Thus the phrase in question is really a hybrid of two experiences - that of pure cit which in the absence of vṛttis manifests the whole of aḥnāna as its object, and the specialized knowledge of the antah-karana by which a particular object becomes separated out from its background. In knowing anything at all "both omniscience and limitation are intertwined."<sup>35</sup>

To further indicate the necessity for positing a foundational consciousness, Vidyāraṇya points to "the consciousness which accompanies what the Naiyāyikas call 'after cognition', the knowledge which follows the cognition of objects."<sup>36</sup> This experience is characterized by the judgment "I know the pot" as distinguished from the preceding cognition of the form "this is a pot". The original cognition is due to cidābhāsa but lasting knowledge is derived from pure cit.<sup>37</sup> Here we encounter

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>36</sup> Pañcadaśī 8.15.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 8.16.

considerations similar to those which form the Advaita criticism of the theory of momentariness. A cognition in itself is discrete and cannot reveal more than its object. Consciousness of the knowledge of an object is due to the witness-self for it reveals simultaneously the agent, the object, and the means of knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Here again the resulting knowledge "I know the pot" is of a composite nature, requiring both a transcendental and finite principle of knowledge. The ego grounds itself upon the sākṣī and appears to be the center around which all cognitions and experiences are unified.

The preceding discussion was an elaboration of certain key points in the thought of Vidyāranya. He has attempted to show that the kūtaṣṭha-intelligence is presupposed by empirical knowing. Any particularized knowledge which belongs to the ego, "presupposes ignorance, the general but improved existence of the object presented to a consciousness other than the ego."<sup>39</sup> Further, an inquiry into the nature of the states prior or subsequent to a particular cognition reveals a consciousness which seems to consist of pure and unchanging illumination, and which reveals without distinction all that is presented to it. Though the vṛttis are dependent

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 10.9.

<sup>39</sup> Murti, p. 161.

on it the converse is not true. Sākṣī illumines  
everything either as known or unknown.

In the thought of Vidyāraṇya, and in the post-Śaṅkara period generally, we encounter the sākṣī idea in the form of a specialized concept whose epistemological importance is clearly brought out. It is no longer, as it was in Śaṅkara's works, strictly equivalent to absolute Reality, for that would render impossible the crucial feature of sākṣī, i.e. its participation in the empirical use. We have shown, however, the antiquity of the Advaita theory of pure cit as the knower or witness by which all else is known. It begins in the Upanisads with an investigation into the light by which the individual shines, and in the discussion of self-luminosity. With Śaṅkara the self-manifest and constant character of pure consciousness is emphasized, especially in the context of counter-arguments against opposing schools of thought which do not admit the necessity of a permanent, changeless principle of knowledge. Thus, Chapter III (as well as the previous section on Sāṅkhya-Yoga dualism) attempts to demonstrate by way of the Advaita critique of alternative theories, some of the important issues involved in the positing of a foundational principle of consciousness. If there is a single most important feature of the notion of the witness-self which runs through all of Advaita thought, it is the fact that as the pure manifesting consciousness which forms the substratum of the individual, the sākṣī

is presupposed by every changing aspect of conscious life. It is the principle of constant consciousness itself, the one permanent feature of all experience. For that reason the witness is ever known, not just as a hypothetical construct necessary for an understanding of experience, but as the irrepressible Reality to which all things give expression.

To live in perfect goodness is to  
realize one's life in the infinitive.  
This is the most comprehensive view  
of life which we can have by our  
inherent power of the moral vision  
of the wholeness of life.

- Tagore, Sādhanā, p. 57

## Sākṣī as a Religious Model

The epistemological, and to a lesser degree the metaphysical dimensions of the sākṣī concept are well enough drawn within the literature of Advaita Vedānta to allow for a relatively systematic investigation into its value and significance within the system. This is not the case, however, where the present topic is concerned. While the witness-self exhibits intriguing possibilities as a religious ideal or category, there has apparently been no explicit treatment of the concept along these lines. In one sense, at least, this might be understandable for behind all formulations of Vedānta philosophy the salvational issue stands paramount. It is patent that the whole body of Advaita thought, its constructive formulations as well as its dialectics, subserve the sole end and purpose of the system, namely the attainment of release. The practical religious concern is the ultimate inspiration for all, even the most abstruse of arguments and formulations. But the sākṣī (and to a large degree all features of the Advaita theory of consciousness) seems to represent a much fuller embodiment of the religious concern than do other aspects of the system.

Like the Supreme Lord of the theistic schools, the



sākṣī is divine presence whose unfailing sight encompasses every aspect of the individual's experience. In Advaita this felt intimacy of connection is to be deepened into an awareness of identity whose ultimate flowering is mokṣa or release; for the Seer of all acts is none other than the innermost reality of the jīva itself. All theorizing about the mechanics of cognition and perceptual knowledge has this recognition as its goal, for it seeks to instill an awareness of the constant conscious background of empirical life as the divine basis of the individual. Enquiry into the nature of consciousness is simultaneously a movement in the direction of the realization of the divine who is the inner Self of all. The witness, because it is manifest in every aspect of empirical life, exhibits an accessibility which is not strictly true of the Ātman and is available as an indicator of a level of truth in ourselves which is far more fundamental than the purely individual. The nature of the witness, as we have come to know it through our investigation into the ground of experience, might be taken as a kind of religious model, the knowledge of and approximation to which, leads into a deeper sense of the eternal and universal dimensions of life. I would like, therefore, to present what I consider to be some of the religious and ethical

implications inherent in the nature of the sākṣī.

We have seen that the sākṣī reveals all that is presented to it without partiality of any kind. Murti notes, in fact, that "the evidence of the sākṣī is very unreliable because he does not, being impartial, make any attempt at sifting the matter presented to him."<sup>1</sup> Because sākṣī has for its objects both the real and the unreal its undependability for providing knowledge of uniform validity is notorious in Advaita.<sup>2</sup> This indifference as to object was touched on in reference to the process of cognition. The sākṣī reveals broadly what the ego comes to cognize in specific and limited ways. The witness makes no distinctions and so is incapable of entering into matters of truth or falsity, right or wrong, etc. This absence of judgment is not precisely equivalent to an ethical or moral neutrality for the witness claims a grounding in Truth itself. Its detachment is really a refusal to acknowledge the illusory distinctions (including those drawn between the real and unreal, good and evil, etc.) by

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<sup>1</sup>T. R. V. Murti, "Ajñāna", Chapter 3 of Ajñāna, the Theory of Ignorance, also by G. R. Malkani and R. Das (London, 1955), p. 158.

<sup>2</sup>Dharmarāja Adhvarīndra, Vedānta-paribhāṣā, trans. Swāmī Mādhavananda (Belur Math, 1963), p. 55.

which reality is falsely fragmented. The sākṣī may be taken to represent the very highest ethic, for it transcends the many dualisms of conventional morality.

Perhaps the most significant and far reaching insight that is linked to knowledge of the sākṣī, is that the most fundamental level of our being manifests itself as different from, and in fact as opposed to the qualities which pertain to ego-centred consciousness. The witness grasps the whole but remains unattached. The ego-centred jīva is only capable of a partial and conditioned view and deliberates the question, "what is the good?". It is the ego which, as agent, chooses its objects, directs its activity towards them, and displays itself as owner of all its attainments. If a man practices virtue he envisions the good for which he strives as an object external to himself. But the enlightened man recognizes that there is nothing to be achieved, for apart from the Self, what could be required?<sup>3</sup> His vision, like that of the sākṣī, is a comprehensive one which encompasses the wholeness of the field of life. If action should

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<sup>3</sup>"But that man...one devoted to Self-knowledge = whose joy is in the Self..., for such a man...there is nothing to do." Śaṅkara's commentary on The Bhagavad-Gītā, trans. Mahadeva Sastri, Madras, 1972, 3.17.

arise, it does not proceed from a predetermined set of moral principles but from a source which runs much deeper than the desires and volitions of individuals. This is the karma-yoga idea of the Gītā, the disinterested activity which is at one with the infinite activity whose source is in the divine. Questions such as "what ought to be done?" or "what ought not to be done?" no longer have substance, nor could they arise when one is in harmony with the divine. When the time to act presents itself one responds not according to the self-conscious mode of deliberation, but in accordance with the divine mode of activity. Such effortless and selfless activity implies a degree of universality which far exceeds the limited sphere of the ego, yet at the same time it serves to generate a further deepening of knowledge which may culminate in release. In this way wisdom or jñāna supersedes karma whose perfection may be seen as preliminary to the dawning of perfect knowledge. Karma-yoga leads in the direction of karma-sanyāsa<sup>4</sup> which would be most closely aligned with the sākṣī model. Non-attachment and indifference characterize the man who is most firmly rooted in his true Self and transcends the relative

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<sup>4</sup> See The Bhagavad-Gītā 4.33, "All works without exception in wisdom find their consummation."

morality which is taken up with distinctions and active striving. To move from the particular towards the universal, to gain a wider and more comprehensive vision of the world, is also to relinquish the relative moral principles which are so deeply rooted in the consciousness of difference.

This idea of an impartial and comprehensive view of things as the precondition for right action has its counterpart in the Ethical Naturalism of the West. The "Ideal Observer" theory, whose central ideas seem to have originated with Adam Smith,<sup>5</sup> involves a similar contention. It is concerned, really, with the meaning of ethical terms which are arrived at in accordance with its definition of the ideal observer of a situation. When we state that an action is morally "right", we supposedly do so with reference to what we feel the reaction of an ideal observer would be if he stood in our place. This hypothetical being is free from conditioning by outside factors, and is in no way motivated by any personal beliefs. He is totally impartial, in the sense that no particular reaction is invoked by the presence or absence of certain individuals or groups involved in the given situation.<sup>6</sup> Further, he is in

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<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Harrison, Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong (London, 1971), p. 151.

<sup>6</sup>Richard B. Brandt, Ethical Theory (New Jersey, 1959), p. 174.

complete possession of all relevant information, that is he has perfect knowledge of all factors bearing on the situation. The implication is that to the extent we are able to conform to the ideal observer model, our response to a situation will be ethically valid. The most common criticism regarding the value of this theory is quite simply that there are, in fact, no ideal observers whose reactions we could inquire about. We only have recourse to our personal feelings about how an ideal observer might react. Since each individual would necessarily differ, in some respects at least, in his conclusions, the right course of action for a given situation is left in the realm of controversy. There is a perspective, however, from which such a common kind of observation becomes quite irrelevant. The fact that the idea of the ideal observer exists at all seems to imply an inherent sense of a higher ethic than that which we as individuals are capable of devising. Despite the fact of his limitations and conditioning, a person is still capable (no matter how imperfectly) of appeal to this ideal observer who, because he stands outside the dualism of right and wrong, affords the truest measure for the ethical. There is an implied belief that the right is achieved not through adherence to conventional ethics but through

appeal to a higher arbitration. In Advaita Vedānta this is the tacit role of the sākṣī. There are not, of course, the problems which attach to a hypothetical entity as ethical model. To arrive at the nature of the sākṣī one becomes it, or rather realizes it through an abandonment of his ego-centric stand.

In Advaita morality is conceived of as a natural outgrowth of jñāna. The ideal "is gradually to replace the narrow view held by the jīva by one like that of the cosmic self, whose interests coincide with those of the universe."<sup>7</sup> Morality is not attained through practice of virtue but flowers of itself when, through knowledge, the sense of self is extended beyond the narrow confines of the merely individual. This is the great possibility offered by the witness-self. "He who ceaselessly reflects on this 'Lamp of Kūṭastha' acquires the nature of Kūṭastha, and is ceaselessly therefore self-luminous."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the jīvanmukta - the freed while yet embodied - becomes the embodiment of the witness. His relation to the world involves no

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<sup>7</sup> M. Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy (London, 1957), p. 366.

<sup>8</sup> Swami Vidyāranya, Pañcadaśī, trans. Hari Prasad Shastri (London, 1956), 8.76.  
 imaṃ kūṭasthadīpam yonūsandhatte nirantaram/  
 svayaṃ kūṭastharūpena dīpyate'sau nirantaram

attachment to it. He is like a light whose shining presence alone may occasion the transformation of others.



## GLOSSARY

abhāva: non-existence

aḥamkāra: egotism

ajñāna and avidyā: spiritual ignorance which stands in the way of release

antah-karana: internal organ

Ātman: eternal self, identified with Brahman in Advaita Vedānta

Brahman: supreme principle, the Absolute of the Upaniṣads

buddhi: intellect

cidābhasa: reflection of consciousness

cit: consciousness, intelligence

guṇa: in Sāṃkhya, one of the three types of substances

Īśvara: Supreme Lord

jīva: individual self

jīvanmukti: release while still embodied

jñāna: knowledge, especially spiritual insight

karma: action, rites, past deeds and their results

kutastha: literally "anvil", the immutable, hence sāksī as foundational consciousness

manas: mind organ

māyā: indeterminable principle of world illusion

mokṣa: release from bondage, highest spiritual attainment

parināma-vāda: doctrine of transformation

paramārta: higher truth as distinguished from ordinary knowledge

prakṛti: also called pradhāna, primal nature, one of two ultimates in Sāṃkhya

pralaya: dissolution

purusa: conscious principle in Sāṃkhya

rajas: one of three constituents of prakṛti, indicating energy, activity

sāksi: witness-self, immutable consciousness

samsara: cycle of rebirth, world of empirical existence

sarga: evolution

sattva: one of three constituents of prakṛti, indicating  
brightness, goodness

susupti: deep dreamless sleep

svarupa: essential nature

svayam-īyotih: self-luminous

tamas: one of three constituents of prakṛti, indicating  
darkness, inertia

upādhi: adjunct, limiting condition

vivarta-vāda: theory that the world is an illusory  
appearance superimposed on Brahman

vṛtti-jñāna: the changing temporary knowledge of the antah-  
karana

vyavahāra: ordinary knowledge pertaining to the empirical

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