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BOOK 2

FINDING ULTIMATE REALITY

IN SEARCH OF THE BEST ANSWERS
TO THE BIGGEST QUESTIONS



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Book 2, The Quest for Reality and Significance
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DEDICATED TO OUR YOUNGER FELLOW STUDENTS,
REMEMBERING THAT WE WERE ONCE STUDENTS—AND STILL ARE

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IN SEARCH OF THE BEST ANSWERS TO THE BIGGEST QUESTIONS

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the background of the traditions we have inherited from the past and that will mean that we need to have a good grasp of history.

Sometimes we forget that ancient philosophers faced and thought deeply about the basic philosophical principles that underlie all science and came up with answers from which we can still profit. If we forget this, we might spend a lot of time and effort thinking through the same problems and not coming up with as good answers as they did.

Moreover, the role of education is surely to try and understand how all the various fields of knowledge and experience in life fit together. To understand a grand painting one needs to see the picture as a whole and understand the interrelationship of all its details and not simply concentrate on one of its features.

Moreover, while we rightly insist on the objectivity of science we must not forget that it is we who are doing the science. And therefore, sooner or later, we must come to ask how we ourselves fit into the universe that we are studying. We must not allow ourselves to become so engrossed in our material world and its related technologies that we neglect our fellow human beings; for they, as we shall later see, are more important than the rest of the universe put together.² The study of ourselves and our fellow human beings will, of course, take more than a knowledge of science. It will involve the worlds of philosophy, sociology, literature, art, music, history and much more besides.

Educationally, therefore, it is an important thing to remember—and a thrilling thing to discover—the interrelation and the unity of all knowledge. Take, for example, what it means to know what a rose is: *What is the truth about a rose?*

To answer the question adequately, we shall have to consult a whole array of people. First the scientists. We begin with the *botanists*, who are constantly compiling and revising lists of all the known plants and flowers in the world and then classifying them in terms of families and groups. They help us to appreciate our rose by telling us what family it belongs to and what are its distinctive features.

Next, the *plant breeders* and *gardeners* will inform us of the history of our particular rose, how it was bred from other kinds, and the conditions under which its sort can best be cultivated.

² Especially in Book 1 of this series, *Being Truly Human*.



INDIAN PANTHEISTIC MONISM

AN INDIAN SEARCH FOR ULTIMATE REALITY

Believe me, my son, an invisible and subtle
essence is the Spirit of the whole universe.

That is Reality. That is Atman. THOU ART THAT.

—The Chandogya Upanishad



HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

We are about to study Indian pantheistic monism as interpreted by the famous Indian philosopher Shankara,¹ but first some necessary, preliminary observations. In some languages the term ‘Hinduism’ is used as if it were an adequate label to denote the religion believed and practised by the people of India. But in this sense it is a misleading label. In the first place there are other religions native to India: Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism.

In the second place, if we do use the term ‘Hinduism’ to refer to Indian religion, then we should be aware that Hinduism is not one homogeneous religion with a central creed laid down by some religious authority, like the Magisterium in Roman Catholicism or the Ecumenical Councils acknowledged by the Orthodox Churches. There are many forms of Hindu religion, each concentrated on the worship of its favoured god, gods or goddesses (there are traditionally said to be 330 million gods, or 300 or 30—in other words it does not matter how many), though some gods, like Krishna, are more widely recognised than others.

In the nineteenth century, European scholars thought, and so do many Indians still, that Indian civilisation began with the arrival in India (c.1500 BC) of the Aryan tribes whose language, Sanskrit, is a member of the Indo-European family of languages. It is also the language in which the sacred books of Indian religion were originally written.

However, in the early period of the twentieth century, British and Indian archaeologists discovered the remains of several early cities in what was then North India (now Pakistan), which have been dated to around 2500–1800 BC. This culture, known now as the Indus or Harappan Civilisation, had a developed religious system, elements of

¹ Alternative spellings: Śaṅkara, Shaṅkara. In Sanskrit his system of philosophy is called *advaita*, meaning ‘non-dualistic’.

which may well have intermingled with the later Aryan systems.² In addition it must be realised that Hinduism is an umbrella term covering not only a non-unified religion but also a whole way of life, a richly variegated national culture built up of many elements.

Its sacred books fall into two groups:

1. The Vedas and the Upanishads. These are referred to as Shruti ('what is heard') and are said to contain truths divinely revealed to the early sages and later written down between 1500 and 300 BC.
2. A collection of texts, said to be based upon revealed truth, but of human composition. They are referred to as Smriti, meaning 'remembered' or 'handed' down, i.e. they are regarded as tradition rather than revelation.

According to Kim Knott 'Most Hindus accept the status and authority of the Veda', though he adds: 'but very few have read it'.³ V. P. (Hemant) Kanitkar (a Hindu priest) and W. Owen Cole in their book⁴ state that 'When questioned about the beliefs which an orthodox Hindu should hold, the reply tends to include:

- belief in one ultimate reality;
- belief in the authority of the *Vedas* (which includes the *Upanishads*);
- belief in the principles of karma and samsara, and the eventual attainment of moksha; to these might often be added the performance of *dharma*, right conduct, and the observance of caste duties.'⁵

In the course of the centuries, however, in addition to the cultic side of Hindu religion, a more philosophical approach was developed; and the result has been the formation of six orthodox schools of philosophy based on the Vedas.⁶ The six philosophical systems are:

² See Knott, *Hinduism*, 5–9.

³ *Hinduism*, 15.

⁴ *Hinduism*, 183.

⁵ The technical terms used here will be explained in a moment.

⁶ Kanitkar and Cole (*Hinduism*, 184–5) state that all these systems can be traced back to times BC. The unorthodox schools are the Carvakas, Buddhism and Jainism; they reject the authority of the Vedas.

- Nyaya
- Samkhya
- Mimamsa
- Vaisheshika
- Yoga
- Vedanta

Of these six, the Vedanta system (Vedanta means the end of the Vedas) is the one that particularly interests us in this chapter, because it is concerned with expounding what the Vedic texts have to say on the topic of Ultimate Reality.

Within this system three scholars stand out, each with his own different interpretation: Shankara⁷ (trad. AD 788–820), Ramanuja (trad. AD 1017–1137) and Madhva (thirteenth century AD). We shall be studying Shankara's philosophy. Until comparatively recently he was thought to be the most influential of the Indian philosophers, and still is by many. One of his modern admirers claims that he was 'a towering mystic of the ninth century AD whose word carries the authority of Augustine, Eckhart and Aquinas all in one'.⁸ *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* reads:



One of Shankara's modern admirers claims that he was 'a towering mystic of the ninth century AD whose word carries the authority of Augustine, Eckhart and Aquinas all in one'.

The most renowned philosopher of this school, and, indeed, of all Hinduism was Śaṅkara. . . . The Śaṅkaran system has sounded the keynote of intellectual Hinduism down to the present, but later teachers founded sub-schools of Vedanta, which are perhaps equally important. . . . Śaṅkara is also said to have founded the four monasteries (*maṭha*) at the four corners of India: Sringeri in Karnataka, Badrīnāth in the Himalayas, Dwārakā in Gujarat, and Puri in Orissa. The abbots of these monasteries control the spiritual lives of many millions of devout Śaiva laymen throughout India, and their establishments strive to maintain the philosophical Hinduism of the strict Vedānta.⁹

Shankara's philosophical system is known as 'Advaita Vedantism': 'vedantism' because it is based on (his interpretation of) the Veda; and 'advaita', which means 'non-dualistic', because he teaches

⁷ Also spelt Śaṅkara, or Śaṅkara.

⁸ Easwaran, *Bhagavad Gita*, 18.

⁹ 15th edn, 1989, 603.

that the human soul, or self, and the Ultimate Reality, Brahman, are one and the same thing—not two entities, but one.¹⁰

Here is a short glossary¹¹ giving the meaning of other Indian technical terms that we shall encounter:

1. BRAHMAN [*Brahman*, from *brh* ‘grow, expand’: that which expands, bursts into growth]. The Supreme Godhead, beyond all distinctions or forms; Ultimate Reality.
2. BRAHMA [*Brahmā*]. The Creator; in the Upanishads, a secondary deity of the Vedic pantheon. Not to be confused with Brahman.
3. ATMAN [*ātman*, ‘self’]. Self; the innermost soul in every creature, which is divine.
4. SAMSAARA [*saṃsāra*] ‘That which is constantly changing’; the phenomenal world; the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.
5. MOKSHA [*mokṣa*]. Liberation (from *samsara*, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth).
6. KARMA [*karma*, ‘something done’]. Action, work, behaviour; also the consequences of action, spiritually and mentally, as well as physically.

The difference between Brahman and Brahmā

To understand Hindu thought, it is of fundamental importance to distinguish between the terms Brahman and Brahmā. In non-Sanskrit orthographies they often look almost the same; but in Sanskrit orthography they are totally different.

Brahman is a neuter noun and carries the connotation that the godhead, the Supreme Reality underlying all life, the divine ground of existence, is impersonal. But this Supreme Reality is not the Creator. The Creator is Brahmā (this noun is masculine), one of the Hindu triad of major gods that proceeded from, but are less than, Brahman. The other two are Vishnu, the Preserver, and Shiva, the Destroyer, called ‘the auspicious one’. Vishnu is thought to have incarnated himself from time to time, in animal form, in half animal and half

¹⁰ For Shankara’s work see Bādarāyana et al., *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyana*.

¹¹ This glossary is taken from Easwaran, *Upanishads*, 337–44.

human form, and in human form, as in Rama and Krishna. All three gods of the Triad are frequently spoken of as performing more or less the same functions.

This idea that the Supreme Godhead is not the Creator, but that the Creator is some lesser god, is not exclusive to Hinduism. It occurs also in Greek thought. To see its significance, we should perhaps contrast it with the very different Hebrew, Christian and Islamic doctrine of creation in which the one and only God is himself the Creator and there are no other gods: cf. 'I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God . . . I made the earth and created man on it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens . . . For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens . . . "I am the LORD, and there is no other"' (Isa 45:5, 12, 18).



This idea that the Supreme Godhead is not the Creator, but that the Creator is some lesser god, is not exclusive to Hinduism.

SHANKARA'S ADVAITA VEDANTA PHILOSOPHY

We come, then, to Shankara's philosophy, looking for its answers to our questions: What is the nature of the Ultimate Reality to which the human race and we as individual men and women owe our existence? And how are we related to that Ultimate Reality?

Put succinctly its answers are:

1. The inner Self of each individual human being, the Atman, is essentially the same as Brahman, the Supreme Reality, in the sense that they are not two different entities but one. Atman *is* Brahman. The true inner Self in each person *is* God. Each person can say 'I am God'.
2. The myriad apparent individual phenomena in the universe, whether human, animal, vegetable, or mineral are illusions. The only reality is Atman = Brahman.
3. The aim of every individual person is to realise his or her true identity with the divine Self, which is Brahman. This realisation can be achieved only by meditation (a form of sophisticated psychological activity), if need be assisted by the constant recitation of a mantra.

4. Those who manage to achieve this realisation of the identity of the inner Self with Brahman, will, upon death, find their sense of Self dissolved by complete immersion in the infinite sea of pure consciousness that is Brahman.
5. Those who do not in this life achieve the realisation of the identity of their inner Self with Brahman, or having achieved it, do not live as they should, will have to undergo reincarnation (or a series of reincarnations) in a material body, to work off their *karma*, i.e. the ongoing effects of their wrong behaviour, until at length they achieve *moksha*, that is, liberation from the otherwise inevitable cycle of birth, death and rebirth.¹²

An explanation

In saying that the Self, the Atman, in each individual person is Brahman, Shankara is not claiming that this Self in the individual person is the sum-total of Brahman. On the other hand, since Brahman is believed to be non-complex, and indivisible, one cannot speak of a part of Brahman being present in one individual. Rather one must say that the Self of the individual is like a drop of water in the Atlantic Ocean, of the same essence as the ocean, and only logically, but not actually, distinct from the undivided waters of the ocean itself.

One of the *Upanishads* contains a number of parables told by a father to his son, Svetaketu, in order to teach him that Atman, the Self, is Brahman. In one of them the father says to his son:

‘Bring me a fruit from this banyan tree.’

‘Here it is, father.’

‘Break it.’

‘It is broken, Sir.’

‘What do you see in it?’

‘Very small seeds, Sir.’

‘Break one of them, my son.’

‘It is broken, Sir.’

‘What do you see in it?’

‘Nothing at all, Sir.’

¹² See Shvetashvatara Upanishad, 5.11–12, Easwaran (tr.), *Upanishads*, 131–2.