

# Ultimate Reality of Samkara and Vivekananda: A Comparative Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The enquiry with regard to the concept of Ultimate Reality is one of the most primal discussions in the domain of metaphysics. With regard to the concept of Ultimate Reality different philosophers have put forward their viewpoint differently, even different opinions have emerged with regard to the number of Ultimate Reality also. Here in this paper an insight into the concept of Ultimate Reality is being discussed specially to bring out a comparison in between the Vedantin thinker Śaṅkara and the Neo-Vedantin thinker Vivekananda. In this paper an enquiry is made to highlight the areas of similarities as well as the dissimilarities in between the aforesaid philosophers. It is believed that Vivekananda's concept of Ultimate Reality is based upon the Advaita Vedanta of Śaṅkara. But as Vivekananda is later to Śaṅkara thus question may arise with regard to the independency of Vivekananda's philosophy. Thus a care has been made to find out the unique contributions of Vivekananda also with regard to his concept of Ultimate Reality.

## Keywords

Ultimate Reality, Brahman, Nirguṇa, Saṅḡa, māyā

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## Introduction

Ultimate Reality is one of the central theme of discussion in the domain of metaphysics. It is basically, the study of the beyond. Such metaphysical knowledge of the Ultimate Reality comes to man when he goes beyond the circle of reason or physical plane. Here, in this paper an effort has been made to bring to the forefront a comparison of the concept of Ultimate Reality in between Śaṅkara and Vivekananda. In this analysis of the concept of Ultimate Reality the possible similarities as well the dissimilarities are being highlighted in between the two philosophers.

## Comparison

Śaṅkara and Vivekananda both of them are Advaitins no doubt as both believe in one Ultimate Reality, but in spite of this, subtle differences in their way of thinking can be discovered. Śaṅkara's metaphysics is purely non-dualistic whereas in Vivekananda's philosophy, monism and dualism become identified. Synthesis between the monism and dualism is not seen in Śaṅkara's metaphysics, as dualism is totally denied in case of the metaphysics of Śaṅkara. That is why Dr. R.C. Majumder considers Śaṅkara's metaphysics as kevalādvaita or abstract monism and Vivekananda's metaphysics as synthetic Vedānta or concrete monism. Vivekananda says that though Advaita is the last stage to pursue but Dvaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita are the preceding stages to reach the ultimate state of Advaita. Vivekananda himself has considered this to be his own discovery distinct from that of Śaṅkara. In the words of Vivekananda, "Now I will tell you my discovery. All of religion is contained in the Vedānta, that is, in the three stages of the Vedānta Philosophy, the Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita; one comes after the other. These are the three stages of the spiritual growth in man. Each one is necessary." The two philosophers differ in their way of discussing Ultimate Reality. So far as the negative explanation of the

Ultimate Reality is concerned both Śaṅkara and Vivekananda hold similar views i.e., Brahman is *nirguṇa* and *nirviśeṣa* and is beyond all qualities as being beyond thought and mind. For Śaṅkara, "Brahman is that which we can never drive out by any power of mind or imagination." Similarly, Vivekananda also holds that "Brahman is *Avāṅmansogocharam*, meaning that which is incapable of being grasped by word and mind."

For Śaṅkara, attributes are ascribed to reality due to māyā. But Brahman is beyond māyā. As such from the transcendental standpoint Brahman is *nirguṇa* and *nirviśeṣa*. For Śaṅkara, thus attributes are applicable only from the empirical standpoint as they are subject to limiting adjuncts due to ignorance. For Śaṅkara, Brahman which is endowed with qualities is called *saviśeṣa* or lower Brahman. But the Brahman which is beyond all qualities is called *nirviśeṣa* or higher Brahman. The way of approaching Brahman, for Śaṅkara is totally negative as he supports the Upaniṣadic path of *neti neti*. Brahman is not an object to be found within space, time, and causation. The only way to Brahman is realization and insight what Śaṅkara calls *aparokṣānubhūti* and as such we can never know the *nirguṇa* Brahman but only the *saṅḡa* Brahman which is the limiting aspect of Brahman due to its being the product of māyā. Moreover, Brahman is not to be considered as an object of knowledge because it cannot be given in our sense perception like any ordinary objects of knowledge because of its being beyond space, time, causation. Thus basing on Upaniṣad Śaṅkara writes "Brahman is clear to the knower whose conviction is that Brahman is not object of knowledge. Whoever, on the other hand, believes that he apprehends Brahman does not at all understand the nature of Brahman."

Vivekananda though explains that ascribing qualities to Brahman means to limit It, yet the negative explanation of the Ultimate Reality as *neti neti* is not the complete description of Brahman in the metaphysics of Vivekananda. Rather the way of approaching Brahman for Vivekananda is negative as well as positive. He holds that to understand

Brahman we have to go through the negation and then the positive side will begin. After negating the ignorance when the truth will emerge then the negated things will reappear. Then negated things will be deified. Thus everything will be understood as their real essence i.e., everything will be understood as Brahman. Thus it may be said that while Śaṅkara stopped with negation, Vivekananda went beyond negation. Dr. Satischandra Chatterjee says that Brahman of Vivekananda is perfectly formless, qualityless and distinctionless (*nirguṇa* and *nirviśeṣa*) like Śaṅkara's, and that there is no difference between them on this point. But this is not the complete estimation of Vivekananda's conception of Brahman. This is the negative way of knowing Brahman which is similar to the Upaniṣadic path of *neti neti*.

Again, it is seen that Śaṅkara has explained Brahman as *sat*, *cit*, *ananta*. Brahman is *sat* or existent in the sense that He is not non-existent or having finite existence. Moreover, the being or existence of Brahman is not like any empirical object although all empirical objects get its existence because of Brahman. However, Brahman is different from all objects that are insentient because Brahman is eternal pure consciousness (*nitya-śuddha-buddha-svabhāvaḥ*) which is its intrinsic nature. As consciousness is immaterial so it is not limited by space and time thus Brahman is also infinite or *anantam*.

Vivekananda also explains Brahman with three essences but for Vivekananda Brahman is *sat*, *cit*, *ānanda*. The term '*ananta*' is not being used by Vivekananda along with *sat*, and *cit* as the essence of Brahman. In Śaṅkara's commentary on *Brahmasūtra* the term '*ānanda*' is being used in case of *saguṇa Brahman*. For Vivekananda '*ānanda*' means love, as for him, *ānanda* is same as love. Vivekananda brings the emotional aspect of love along with existence and consciousness which was absent in the concept of Ultimate Reality of Śaṅkara. According to Thomas Mannumel S. J. Vivekananda's unique contribution regarding the nature of Brahman is *ānanda* where *ānanda* is equated with love, but in Śaṅkara we nowhere come across love in connection with *ānanda*.

Furthermore, even from the empirical standpoint unlike Śaṅkara, the aspect of *sat*, *cit*, *ānanda* is also explained in a different way by Vivekananda. Vivekananda asserts that the Absolute Brahman appears from the earthly or empirical plane as Trinity. He explains that at the empirical level *sat* is the creating principle, *cit* is the guiding principle and *ānanda* is the realizing principle. Vivekananda was influenced by Christian concept of Trinity. He says: "When we return to earth and see the Absolute as relative, we see Sachchidananda as Trinity – Father, Son, Holy Ghost. *Sat* = the creating principle; *Chit* = the guiding principle; *Ananda* = the realising principle, which joins us again to the One. No one can know "existence" (*Sat*) except through "knowledge" (*Chit*), and hence the force of the saying of Jesus, No man can see the Father save through the Son." In this regard, Thomas Mannumel, S. J., also remarks that "He thinks that Saccidānanda of Vedānta is comparable to the mystery of the Holy Trinity." It may be said here that the influence of Christianity is a new impact in Vivekananda's concept of Ultimate Reality which cannot be imagined in the concept of Ultimate Reality of Śaṅkara. Moreover, for Vivekananda, '*Saccidānanda*' is also truth, goodness, and beauty as

Vivekananda says that the reality reveals in the form of truth, beauty, and goodness when it is sought with love and veneration. This is a totally new interpretation of '*Saccidānanda*'.

*Saguṇa Brahman* of Śaṅkara is *Īśvara* which is the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the world. This *saguṇa Brahman* is not the real aspect of Brahman because it appears to us due to the effect of *māyā*. For Śaṅkara, in the transcendental level the *saguṇa Brahman* or qualified Brahman disappears after the realization of *nirguṇa* or unqualified Brahman as *saguṇa* in the empirical level is our wrong apprehension. For Śaṅkara, *saguṇa Brahman* is the unreal aspect of Brahman which is only wrongly superimposed on *nirguṇa* and *nirviśeṣa Brahman*. In his metaphysics there is a demarcation between the two terms God and Brahman in the sense that Śaṅkara has used the term 'God' for signifying the *saguṇa* aspect and the term 'Brahman' for signifying the *nirguṇa* aspect. In Śaṅkara's metaphysics Brahman is totally transcendental because He cannot be within, being beyond all limitations while *saguṇa Brahman* or God is the product of *māyā* and is the immanent aspect of Brahman. It is this *saguṇa Brahman* which can be an object of devout meditation for Śaṅkara.

The empirical standpoint is not false for Vivekananda. It is the partial or relative standpoint. For Vivekananda, *nirguṇa Brahman* is that which is fully apprehended but *saguṇa Brahman* is the partially apprehended Brahman. For Vivekananda Brahman is both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* from the empirical level even, which is the impersonal and personal aspect of Brahman respectively. *Nirguṇa Brahman* is the impersonal principle underlying everywhere from a cell to God which is the highest manifestation and *saguṇa Brahman* is the personal Brahman with qualities. But it does not mean that *saguṇa Brahman* must be a person sitting on a throne and setting rewards and punishments or it may be said that it need not to be the *Īśvara* of theism. However, it is seen that for Vivekananda, though the *saguṇa Brahman* is only the active aspect of Brahman within space, time, and causation but this aspect is not considered by him as false or unreal. Rather this relative aspect of Brahman is considered by him as lower truth. He no doubt, admits that one must proceed from this aspect of *saguṇa* to the *nirguṇa* aspect of Brahman but this journey, for him, is not from error to truth rather from lower truth to higher truth. For Vivekananda, in the empirical level Brahman is not wrongly apprehended but partially apprehended as *saguṇa Brahman*. Brahman is both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* or it may be said that *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa Brahman* both are same for him. Vivekananda holds that there are not two but one and the same *sat-cit-ānanda* who is impersonal as well as personal. Thus, it is to be said that the distinctions between the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa Brahman* appear due to the difference in the level of perception, but transcendently both are one and the same. Moreover, unlike Śaṅkara, Vivekananda used both the terms God and Brahman for signifying the same reality and there is no hard and fast demarcation between the two terms God and Brahman. To quote Vivekananda here, "I am a materialist in a certain sense, because I believe that there is only One. That is what the materialist wants you to believe; only he calls it matter and I call it God. The materialists admit that out of this matter all hope, and religion, and everything have come. I say, all these have come out of

Brahman.” Moreover, it may be said that the Reality has both being and becoming for Vivekananda, it is absolute being when he talks about *nirguṇa* or Impersonal Brahman and it is becoming when he talks about Personal Brahman. Thus, it may be said that for Vivekananda Brahman is both transcendental and immanent. Being transcendental He is absolute being but being immanent He is becoming. For Vivekananda not only the Personal Brahman is an object of worship rather the Impersonal Brahman which is *nirguṇa* also can be worshipped and this worship is the worship of truth that ‘I and you are all one’.

Moreover, it may be said that as for Śaṅkara, after the attainment of the knowledge of Brahman, there remains nothing but Brahman. As such there is no place for ‘seeing of separateness’. Śaṅkara uses the analogy of ‘rope-snake’, where the snake is superimposed upon the rope. When the real knowledge arises there remains no snake but the rope appears in its true light. Similarly, another analogy of *ghaṭākaśa* is being used by Śaṅkara which also shows that when the *ghaṭākaśa* is destroyed there remains no *ghaṭa* but only single *ākāśa*. For Vivekananda too the reality of oneness prevails with the attainment of realization of the truth. There remaining no difference between Brahman and its manifestations, there is no place for ‘feeling of separateness’. However, this happens due to seeing of the real essence of things i.e., Brahman because the truth of oneness enables to see in everything the real essence i.e., Brahman. Vivekananda uses the analogy of ‘wave and ocean’. The analogy points out the fact that the waves are different from the ocean in its name and form but essentially the waves are not different from the ocean. When there is complete calmness i.e., when the waves subside, waves and ocean appears to be the same. The waves are not destroyed or eliminated for Vivekananda after the attainment of the knowledge of oneness like that of the snake and *ghaṭa* of Śaṅkara. Rather they remain but are perfected with their real essence. That is why may be Romain Rolland says that “He does not reject any one of the proposed attempts at explanation, but from each he seeks to extract the grain of permanent reality;...”

Furthermore it is seen that according to Śaṅkara, there is only Brahman upon which multiplicities are superimposed due to ignorance or *avidyā*. Brahman appears in its true light when the superimpositions are removed by *vidyā* or truth of oneness because when *avidyā* is destroyed by *vidyā* all categories of intellect are removed. Thus for Śaṅkara, truth of oneness will make everything except Brahman disappear. Whereas for Vivekananda the multiplicities are not superimpositions but are manifestations of Brahman. Moreover, the manifestations are not removed for Vivekananda but they appear in its true light which is nothing but Brahman as all are essentially Brahman. Vivekananda denies any qualitative difference between the manifestations of Brahman and Brahman Himself. He affirms that they differ only in degree but not in kind. For Vivekananda, multiplicities are not valueless rather it is through the many that we reach the one. He emphasizes that the “...universal Absolute must have two aspects; the one [representing the] infinite reality of all things; the other, a personal aspect, the Soul of our souls, Lord of all lords.”

As Śaṅkara holds that there is nothing but Brahman so Vivekananda added to this by saying that everything is

Brahman. Hence, for Vivekananda, the *saguṇa* aspect of Brahman is not wrong rather it is Brahman but in its partial aspect. The Personal or *saguṇa* aspect of Brahman is nothing but man’s approaching towards *nirguṇa* Brahman with five sense organs. It is the objectification of the *nirguṇa* Brahman.

## Conclusion

The above discussion shows that the views of Śaṅkara and Vivekananda regarding the concept of Ultimate Reality cannot be considered as identical. Both believe in a reality which is one without second and thus are Advaitins. Śaṅkara in *Upadeśa Sāhasrī* holds that, “... in reality there is only One, the Self, who appears to be many to deluded vision, like the moon appearing more than one to eyes affected by amaurosis.” He also remarks, “...nothing really exists except the Self”. “...the Self is no other than *Brahman* as defined in the *Srutis*.” Śaṅkara in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* asserts that, “... it is impossible that Brahman should stand in an analogous relation to injunctions of devout meditation, for if the knowledge of absolute unity has once arisen there exists no longer anything to be desired or avoided, and thereby the conception of duality, according to which we distinguish actions, agents, and the like, is destroyed.” Similarly, Vivekananda also holds that, “There is only one Purusha, the Brahman of the Vedānta; God and man, analysed, are One in It.”

Vivekananda in Neo-Vedānta or New-Vedānta emphasized the practical aspect of Vedānta and unlike in Śaṅkara, along with unity, the variety or multiplicities are also important for him. Śaṅkara’s Advaita is purely non-dualistic but Vivekananda’s Advaita is a synthesis of dualism and non-dualism. Vivekananda asserts that multiplicities are not valueless rather it is through the many that we reach the one. He also asserts that “...universal Absolute must have two aspects; the one [representing the] infinite reality of all things; the other, a personal aspect, the Soul of our souls, Lord of all lords.” Vivekananda himself makes a distinction of himself from Śaṅkara when he says, “The dry, abstract Advaita must become living – poetic – in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology –and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life’s work.”

Similarity of Śaṅkara and Vivekananda follow from their both being Vedāntins. Upaniṣads describe Brahman as ‘*ekam-eva-adviṭīyam*’ i.e. one without second. It is also observed that following *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* Vivekananda and Śaṅkara both uphold that “He, verily, who knows the Supreme *Brahman* becomes *Brahman* himself.” Both Śaṅkara and Vivekananda following Upaniṣads call Brahman as *sat*, *cit*, *ananta* and *ānanda*. In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* Brahman is described as *sat*, *cit*, *ananta* whereas Chāndogya Upaniṣad describes *ananta* as *ānanda* - “The infinite is happiness. There is no happiness in anything small (finite). Only the infinite is happiness. But one must desire to understand the infinite.”

However, this interpretation cannot be considered as identical. Śaṅkara’s description of Brahman as *sat*, *cit*, *ananta*, in Vivekananda becomes Brahman as *sat*, *cit*,



*ānanda*. Even though *ānanda* in the sense of bliss is being used by Śaṅkara for qualified Brahman but for Vivekananda the term bliss becomes love. The idea of the Upaniṣads which Vivekananda likes most is the impersonal character of the Upaniṣads, yet according to him it is not against any personality rather it embraces all the personalities, which is not seem to be there in the concept of Ultimate Reality of Śaṅkara.

Vivekananda has reformulated and reinterpreted Upaniṣads in his own way that made 'Practical Vedānta' to flourish in the philosophy of Vivekananda but not in the philosophy of Śaṅkara. It may be said that Śaṅkara stresses more on intellectual aspect of Vedānta but Vivekananda gives stress on the practical aspect. Vivekananda has ultimately shown the Ultimate Reality in the form of man, as they are the living God for him. He also insist on the teaching of his Guru Ramakrishna, '*Śiva jñāne jīva sevā*' - 'Service of man considering him as God'. For, Vivekananda believes that man is potentially divine and as such service to humanity is indeed service to God. That is why may be Swami Lokeshwarananda maintains that "Thus, the novelty about the Ramakrishna Order is that it preaches not only God-realization, but also service to humanity. Be God and make others also God – this was the message of Swami Vivekananda." Vivekananda had written a letter from Chicago on March 19, 1894 to one of his brother disciples in India, a part of it is reproduced here: "We are so many Sannyasis wandering about, and teaching the people metaphysics – it is all madness. Did not our Master say, "An empty stomach is no good for religion". Therefore, the foremost need of the hour is to remove hunger, upgrade people to lead a moderate life, before teaching them about religion."

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