

RAMANUJA (1017-1137 [!])

COMMENTARY ON THE VEDANTA SUTRAS (Shri-Bhashya)¹

A Critique of Shankara's Metaphysical Non-Dualism²

Shankara: *Brahman* — a single, undifferentiated, and pure intelligence — is the only true reality. All other things (knowing subjects, objects of knowledge, all distinctions and differences between things, and individual things themselves) are illusory and unreal. The "Pure Being" of *Brahman* alone is "really real."

Ramanuja: This view (metaphysical non-dualism) cannot be proved. All objects that can be known are things that are distinct and different from other such things.³

Acts of consciousness reveal metaphysical distinctions

Shankara: [T]he theory of a supreme reality devoid of all distinction and difference is immediately established by one's own consciousness. The various individual objects of consciousness such as jars, pieces of cloth, etc., and the distinctions and differences between them, come and go in our experience (that is, they are impermanent); but the *being* of such objects (Pure Being, Being-as-Being) persists in all states of consciousness. The one permanent and therefore really fundamental feature of all individual objects of consciousness is Pure Being itself (which is the same as *Brahman*). Distinctions and differences between things — and the things themselves — are appearances only, not realities.

¹Rendition and editing by George Cronk. © 1998. Ramanuja's commentary on the *Vedanta Sutras* (also known as the *Brahma Sutra*), is known as the *Shri-Bhashya* ("The Great Commentary"). Originally composed in Sanskrit, the *Shri-Bhashya* is a large work of almost 800 pages in English translation. See the *Vedanta Sutras with the Commentary by Ramanuja*, trans. George Thibaut, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller, Vol. 48 (Part III) (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989).

The part of the *Shri-Bhashya* included here is from a section entitled "The Great Siddhanta" (*siddhanta* means "conclusion"). It is a lengthy attack on the basic metaphysical doctrines expressed in Shankara's commentary on the Vedanta Sutras (the *Brahmasutra-Bhashya*). I have set the text forth in the form of a dialogue between Shankara and Ramanuja. The views expressed by "Shankara" are those attributed to him by Ramanuja in his *Shri-Bhashya*. — GC.

²Metaphysical "non-dualism" (*advaita*) is the view that reality is "not two" or "not many." For Shankara, *Brahman* alone is real, and *Brahman* is identical with *Atman* (the transcendental Self). The world of ordinary experience (which contains many material objects and many conscious selves) is merely an appearance caused by the powers of ignorance (*avidya*) and illusion (*maya*).

³Ramanuja, like Shankara, is a "non-dualist." He too believes that Brahman alone is ultimately and independently real. However, Ramanuja is a non-dualist with a difference: He holds that, within the one Brahman, there exist many individual material entities as well as many individual conscious selves, and he regards these individual things and selves as ontologically real. It is not that material things and conscious selves exist independently of Brahman, as certain dualistic or pluralistic metaphysicians claim (see Shankara's discussion of the Samkhya-Yoga and Nyaya-Vaisheshika systems, above). For Ramanuja, material things and conscious selves are real, but not independently or ultimately real; their existence is grounded firmly in the unity of Brahman, "in whom they live, and move, and have their being." Ramanuja's version of Vedanta is therefore known as "qualified non-dualism" (*vishishtadvaita*).

Ramanuja: This view is refuted by the fact that all consciousness implies difference. All states of consciousness have for their objects things marked by some difference, as appears in the case of judgments like "I saw this" [where the "I" is different from the "this" and vice versa, and where both the "I" and the "this" are different from other things]

Moreover, consciousness has certain attributes that are different from each other such as permanence, oneness, self-luminousness,¹ etc. Thus, it cannot be shown that these are only Being in general. Also, we observe that [in philosophy and other fields] there takes place a discussion of different views, and the proponents of non-dualism themselves attempt to prove their theory by means of the differences between other views and their own. It therefore must be admitted that reality is full of distinctions and differences

Speech implies metaphysical distinctions

Ramanuja: It is obvious that speech (*śabda*) can refer only to things that are characterized by difference. Speech operates with words and sentences. Now a word (*pada*) is a combination of a root and a suffix, and since these two elements are different it necessarily follows that a word itself can convey only a sense affected by difference. Furthermore, the plurality of words is based on a plurality of meanings. Therefore, a sentence, which is a set or series of words, expresses some special arrangement of different meanings and thus cannot denote a thing devoid of all difference or distinction

Perception reveals metaphysical distinctions

Ramanuja: Perception also cannot give us knowledge of anything devoid of difference. Determinate (*śavikalpaka*) perception clearly has for its objects things characterized by difference, for it reveals things that are distinguished from other things by generic differences [for example, we recognize that cows are generically different from birds, and so on]. Non-determinate (*nirvikalpaka*) perception, too, has for its objects only things that are different from other things, for it is through non-determinate perception that the object distinguished by generic character is recognized in determinate perception. Non-determinate perception is the experience of an object devoid of *some but not all* differences. It is impossible to perceive anything devoid of all differences and distinctions, and therefore such perception never takes place. Thus, on the basis of perceived distinctions, we say "This is such and such" [that is, "this" is "this" and "not that," and so on]. Nothing can be perceived without some special feature of form or structure, as, for example, the triangle-shaped dewlap (fold of skin) hanging from the throat of a cow.

The true distinction between non-determinate and determinate perception is that the former is the perception of the first of a number of things belonging to the same class, while the latter is the perception of a second, or a third, or a fourth (etc.) member of the class. Upon perceiving a cow for the first time, the perceiver is not aware of the fact, and thus cannot "determine," that the object of perception (the cow) is a member of a specific generic class ("cows"); but upon perceiving a second cow, and then a third, and so on, the perceiver comes to recognize the generic character of these objects of perception. The perception is then "determinate." Such recognition of a determinate generic character is not there in the perception of the first individual, and that perception is thus "non-determinate." This is not because there is no perception of structure, color, [or other characteristics], for all these attributes are equally objects of sense perception and are thus perceived as belonging to the first individual also.

Moreover, that which possesses structure cannot be perceived apart from the structure, and so in the case of the perception of the first individual there is already a perception of structure, which enables the perceiver to say, "This thing is such and such." In the case of the second, third, and other individuals, we grasp, in addition to the thing possessing structure and to the structure itself, the generic character shared by the various perceived objects, which makes the perception "determinate." It follows therefore that perception never reveals an object devoid of all differences and distinctions.

¹Both Ramanuja and Shankara frequently characterize consciousness as "self-luminous," "self-illuminating," etc. It is not always clear what they mean by this. Sometimes they seem to mean that consciousness is the source of its own light, that is, the light that reveals truth and reality to it, which implies that consciousness is not dependent upon anything other than itself for knowledge and understanding. In some contexts, Ramanuja and Shankara speak of consciousness as "self-luminous," etc., when they apparently mean to say that consciousness is self-proving or self-certifying in the sense that consciousness shows itself to itself directly and without any intermediary, that consciousness is its own proof of its own existence, as when Descartes proclaimed, "I think; therefore, I am."

The same arguments can be used to refute the view that there is difference and absence of difference at the same time. We commonly judge that "This [substance] is such and such [that is, has such and such an attribute]" In general, when we recognize the connection of a distinguishing attribute and the thing [substance] distinguished thereby, the attribute and the substance clearly present themselves to the mind as absolutely different from one another [not both different and non-different]

The process of inference implies metaphysical distinctions

Ramanuja: Since all of the objects of perception are marked by difference, and since the process of logical inference is a process of reasoning from what is established on the basis of perception and the other means of knowledge, inference also reveals a world of things marked by difference. A person who tries to deduce a reality devoid of difference from a world filled with differences is simply contradicting himself; he is just like a man who asserts that his own mother never had any children

There is no perception of Pure Being

Shankara: The true object of all perception is Pure Being (*Brahman*). When we perceive a jar, it is its essential nature — that is, its *being* — that is the object of perception, not its individual and changing qualities and not its differences from other things. Differentiating between individual things is possible only on the basis of an understanding of the essential natures of those things, and the really essential nature of all things is Being itself. Therefore, there is no perception of differences and distinctions; and all judgments and propositions that presuppose that differences and distinctions are real are in error.

Ramanuja: [On the contrary, we never perceive Being-as-such.] The only objects of perception are things that are distinguished from other things [in various ways]. Also, the various characteristics of perceived things [for example, color, size, spatial location, generic character, etc.] are different from the things they characterize [for example, there is a difference between the brownness of a brown cow and the cow itself]

Furthermore, if perception did reveal Pure undifferentiated Being as the only reality, then judgments referring to different objects — such as "Here is a jar," "There is a piece of cloth," and so on — would be meaningless [and, in fact, false]. Also, if the distinctions and differences between things that we perceive are unreal, why should a man searching for a horse not be satisfied with finding a buffalo?

[None of the senses reveals Pure Being.] The eye grasps color, and the colored thing, and those other [visual] qualities (such as spatial extension) that inhere in the thing. [The sense of touch] has for its objects things that are palpable. Similarly, the ear and the other senses do not have Pure Being for their object, but rather that which is distinguished by a specific sound or taste or smell.

Thus, [it is obvious that] there is no perceptual experience or knowledge of Pure Being.

Impermanent things are not necessarily unreal

Shankara: Objects such as jars, pieces of cloth, and the like are unreal because they do not persist throughout all time [that is, they are impermanent, here today and gone tomorrow]. [The permanent is real, and the impermanent is unreal.]

Ramanuja: [T]his view is dead wrong and is based on a misunderstanding, on the one hand, of the relationship between persistence and non-persistence, and, on the other hand, of the relationship between that which *sublates* and that which is *sublated*.¹ Where two judgments are mutually contradictory [for example, "Rocks exist" and "Rocks do not exist"],

¹Sublation is the process of correcting our understanding by replacing false judgments with true judgments.

[the process of sublation must come into play. One of the judgments must be true and the other must be false, and we must correct our understanding by accepting the true and rejecting the false,] in which case the false judgment, which has been sublated, will not persist. But jars, pieces of cloth, and other objects that occupy separate positions in space and time do not contradict one another [as do the judgments "Rocks exist" and "Rocks do not exist"].

However, if a thing in a specific place at a specific time is believed to exist there [for example, "This object is a snake"] and is also [perhaps subsequently] believed not to exist there [for example, "This object is a rope"], then the two beliefs are mutually contradictory,¹ and the stronger belief [for example, "This object is a rope"] must sublate the weaker [for example, "This object is a snake"], and the latter thus ceases to persist [in the mind, that is, we stop believing that the rope is a snake]. But there is no contradiction in believing that a given thing exists at one time and in one place ["This object is a snake"] and does not exist at some other time and in some other place ["This object is not a snake but a rope"]. Here, the process of sublation does not necessarily come into play. [Both beliefs may be true and therefore may persist.] Thus, the fact that a belief that is true under one set of circumstances ["This object on the table is a jar"] does not "persist" [continue to be true] under another set of circumstances [where the object on the table may be a piece of cloth rather than a jar] does not necessarily call the process of sublation into play. Mere "non-persistence" of this kind in no way shows jars or pieces of cloth to be unreal

Thus, for all of the foregoing reasons, Pure Undifferentiated Being is not the sole reality.

A Critique of Shankara's Theory of the Self

Being and consciousness are not one and the same

Shankara: [As we have stated,] we regard all differences and distinctions as illusory and unreal. Now, both Being and consciousness are obviously real.² If all differences and distinctions are unreal, and if Being and consciousness are both real, it follows that there are no differences or distinctions between Being and consciousness. They must be one and the same. Therefore, consciousness itself is Being — that which is. [It also follows that Being is consciousness. So the essential nature of *Brahman* — the sole reality — is consciousness.]

Ramanuja: Perception shows that there is a real distinction and a real relationship between consciousness and its objects. Thus, the claim that only consciousness is real is [easily] refuted [on the basis of perception]³ There is no consciousness without an object; we never experience any such thing. Our opponent himself has argued that the self-luminousness of consciousness, its essential nature, shows itself only in the illumining (lighting up, revealing) of objects. Pure consciousness (that is, consciousness without objects, a consciousness that, according to our opponent, cannot be the object of another consciousness) is something altogether unreal and imaginary

¹Actually, "This object is a snake" and "This object is a rope" are not contradictory but rather **contrary** to one another. The two judgments cannot both be true, but they can both be false: the object might be a length of wire.

²According to Shankara, the reality of consciousness is proved by consciousness itself. Consciousness, in his view, is self-illuminating. By this he seems to mean that from the standpoint of consciousness the unreality of consciousness is impossible. If I am in a position to wonder about the reality or unreality of consciousness, then I must *be* conscious, and the reality of consciousness is therefore established without any doubt.

Shankara does not explain why he thinks that the reality of Being is obvious, but what he says about the self-luminousness of consciousness suggests the approach he might take here. If I am in a position to wonder about the reality or unreality of Being, then I must *be* (that is, *have being*). If I have being, then the reality of Being is obvious.

³Remember that, according to Ramanuja, material entities really exist within the unity of *Brahman*.

Consciousness is an attribute of a permanent Self

Ramanuja: What is the nature of the Self (*Atman*)?

Shankara: Pure, eternal, and unchanging consciousness, as we have said before.

Ramanuja: True, you have said so; but it certainly was not well said. The essential character of consciousness is that it presents objects to the Self, which is the subject of thought and speech. Consciousness is a particular attribute belonging to a Self (the subject that is conscious) and related to an object. As such, it is known immediately to everyone, as is evident in ordinary judgments such as "I know the jar," "I understand this matter," "I am conscious of the presence of this piece of cloth"

Thus, consciousness clearly presents itself as the attribute of an agent (the conscious Self) and as related to an object. It would be difficult indeed to prove that consciousness itself *is* the agent — just as difficult as it would be to prove that the object is the same as the agent. For it seems clear that this agent (the subject of consciousness) persists through time while various states of consciousness (for example, joy, grief, etc.), which are attributes of the agent, arise, persist for a time, and then pass. The continuing and permanent existence of the conscious subject is proved by the fact of recognition ("I have seen this before," etc.), whereas the impermanence of consciousness is proved by such expressions as the following: "I know now," "I knew at a prior time," "I no longer have knowledge of this."

How, then, can consciousness and the conscious subject be identical? On the one hand, if consciousness is continually changing from moment to moment and is identical with the conscious subject (the Self), it would be impossible for us to recognize something seen today as the same thing we saw yesterday, for what has been perceived by one subject cannot be recognized by another.¹ On the other hand, if consciousness is unchanging and identical with the conscious subject (the Self), the phenomenon of recognition would still be inexplicable because recognition implies a *conscious subject*, not just "consciousness," that persists from an earlier to a later moment.² Its expression is, "I myself perceived this thing on a prior occasion"

There is simply no experience of pure consciousness not grounded in a subject (a conscious Self) and devoid of objects. On the contrary, what we experience is a Self that is conscious of various objects of consciousness. Experience does not reveal a Self that is *consciousness*, but rather a Self that is *conscious* (that is, a substantial Self that has consciousness as one of its attributes). As we have demonstrated earlier, there is simply no basis for the view that mere [pure] consciousness is the only reality.

Shankara: The relation of the Self and the "I" should be conceived as follows: In self-consciousness, which expresses itself in the judgment "I know," the true subject is the Self, which is pure, self-illuminating consciousness, whereas the object illuminated (revealed) by the Self is the "I" [the personal self], which is something different from pure consciousness, something objective or external [to the true Self, and thus not "really real"]

Ramanuja: [T]his view contradicts the relation of substance and attribute of which we are directly conscious when we think "I know" [where "I" is the substance and "know" is the attribute]. Also, if the "I" were not the seat of consciousness but rather an object of consciousness, the distinction between the inside and the outside of ordinary experience would be lost, for it is just the sense of the "I" that separates the inward [the Self and its consciousness] from the outward [objects external to the Self and its consciousness].

[Furthermore, if your view of the relationship between the Self and the "I" is correct, release from Samsara will not be entirely welcomed.] What motivates a man seeking release to apply himself to the study of the sacred texts [**Vedas**] is the

¹Ramanuja's point here seems to be as follows: If consciousness is ever-changing, and if consciousness and the conscious subject (the Self) are identical, then the Self is also ever-changing. Thus, the Self that experiences something on one day is not the same Self that experiences something on another day, which would make the phenomena of remembrance and recognition impossible.

²In other words, experience requires an experiencer.

hope that liberation from Samsara and its associated pain and suffering will bring a life of freedom and endless delight. Were it certain that release consists in the annihilation of the "I" [the personal self], the same man would flee at the mere mention of release. No one will make great efforts to achieve a state of being in which a consciousness different from his own exists eternally but in which he himself has perished.

Moreover, the very existence of consciousness depends on its connection with a [substantial] Self. When that connection is dissolved, consciousness itself cannot exist, no more than the act of cutting can take place when there is no one to do the cutting and nothing to be cut. Thus, it is certain that the "I," that is, the conscious subject, is the inward Self. [T]he Self is not mere consciousness [but rather a subject that is conscious of its objects]

In general, we may say that where there is light it must belong to something, such as a lamp. [Similarly, where there is consciousness, there must be a conscious subject.] The Self thus cannot be pure consciousness [that is, consciousness with no subject and no object]. As the grammarians tell us, words such as "consciousness," "knowledge," etc., are relative; neither ordinary nor Vedic language uses expressions such as "he knows" without reference to an object known and a subject who knows

Editorial Comment

There follows at this point an extremely complicated discussion of the view, attributed by Ramanuja to Shankara, that the "I," the conscious subject or personal self, is not the true Self (*Atman*) but merely an illusion produced by the ignorance of the ego.¹

The human body arises through a process of evolution out of the material world (*prakriti*) and is naturally endowed with certain mental powers, which are seated in an "internal organ" (*antahkarana* = the central nervous system, the brain). These mental powers are (1) the ability to receive sense impressions from the external world (*manas*); (2) the ability to distinguish between and classify all sensory impressions presented to the mind (*buddhi*); (3) the power of critical and reflective thought (*chitta*); and (4) "ego-making" (*ahamkara*), the mental power that gives rise to the (false) idea of an individual self that is separate from all other things (*jiva*).

Ramanuja agrees with Shankara that ego consciousness is false consciousness, but he does not agree that the "I" or personal self is a product of ego consciousness. For Shankara, there is only one Self (*Atman*), not many individual selves, and the one Self is identical with *Brahman*, which is the only ultimate reality. Furthermore, for Shankara, *Brahman* is absolutely one; all distinctions and differences are illusory and unreal, produced by the mysterious powers of *maya* (illusion) and *avidya* (ignorance). Ramanuja agrees that the sense of separate selfhood created by ego consciousness does not express true selfhood; the true Self is not the ego-created separate self (*jiva*), but the *Atman*. However, there is not just one *Atman*; there are many individual and personal *Atman* selves, each of which exists as a real part of and in fundamental union with *Brahman*. In Ramanuja's world-view, *Brahman* is the single, supreme, and all-encompassing reality; but within the essential nature of *Brahman* there exist real distinctions and differences between real material entities and between real individual selves.

The conscious subject persists in the state of release

Shankara: Since "I"-consciousness is false consciousness produced by the ego and is thus no real attribute of the true Self (*Atman*), the nature of which is pure, undifferentiated consciousness, it follows that the "I" (personal self) does not

¹See the *Vedanta Sutras with the Commentary by Ramanuja*, trans. George Thibaut, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller, Vol. 48 (Part III) (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), pp. 61-67.

continue to exist in the state of final release. In [that state], "I"-consciousness passes away, and the Self appears in its true nature, that is, as pure consciousness

Ramanuja: To maintain that "I"-consciousness does not continue in the state of final release is, as we stated earlier, altogether inappropriate. It amounts to the doctrine that final release is the annihilation of the Self. In our view, the "I" is not a mere attribute of the Self, which may be destroyed while the essential nature of the Self persists. No, the "I" constitutes the very nature of the Self

When someone suffers much pain, whether the pain be real or only an illusion produced by ignorance, he naturally begins to wonder how he may once and for all free himself from [his] many afflictions and enjoy a state of untroubled ease. Desiring final release, he immediately sets to work to achieve it. But if he were to realize that the result of his efforts would be the destruction of his personal identity, he would surely run the other way as soon as somebody began to speak of "release." The result would be that the whole scriptural teaching on final release would lose its authoritative status.

Shankara: [But] even in the state of release there persists pure consciousness.

Ramanuja: [T]his by no means improves your case. No sensible person will exert himself to bring about a situation in which he himself has perished but in which there remains something called "pure light!" No, we must insist that what constitutes the true "inner" Self is the "I," the knowing subject. This "inner" Self shines forth in the state of final release as an "I," for in that state it appears to itself. [W]hatever appears to itself [that is, whatever is self-conscious] appears as an "I;" [and] whatever does not appear as an "I" (for example, jars and the like) [that is, whatever is not self-conscious], does not appear to itself. Now, the emancipated Self does appear to itself, and therefore it appears as an "I."

This appearance as an "I" in no way implies that the released Self is subject to ignorance and thus implicated in Samsara; for that would mean that final release is *not* final release (an outright contradiction). Moreover, "I"-consciousness cannot be the source or cause of ignorance and [its effects]. Ignorance is either (1) failure to grasp the essential nature of something [as when an attribute (for example, consciousness) is equated with a substance (for example, the conscious Self)], or it is (2) taking something to have a quality that it does not have (as when a person suffering from jaundice sees all things as yellow); or it is (3) taking something to be completely different from what it really is (as when mother of pearl is mistaken for silver). Now, the "I" constitutes the essential nature of the Self. How, then, can "I"-consciousness, that is, the Self's consciousness of its own true nature, implicate the released Self in ignorance or in Samsara? On the contrary, such consciousness destroys ignorance because it is essentially opposed to it Thus, the Self [in a state of release] is nothing but the knowing "I."

A Critique of Shankara's Theory of Ignorance

Shankara: False understanding is terminable [capable of being sublated] by knowledge of reality. The falsely perceived snake is, in reality, merely a rope; the rope is falsely taken to be a snake as a result of an imperfection [*avidya*, ignorance] in the perceiver. [T]his entire [plural] world, with all of its countless distinctions, is, owing to a certain imperfection [in the nature of things?], fictitiously superimposed upon the supreme, undifferentiated, self-luminous reality, *Brahman*. That imperfection is beginningless ignorance (*avidya*), which hides the true nature of *Brahman* and gives rise to multitudinous illusions [such as the illusion that the plural world is real]. This false vision of a plural world (made up of many material entities and many individual souls) may be sublated [refuted, corrected] by knowledge of the true nature of *Brahman*.¹

Moreover, this beginningless ignorance cannot be defined either as something that is or as something that is not. This ignorance cannot "be," that is, be *real*, because in that case it could not be the object of false understanding and sublation (refutation, correction); [that is, if we understand the *real*, our understanding cannot be false, and if our understanding is not false, then it is not subject to sublation.] Nor can beginningless ignorance "not be," that is, be altogether

¹See the *Vedanta Sutras with the Commentary by Ramanuja*, trans. George Thibaut, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller, Vol. 48 (Part III) (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), pp. 22 and 102.

unreal, because in that case it could not be either the object of mental apprehension or of sublation; [that is, the mind cannot grasp the *unreal* (something that is not there to be grasped) and thus cannot form any idea (true or false) as to the unreal, which means that sublation (the refutation and/or correction of false ideas) could not come into play at all]

What is the ground of beginningless ignorance?

Ramanuja: [T]his theory of beginningless ignorance [which obscures the true nature of reality] is altogether untenable. In the first place, we ask, "What is the metaphysical source or seat of this ignorance which gives rise to the great error of imagining reality to be the plural world [of *Brahman*, souls, and material objects]?" You cannot reply, "the individual soul," for the illusion of the individual soul exists only in so far as it is fictitiously imagined through [that is, is a product of] ignorance. Nor can you say, "*Brahman*," for *Brahman* is perfect and self-luminous consciousness, intelligence, and knowledge and thus contradictory in nature to ignorance, which is sublated by knowledge

Shankara: To know that everything other than *Brahman* is unreal is the negation [sublation] of ignorance

Ramanuja: [Is] this knowledge that everything other than *Brahman* is unreal contradictory (1) to the ignorance of the true nature of *Brahman*, or (2) to that ignorance which leads to the belief that the world [in addition to *Brahman*] is real? (1) The former alternative is inadmissible because the knowledge that everything other than *Brahman* is unreal has a different object from the ignorance of *Brahman*'s true nature and therefore cannot be contradictory to it; for knowledge and ignorance are contradictory only in so far as they refer to one and the same object. (2) And with regard to the latter alternative, we point out that the knowledge that the plural world of ordinary experience is unreal is contradictory to the ignorance which takes that world to be real; the former knowledge therefore sublates the latter ignorance only, while the ignorance of the true nature of *Brahman* is not touched by it

Shankara: [W]hat we mean by ignorance of the true nature of *Brahman* is the view that *Brahman* is dual in nature [that is, that there are real distinctions between *Brahman* and other things such as material entities and individual souls], and this view is sublated by the knowledge of the unreality of whatever is other than *Brahman*, while the true nature of *Brahman* itself is established by its own consciousness.

Ramanuja: But this too we refuse to admit. If non-duality [oneness] constitutes the true nature of *Brahman* and is proved by *Brahman*'s own consciousness [that is, if *Brahman* alone is real], then there is no room for what is contradictory to it, namely, the ignorance that sees duality [distinctions and pluralities] in *Brahman*, nor for the sublation of that ignorance

From all this it follows that *Brahman*, whose essential nature is self-luminous consciousness and knowledge, cannot be the source or seat of ignorance: the theory, in fact, involves an outright contradiction. When you go on to maintain that *Brahman*, whose nature is pure intelligence, is infused with and hidden by ignorance, you thereby deny *Brahman*'s essential nature

Consider the following point also. Your theory is that pure self-luminous consciousness [*Brahman*], which in reality has no objects and which is not grounded in any substance more fundamental than itself, comes to see itself, through the influence of an imperfection residing within itself [that is, *avidya*], as related to a plural world containing countless souls and material objects. Is that imperfection [in *Brahman*] real or unreal? It cannot be real because, according to you, *Brahman* is, in reality, perfect. And it cannot be unreal for the following reasons: (1) If such an imperfection residing in consciousness is unreal, then we would have to distinguish between two kinds of consciousness, perfect and imperfect, which is contrary to your fundamental doctrine of the oneness of consciousness. (2) If consciousness is both one and reality itself [Shankara's view?], and if it is the residence of an imperfection that is unreal, then consciousness [reality] is itself unreal, and we would then have to accept the Madhyamaka [Buddhist] doctrine of a general void [that is, the emptiness of all things]

How can beginningless ignorance be a positive entity?

Ramanuja: Now, to move on to the next point, you claim that beginningless ignorance is neither real nor unreal. That is incomprehensible, for none of the recognized means of knowledge apply to it. With regard to the world of objects, we find some things that [evidently] exist [for example, rocks] and some things that [apparently] do not exist [for example,

unicorns]. If, in addition, there could be something that is neither real nor unreal, then anything whatsoever might be the object of any state of consciousness whatsoever

Shankara: The kind of ignorance (*avidya*) or non-knowledge (*ajñāna*) we are talking about is not just the absence of knowledge before knowledge arises [for example, "I didn't know X yesterday, but I know it today"]. No, we are talking about a cosmic and beginningless ignorance or non-knowledge that has the power to hide reality and to superimpose the illusion of plurality upon the real (*Brahman*). In this way, the true nature of *Brahman* is shrouded and made to appear as the plural world. Thus, beginningless ignorance, although it is neither real nor unreal, is not a mere non-entity. On the contrary, it is a positive force that produces in the plural world, which is itself superimposed upon reality, many additional superimpositions in the form of things and ideas of things such as snakes superimposed upon ropes, silver superimposed on shells, and the like. Thus, beginningless Ignorance is the cause of this entire false world, and it can be terminated only by knowledge of the true nature of the one supreme substance that constitutes reality [that is, *Brahman*]

That beginningless ignorance is not merely non-knowledge but a positive entity can be proved through both perception and inference. In such judgments as "I do not know" and "I do not know either myself or others," there is a direct mental perception or apprehension of ignorance as a positive entity. The state of consciousness under discussion cannot have mere absence of knowledge in the Self for its object, for at the very moment of such consciousness, knowledge either exists or it doesn't. When I am conscious that I do not know, is there or is there not knowledge of the Self as having the absence of knowledge for its attribute and of knowledge as the opposite of the absence of knowledge? In the former case, there can be no consciousness of the absence of knowledge, for that would imply a contradiction [because where there is knowledge there cannot be absence of knowledge]. In the latter case, there also cannot be consciousness of the absence of knowledge because such consciousness presupposes knowledge of that to which absence of knowledge belongs as an attribute (that is, the Self) and of the opposite of the absence of knowledge, namely, knowledge However, if beginningless ignorance is viewed as a positive entity and not as mere non-knowledge (a negative state), then there arises no contradiction between the knowledge of such ignorance and, at the same time, knowledge of the Self as ignorant and of knowledge as the opposite of ignorance. [In that case, the Self knows that knowledge is the opposite of ignorance, knows itself to *be* ignorant, and knows that the ignorance that afflicts it is "really there."]

Ramanuja: But how can the Self *be* ignorant? Isn't it the nature of the Self to reveal the true nature of things through its "witnessing consciousness"? Isn't there a contradiction between your theory of ignorance as a positive entity and what we know the Self to be?

Shankara: I am not saying that beginningless ignorance is part of the very nature of the True Self. I agree that the Self reveals to us the true nature of reality — that is, it puts us in touch with *Brahman*. However, since *Brahman* is shrouded by beginningless ignorance, the "witnessing consciousness" of the Self (which illumines our individual intellects) presents to us the world of appearances that has been constructed by ignorance, and we then take that world to be real. Until we wake up and realize that the world of dualities and distinctions is an illusion projected by beginningless ignorance — i.e., until we gain knowledge of the true nature of *Brahman* and *Atman* — we remain deluded as to the way things really are.

Ramanuja: It seems that, according to your analysis, a judgment such as "I do not know myself" expresses knowledge of the Self as ignorant of itself. This seems to make the Self an object of knowledge (even in its ignorance of itself). But don't you deny that the Self can ever be an object of knowledge or, indeed, an object in any sense at all? And isn't it true that the Self cannot be known through any of the standard means of knowledge (perception, inference, analogy, etc.)?

Shankara: Some things (for example, material objects) can be known through the standard means of knowledge. In fact, beginningless ignorance as a positive entity is one of those things that are known through the standard means of knowledge, e.g., through perception, as stated earlier. But that is not the way the Self is known. The Self is self-luminous. It shines forth and reveals itself directly. When I say "I do not know myself," I don't mean that I doubt my own existence. That would be absurd. To say "I do not know myself," "I" must exist. Thus, the Self is known through its own self-certification, even when "I" feel that I do not know myself (i.e., my true nature).

Now, turning to inference as a second means of showing that beginningless ignorance is a positive entity, we find that sense perception gives us knowledge of objects that are presented to our senses, objects not known to us before we perceived them. Thus, before we perceived them, there must have been something covering the objects we now see, something that is removed by the knowledge we now have. That something is beginningless ignorance. I infer that it is a

positive entity because, prior to our present experience, it was *there*, actively covering up the objects that we now know. Consider this analogy: When a dark room containing various objects is illuminated by a lamp-light, the darkness is dissolved and the objects in the room are revealed, as is the lamp. Before the lamp was lighted, the objects in the room were covered by darkness. The darkness is not merely an absence of light. No, it is a positive entity, as is shown from the fact that darkness is perceived as having color (i.e., blackness) as well as various shades (e.g., "pitch dark," "murky darkness," etc.). In the same way, beginningless ignorance, which covers *Brahman* with the illusion of plurality, is a positive entity.

Ramanuja: All this is untenable. In the judgment, "I am ignorant; I do not know myself," ignorance is not experienced as a positive entity. The difficulties you pointed out above with respect to ignorance as absence of knowledge also apply to ignorance considered as a positive entity. In the judgment "I am ignorant; I do not know myself," is there knowledge of the Self or not? If there is, then we have a contradiction because knowledge of the Self and ignorance of the Self cannot exist simultaneously in the same consciousness. If there is no knowledge of the Self in the judgment, "I am ignorant; I do not know myself," then we cannot identify the locus of the ignorance asserted in the judgment, nor can we identify the object of that ignorance.

Shankara: But what is contradictory is the co-existence of ignorance and knowledge of the *real* Self, whereas the Self qualified by ignorance is only an obscured image of the Self. There is no contradiction between the ignorance of this obscured and unreal Self and the ignorance denoted in the judgment "I do not know myself."

Ramanuja: The same holds true with regard to ignorance conceived as a previous non-existence of knowledge, which can also be said to relate, not to the real Self, but to an obscured Self that is the locus and object of such previous non-knowledge (*ajñāna*). In the latter case, the difficulties you insisted upon with reference to the idea of ignorance as absence of knowledge disappear.

Whether ignorance is taken as a positive entity or as the absence of knowledge, a negative state, it still means nothing but non-knowledge. Ignorance is either (1) absence of knowledge, or (2) something other than knowledge, or (3) something opposed to knowledge. In all three cases, recognition of ignorance presupposes knowledge of the opposite of ignorance, namely, knowledge. The ignorance described by you and your followers is never known in and of itself but always as the opposite of knowledge. Again, cognition of ignorance presupposes cognition of knowledge. This means that it is more reasonable to view ignorance as simply the negation or absence of knowledge, a negative state, rather than as a positive entity.

How can *Brahman* be affected by ignorance?

Ramanuja: Let us now turn to your claim that *Brahman* — who is eternal, free, and self-luminous intelligence — is capable of false consciousness based upon ignorance. That seems impossible.

Shankara: Our view is that *Brahman*, although having pure consciousness of Self as its essential nature, is nonetheless capable of false consciousness in so far as its (*Brahman's*) nature is hidden by ignorance . . .

Ramanuja: What is meant by *Brahman's* nature being hidden?

Shankara: [T]he fact of its not being illumined.

Ramanuja: But how can the nature of that whose very essence consists in consciousness of Self, that is, self-illumination, not be illumined?

Shankara: [E]ven that whose nature is self-illumination may be in a state where its nature is obscured or hidden by some external agent.

Ramanuja: But, according to you, light is not merely an attribute of *Brahman*; it is rather the very nature of *Brahman*. How can the light of *Brahman* be obscured or destroyed from the outside . . . ? You seem to be saying two different things here: (1) that beginningless ignorance, which causes the nature of *Brahman* to be concealed, hides *Brahman* only in so far as it is first a feature of *Brahman's* nature; and (2) that having first hidden *Brahman*, beginningless ignorance [initially external to *Brahman*] then becomes a feature of *Brahman's* consciousness. This seems to constitute a logical see-

saw If (1) *Brahman's* false consciousness based on ignorance results from *Brahman's* essential nature, then there would never be any release [from ignorance, Samsara, etc. — because reality-concealing ignorance would be a fundamental feature of ultimate reality]. Or if there is an awakening from beginningless ignorance similar to the realization that mother of pearl on seashells is not really silver, then, on the assumption that false consciousness is a feature of the very nature of *Brahman*, this awakening would be a negation (sublation) of *Brahman's* essential nature itself. If (2) *Brahman's* false consciousness is caused by a beginningless ignorance existing external to *Brahman*, which, having first concealed *Brahman*, then (like an injury to the eye) becomes a feature of *Brahman's* consciousness, [then (again) either release (awakening from ignorance) would be impossible or it would constitute a transcendence of *Brahman* itself]

[And here's another problem with what you are saying:] If *Brahman* is hidden by ignorance, does it then not shine forth at all, or does it shine forth only to some extent? If *Brahman* — whose nature is pure light — does not shine forth at all, then it is reduced to the status of an absolute non-entity. If *Brahman* shines forth only to some extent, then we ask how *Brahman*, which has an absolutely unified nature, can shine forth only in part. Which part is concealed, and which shines forth? In *Brahman* — which is pure light, free from all division and distinction — there cannot be two modes of being, nor can it show its light in part and be partly obscured. [Something that is absolutely one cannot have parts.]

Shankara: Let us then say that *Brahman* — which is pure being (*sat*), pure consciousness (*chit*), and pure bliss (*ananda*) — has its nature hidden by beginningless ignorance and thus shines forth indistinctly as it were.

Ramanuja: But how can that whose nature is pure light shine forth indistinctly? When something that manifests light, but which has parts and distinct attributes, appears in its totality, we say that it appears distinctly; whereas we say that the thing appears indistinctly when some of its attributes do not appear. Of those aspects of the thing that do appear, we find their light (if any) distinct. However, of those aspects of the thing that do not appear, we do not say that their light (if any) is indistinct; we say that it is absent altogether. Thus, where there is light, there is no indistinctness. A thing (not its light) is said to be indistinct only when some of its distinguishing attributes do not appear. But with regard to *Brahman*, which is not a being with parts and distinct attributes, and which is pure light, the essential nature of which is to shine forth, it makes no sense to say that it is indistinct because some of its attributes do not appear [since, as stated, it has no attributes]. Thus, it is impossible for *Brahman* to shine forth indistinctly.¹

Furthermore, we must ask the following question: "Is this indistinctness which you consider an effect of beginningless ignorance [operating from within the nature of *Brahman*] done away with by the rise of true knowledge or not?" If not, then there can be no final release. If so, then we must ask further as to the nature of *Brahman*.

Shankara: It is of an essentially clear and distinct nature.

Ramanuja: Then does this [clear and distinct] nature [of *Brahman*] exist prior to the cessation of indistinctness [through the rise of true knowledge] or not? If it does, then there is no room whatever for either the rise or for the cessation of indistinctness. If the clear and distinct nature of *Brahman* does not exist prior to the cessation of indistinctness, then *Brahman* would be made clear and distinct as a result of the rise of true knowledge, and thus *Brahman* would not be eternal

[In conclusion, it seems that your "beginningless ignorance" is an impossibility, whether it is conceived as a mysterious something external to *Brahman* or as a feature of *Brahman's* nature.]²

¹Ramanuja is not here denying that we, because of our limitations and our own ignorance, may find the nature of *Brahman* to be indistinct. What he is denying is that any such indistinctness originates from within the nature of *Brahman* itself.

²For Ramanuja's further and concluding criticisms of Shankara's theory of ignorance, see the *Vedanta Sstras with the Commentary by Ramanuja*, trans. George Thibaut, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller, Vol. 48 (Part III) (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), pp. 114-119.

