Knowledge and Liberation
Advaita Vedanta Epistemology

David Paul Boaz

> There is a self-existent Reality which is the base of our awareness of our ego-I . . . that Reality is the primordial witness . . . luminous Spirit Itself.
> - Shankara

Epistemology or knowledge theory is concerned with what and how we know. Thus it is concerned with the limits of finite relative-conventional conceptual knowledge, which leads necessarily to ontology or metaphysics and the realization of absolute truth. What is the epistemological status of mental and physical phenomenal reality as it arises in mind from its absolute, supreme sourceground? Is it objectively real (realism)? Or is it transcendental manifestations of a subjective reality, even a supreme Reality arising in mind (idealism)? Is its nature dualistic, monistic, or nondual? These questions of epistemology parallel the concern of metaphysics and ontology to know and realize the subtle nature of the sourceground, Absolute Being Itself. So the questions and distinctions of epistemology and metaphysics overlap. Just as nondual absolute or infinite Consciousness-Being-Spirit Itself transcends yet embraces finite relative-conventional phenomenal appearance arising therein, so metaphysical ontology is prior to and includes its second order, epistemology, how and what we can know of what is given of the whole to the senses and the heart through appearing phenomenal reality.

Brahman and the World: the Two Fundamental Truths

The ancient *Vedas,* as with our entire Primordial Wisdom Tradition, describes two aspects of knowing, Two Truths. *Para* or *vidya,* is the light, the absolute or Ultimate Truth *(paramaratha–satya, don dam denpa, gnosis),* and *apara* or *avidya* is the world of Relative Truth, the "concealer truths" of spacetime, cause and effect reality (*samvriti–satya, kundzob denpa*). *Para* (the beyond) as absolute, nondual essence is Brahman,

"The Bright," the Light of Absolute Being, Reality Itself, *Brahmavidya,* the Base or divine source of *avidya* (ignorance) our limited illusory knowledge of relative, physical and mental phenomenal reality. In the *Upanishads* these two modes of knowing are referred to as Brahman without attributes or *Para* Brahman, and Brahman with attributes, *Apara* Brahman. We have seen that in Shankara's *Advaita Vedanta* these two aspects of the knowledge of Reality that is Brahman are *Nirguna* Brahman and *Saguna* Brahman. ***Nirguna* Brahman is Absolute Truth transcending spacetime causality and indeed all relationship, yet remaining as the changeless substrate or sourceground that is the possibility of all relationships. *Saguna* Brahman as Ishvara (Creator God) and *Satchitananda* (Being/Consciousness/Bliss arising) as the concepts and experiences of our existence conditioned by ignorance *(avidya-maya).*** Therefore, this creator, sustainer, and destroyer (the *Trimurti)* of the ever-changing phenomenal worlds is not the nondual Absolute. In *Advaita Vedanta* however, this apparent dualism of the two Brahmans of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* is resolved in a nondual view of Brahman. Here, *Nirguna* Brahman is ultimate subjectivity, the perfectly subjective absolute source condition of phenomenal reality. This reality arises and appears as *Maya.* The *Shad-darshana, the Upanishads* and *Vedas* variously describe Brahman in dualistic, idealistic, realistic, theistic and pantheistic language. Sometimes the nondual transcendence of Brahman is emphasized. Sometimes the permanent quality is emphasized over against illusory and impermanent *Maya.* The Buddhist argument against Vedanta seems always to target these dualistic, realistic and theistic views, but not the nondual view of *Advaita Vedanta.*

Adi Shankara insisted upon both an objective realism, and a subjective idealism. As with Buddhist *Madhyamaka*, this centrist view (between eternalism and nihilism) is of an objectively real world arising from its perfectly subjective nondual source (Prabhavananda 1947, Johnston 1946, Thibaut 1890 in Deutsch, 1969, Nikhilananda 1963). **The direct, objective, empirical reality of the unfolding phenomenal world then, is acknowledged (realism), yet this manifest apparent reality is enfolded in and is not different or other than Brahman. Indeed it is identical in essence with Nirguna Brahman, the perfectly subjective Absolute Reality (idealism).** Thus, realism is required in order to understand our relative-conditional existence, but is ultimately transcended and embraced by the subjective idealism of the perfectly ultimate subjectivity that is Brahman. So, Shankara's epistemological realism is embedded in an ontological idealism. But an absolute subjective idealism with its denial of relative spacetime reality altogether is precluded for, as with the nondual Buddhist view of *Dzogchen* and *Saijojo* Zen, from the view of relative truth, phenomenal empirical reality is truly, objectively real, appearing as the primordial, creative *prana-*

shakti energy of the illusory and impermanent *namarupa* of *Maya,* the objective aspect or power of perfectly subjective Brahman.[3]

However, from the liberated nondual view *(vidya-moksha)* of absolute truth *(paramartha satya),* only Brahman, the supreme source, the self-luminous, unchanging, utterly ineffable Absolute is the Real, Ultimate Reality Itself. To the enlightened master *(maharishi)* all of the illusions of *Maya*—including these interminable concepts about Brahman—are only Brahman. *Kham Brahm,* "All is Brahman." Thus, in *Advaita Vedanta,* as with the "highest" or subtlest nondual teachings of our entire Primordial Wisdom Tradition, the exoteric, objective relative-conventional view is transcended in an ontological absolute subjective nondual monism that includes all relative views.

Let us now consider the Two Truths in the Buddhist *Heart Sutra (Prajnaparamita),* with the intention of clarifying nondual *Vedanta*. "Form is emptiness" (idealism). This is "self-emptiness" or emptiness of intrinsic existence and negates the extreme view of eternal or absolute existence. But "Emptiness is form" (realism). This is "emptiness of other" or emptiness of all phenomena and negates the extreme view of nihilism. Further, "form is form… and emptiness is emptiness" (nondual monism). This is the union of appearance (dependent arising) and emptiness (*shunyata*). These four constitute the centrist, Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*) between the extreme views of nihilism (nothing exists) and existential absolutism (phenomena have a permanent, absolute existence) [Mipham, 1999].

> "Existence is the view of realism. Non-existence is the view of nihilism.
> Therefore the wise dwell neither in existence, nor non-existence."
> - Chandrakirti

Yet, Ramana Maharshi reminds us, "everything is just concepts." And the fundamental truth that is the emptiness of Brahman cannot be reduced by conceptual elaboration to a concept or a symbol by the intellect (try as we may). Again, no relative mind-created object can grasp ultimate Reality Itself. "Truth is One," forever "neti, neti"—not that, not that. Thus it is, even though arising phenomena do have a relative existence, from the view of the nondual absolute, there is no name, no form and no view. The Heart Sutra continues,

> "Therefore Shariputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no mental formation, and no consciousness… There is no body and no

[3] Indeed, in *Tantra (Shaktism)* it is the divine "Mother Shakti" aspect of Absolute God through whom the seven *chakras* (spiritual energy centers) are awakened allowing the *shakti* spirit current (*kundalini*) to ascend up the spinal chakras to the crown where it unites with Shiva, the male energy as the *Trimurti*. It is through such yogic practice or *sadhana* in relationship with a living master (*satsang*), and by the grace of the Mother *Shakti*, that the student is enabled to realize the absolute source condition of the primordial *shakti* energy (*prana, c'hi, tsal, lung*), which in self-aware beings is liberation into the primordial love-wisdom (*gnosis, jnana, yeshe*) of *ananda*-bliss, Ultimate Happiness Itself.

mind… There is no ignorance, no suffering… no wisdom, no attainment and no non-attainment…"

Is Brahman, the Ultimate Truth merely Buddhist emptiness? Are either of these an existent entity? Do they exist, ultimately, from their own side? No. Ultimate Truth, nondual Reality Itself, as ultimate subjectivity, the unbounded whole—by whatever name—is utterly beyond the conceptual understanding. It is empty of all predicates, qualities and attributes. Yet, miraculously it may be touched, recognized, then realized at the spiritual heart of each human being.

Why Do I Exist? Who Am I?

Why does anything at all exist? What is the meaning and purpose of creation? Why is there ignorance and evil? The *Avdaita Vedanta* of Adi Shankara—as with the other nondual traditions of our Great Wisdom Tradition—answers that the "Why Question" can have no answer. The realm of relative conventional reality arises necessarily and spontaneously as *Lila*, the unintelligible divine Play and display of Brahman, the nondual primordial absolute, through the activity of Ishvara, the Creator. It is Brahman's very nature to create, to arise as itself through the apparition of form. There is no motive, no intention, no purpose, no "why" and therefore no Creator responsibility for evil and suffering in this created world. Thus there is no theistic "problem of evil" to brood about. The "why question" then, is but the futile effort of the limited, concept-bound ego to understand its apparent existence in what is, in the ultimate view, a Reality utterly beyond conceptual cause and effect understanding. In this ultimate view not even the *Lila* of Brahman exists. The empirical realm of Relative Truth exists relatively. The nondual reality of Absolute Truth exists only relatively, as conventional concept and belief. Who is it then that asks this "why" question? Who am I?

As with the Buddhist *Madhyamaka Prasangika* view of the "Two Truths," from the nondual view of the *Paravidya* of Absolute Brahman, Ultimate Truth, all else is *aparavidya-maya* and *adhyasa*, the tainted ignorance of Relative Truth. All of the *pramanas*—attention, perception, deductive and inductive inference, discriminating wisdom, emotion—have truth value, but only in the realm of Relative Truth. Thus, for the realizer of *paravidya*, the ultimate nondual noetic knowledge that is Brahman, all arising phenomena are mere illusory *aparavidya*, the ignorance that is *Maya*. For the non-realizer, the means of knowledge of the *pramanas* are valid cognition (*pramana*) so long as they are recognized to be *avidya-maya*, and not confused with *vidya-maya*. This

is the *Vedanta* theory of *svatah pramanyavada*.[4] "Knowledge and ignorance cannot co-exist in the same individual, for they are contradictory, like light and darkness" (Shankara, *Brahmasutrabhasya*, Apte, 1960). From this absolute view of the enlightened *rishi* (*jivamukta*) there is only primordial wisdom, non-conceptual nondual *paravidya*. There is no ignorance and no existence which needs to be explained. From the view of relative truth the "why" question is ever present. From the wisdom view of enlightenment the "why" question does not, indeed, cannot arise. Ultimately, there is no "why". Ultimately there is only Silence (*mouna*) from whence arises the cacophony of the world. This is "That by being known, everything is known" (*Mundaka Upanishad*). Who am I? "*Tat Tvam Ami.*" **That** I Am. Without a single exception.

[4] The doctrine of *svatahpramanyavada* does not preclude the Cartesian *Cogito*, "I think, therefore I am." We may have a doubting cognition, "Do I exist?", but we cannot doubt that this is a pramana cognition. In Relative Truth, the possibility of error exists. In Ultimate Truth, it does not.