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# The Concept of Appearance and Reality in

A. Sankara and F.H. Bradley

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## Abstract

Metaphysics, a branch of philosophy, is the study of Being or reality. The problem of appearance and reality plays as an indispensable issue in metaphysics. Sankara, one of Eastern philosophers, represents the flowering of the Vedanta school. He maintains that reality is ultimately one and that the apparent plurality of the individual selves and entities of empirical existence is illusory. So, his system of thought is known as *advaita* (non-dualistic). Bradley, one of Western philosophers, maintains that there is no unity in phenomena; space, time, motion, change are self-contradictory. Appearance belongs to reality. For him, reality is a self-consistent whole embracing all differences in an inclusive harmony. In this paper the researcher shall present a view that the metaphysical systems of Sankara and Bradley are almost identical although there are minor differences.

Key words: metaphysics, appearance, reality, *advaita*, Absolute.

## Introduction

Metaphysics is one of the branches of philosophy. It is the study of Being or reality. In other words, it is an attempt to find the right intellectual attitude towards the ultimate reality or the first principle of all things. Aristotle, a versatile Greek philosopher, calls it the first philosophy. Traditionally, metaphysics includes ontology (speculation concerning pure being), cosmology (the science of the universe as a whole), and rational psychology (deals with the mind, soul and personality).<sup>1</sup>

The problem of appearance and reality plays as a vital issue in metaphysics. In Eastern philosophy, Indian philosopher Adi Sankara represents the flowering of the *Vedanta* school. The *Vedanta* tradition is grounded in the wisdom portions of the *Vedas*, primarily the *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads* are the concluding portions of the *Vedas* or the end of the *Vedas*. The teaching based on them is called *Vedanta*. The *Upanishads* are the gist and the goal of the *Vedas*. They form the very foundation of Hinduism.

The different philosophers of India belonging to different schools, such as Monism, Qualified Monism, Dualism, Pure Monism, Difference-cum-non-difference, etc., have acknowledged the supreme authority of the *Upanishads*. They have given their own interpretations, but they have obeyed the authority. They have built their philosophy on the foundation of the *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads* asserts that *Brahman* is the fundamental reality. Sankara maintains that reality is ultimately one and that the apparent plurality of the individual selves and entities of empirical existence is illusory. So, his system of thought is known as *advaita* (non-dualistic).

In Western philosophy, British philosopher F. H. Bradley maintains that there is no unity in phenomena; space, time, motion, change are self-contradictory. Appearance belongs to reality. For him, reality is a self-consistent whole embracing all differences in an inclusive

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<sup>1</sup> A. E. Taylor, *Elements of Metaphysics*, London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1903, pp. 42-43

harmony. The Absolute is a harmonious system. Truth and life, beauty and goodness are revelations of the Absolute. Appearances are part of the Absolute.

### Sankara's Life and Works

Adi Sankara (788-821 CE) was a great saint and philosopher who consolidated the doctrine of *Advaita Vedanta*. His teachings are based on the unity of the soul and *Brahman*, in which *Brahman* is viewed as without attributes. He hailed from Kalady of present day Kerala.<sup>2</sup> Sankara travelled across India and other parts of South Asia to propagate his philosophy through discourses and debates with other thinkers. He founded four *mathas* (monasteries), which helped in the historical development, revival and spread of *Advaita Vedanta*.

His works in Sanskrit concern themselves with establishing the doctrine of *Advaita* (Non-dualism). He also established the importance of monastic life as sanctioned in the *Upanishads* and *Brahma Sutra*. Sankara represented his works as elaborating on ideas found in the *Upanishads*, and he wrote copious commentaries on the *Vedic Canon* (*Brahma Sutra*, Principal *Upanishads* and *Bhagavagita*) in support of his thesis.

Sankara's major commentaries as well as his other works are

1. *Brahmasutra-bhashya*
2. *Brahmasutra-bhashya*
3. *Brahmasutra-bhashya*
4. *Upanishad-bhashya*, vol. 1: *Isa, Kena* [2], *Katha, Prasna*
5. *Upanishad-bhashya*, vol. 2: *Mundaka, Mandukya, Aitareya*
6. *Upanishad-bhashya*, vol. 3: *Taittiriya, Chhandogya* 1-3
7. *Upanishad-bhashya*, vol. 4: *Chhandogya* 4-8
8. *Upanishad-bhashya*, vol. 5: *Brihadaranyaka* 1-2
9. *Upanishad-bhashya*, vol. 6: *Brihadaranyaka* 3-4
10. *Upanishad-bhashya*, vol. 7: *Brihadaranyaka* 5-6, *Nrisimhapurvatapani*
11. *Bhagavad-Gita-bhashya*, vol. 1: chaps. 1-9
12. *Bhagavad-Gita-bhashya*, vol. 2: chaps. 10-18
13. *Vishnusahasranama and Sanatsujatiya Bhashyas*
14. *Vivekachudamani, Upadeshasahasri*
15. *Miscellaneous Prakaranas* vol. 1: *Aparokshanubhuti, etc.* [7 works]
16. *Miscellaneous Prakaranas* vol. 2: *Prabodhasudhakara, etc.* [25 works]
17. *Stotras*, vol. 1 [30 works]
18. *Stotras*, vol. 2 [35 works, plus *Lalita Trisatistotra Bhashya*]
19. *Prapanchasara*, vol. 1
20. *Prapanchasara*, vol. 2<sup>3</sup>

### Bradley's Life and Works

Francis Herbert Bradley was born on January 30, 1846 at Clapham, England to Charles Bradley and Emma Linton. Bradley began his schooling at Cheltenham College, after which, in 1861, he shifted to Marlborough College. Bradley, during this time, read some of "Kant's Critique of Pure Reason". During the same time, he suffered from severe typhoid along with pneumonia, but overcame both of them. Again in June 1861, he contracted a fatal inflammation of the kidney due to which he appeared to gain some permanent effects of the same. In 1865, Bradley got into the University College, Oxford as a scholar. After attempting to receive fellowship for more than once, Bradley was elected to a fellowship at Merton

<sup>2</sup> Diane Collinson, Kathryn Plant and Robert Wilkinson, *Fifty Eastern Thinkers*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 121

<sup>3</sup> [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adi\\_Shankara.htm](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adi_Shankara)



College, Oxford in 1870. Bradley continued his fellowship staying at Oxford's Merton College until his death on September 18, 1924.

His works include

1. Ethical Studies (1876),
2. Principles of Logic (1883),
3. Appearance and Reality (1893),
4. Essays on Truth and Reality (1914),
5. Aphorisms (1930),
6. Collected Essays (1935),
7. Writings on Logic and Metaphysics (1994) and
8. The Collected Works of F.H. Bradley, 12 volumes, (1999).<sup>4</sup>

His most important work was *Appearance and Reality*. In logic, Bradley attacked the psychological tendencies of empiricism by differentiating sharply between the mental act as a psychological event and its universal meaning; to him only the latter was the concern of logic. In metaphysics Bradley held that many phenomena considered real, such as space and time, are only appearances. Reality, or what Bradley called the Absolute, is an all-inclusive whole that transcends thought. Although greatly influenced by Hegel, Bradley's metaphysics is generally considered a highly original contribution to philosophical thought.

### Sankara on Appearance

Sankara's philosophy can be approached from two directions. The first concerns his emphasis on the texts of the *Vedic* tradition, and in particular the *Upanishads*. The second approach concerns his critical assaults on the other systems of thought—both orthodox and non-orthodox—carried through with a combination of corrections to their scriptural interpretations and scripturally independent assessments of their coherence.<sup>5</sup>

The foundation of Hindu thought includes the concepts such as *samsara*, *karma* and *moksa*. Here, *samsara* means the wheel of continual rebirth or transmigration of souls. *Karma* means the principle of action and consequence. *Moksa* means the liberation from *samsara*, achieved by means of union with *Brahman*. It is on the basis of these concepts that Sankara built his philosophical conception of the nature of things.

According to Sankara, appearances are of three kinds, namely, illusory existent, existent and real existent.<sup>6</sup> To experience a mirage of an oasis in the desert is to experience an illusory existent. Existent is item of common sense or conventional knowledge (a rainbow as a coloured is in the sky). Scientific principle, along with other general principles such as the law of contradiction, is a real existent.

Sankara described the world as illusion (*maya*). But this does not mean that the world is imaginary. It is rather that it is not what is ultimately real. The world is an amalgam of real and unreal. To say that the world is *maya*, then, is to say that it is 'appearance.' *Maya* is considered to be material and unconscious and opposed to *Brahman*, which is pure consciousness. Yet *maya* is also said to be non-different from *Brahman*. The relationship between them is neither identical nor different, nor both.

<sup>4</sup> [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/F\\_H\\_Bradley.htm](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/F_H_Bradley)

<sup>5</sup> Brian Carr and Indira Mahalingam, ed., *Companion Encyclopedia of Asian Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 171

<sup>6</sup> Diane Collinson, Kathryn Plant and Robert Wilkinson, *Fifty Eastern Thinkers*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 122-123

*Maya* is indescribable and indefinable, as it is neither real nor unreal. It is not real, as it has no existence apart from *Brahman*, yet it is not unreal, as it projects the world of appearance. It is not real as it vanishes at the dawn of knowledge. It is not unreal, since it is 'true' as long as it lasts.

In general, *maya* is phenomenal, incomplete and relative in character, having momentary or worldly existence. The act through which it is known is designated as superimposition. Superimposition is a way of knowing something wrongly or of knowing something which it is not. Our fixation on *maya* can be removed, but only by the right kind of knowledge. This kind of knowledge comes from, or is indebted to, intuition and it is through this that *Brahman* itself can be proved.

### Bradley on Appearance

According to Bradley, the universe is full of puzzling contradictions and it is not a reality, but a mere appearance of reality. Some philosophers like John Locke and some scientists try to interpret the world in terms of primary and secondary qualities. They point out thus:

*"The secondary qualities, therefore, are appearance, coming from the reality, which itself has no quality but extension."*<sup>7</sup>

However, Bradley says that if the secondary qualities are appearance the primary are certainly not able to stand by themselves. This distinction cannot bring nearer to the true nature of reality. For him, matter is self-contradictory in nature and is a mere appearance, not really reality.

The distinction between substantive and adjective is based many kinds of interpretations of the universe. But this distinction is also equally untenable. So Bradley says that interpreting the universe in terms of substantives and adjectives is impossible. The root cause of all these troubles is the fragmentary outlook which breaks up the universe into its different aspects but fails to reunite them. He points out thus:

*"We cannot solve the riddles unless we suppose that everywhere there must be a whole embracing what is related, or there would be no differences and no relations."*<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, for Bradley, the very essence of the ideas of relation and quality involves self-contradiction, each of these presupposes the other and there is a vicious circle. According to him, there would be no qualities without differences of aspects and there would be no differences without distinction, and no distinction can be made without the mind's interrelation of the aspects distinguished. Hence qualities presuppose relations and are not intelligible without them. On the other hand, relation is unthinkable without qualities. Thus Bradley says:

*"...a relational way of thought—any one that moves by the machinery of terms and relations—must give appearance and not truth."*<sup>9</sup>

For Bradley, the nature of relation being contradictory and unintelligible, the nature of everything that involves some kind of relation must be so. All these categories—space, time, change, causation, activity, thing, self—with which our intellect or thought interprets the world are found to possess self-contradictory nature. Hence, none of these can be real. They must be mere appearances of reality.

<sup>7</sup> F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, London: Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1897, p. 10

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.18

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 28



### Sankara on Reality

Metaphysics in India is almost indissolubly linked with the school of *Vedanta* and, particularly, with its development within what is now called *Advaita Vedanta* (non-dualism). Its best-known exponent is the Indian philosopher Sankara.

Sankara describes ultimate reality as '*Brahman*.' The term can also be translated as 'the universal self' or as 'the Absolute.' According to Sankara, the term '*Brahman*' is etymologically derived from *brh* (growth; development). It is an ever-growing and ever-evolving reality.<sup>10</sup>

According to Sankara, individuals are intuitively aware of the *Brahman* but, due to ignorance, they come to impose characteristics on *Brahman* that never were actually possessed by *Brahman*, and thus their understanding of reality becomes confused.

For Sankara, *Brahman* alone is real, this world is unreal; the *Jiva* is identical with *Brahman*. Just as the snake is superimposed on the rope, this world and this body are superimposed on *Brahman* or the Supreme Self. If one gets knowledge of the rope, the illusion of the snake will vanish. Even so, if one gets knowledge of *Brahman*, the illusion of the body and the world will vanish.

Sankara said that *Brahman* (or the universal self) is not God; God is inferior to *Brahman* or ultimate reality. According to Sankara, *Brahman* supersedes God. Yet there is a relation between *Brahman* and God.

Human beings are beings of Body and Soul. For Sankara, our body is like any other material object and is therefore considered to be an appearance. That reality that remains 'inside' us or underlies us is the soul. Sankara holds that the world is appearance, and our experience of it is unstable, accidental and fragmentary. The uncovering or discovery of reality requires a negation of this 'world.'

According to Sankara, the individual self must undergo in order to reach 'the Absolute' as an evolutionary process. In Sankara's account, the *Upanishad*, being scientific in its approach, analyzes from the vegetative level through to the level of eternal and unending pleasure.

### Bradley on Reality

Bradley said that ultimate reality is such that it does not contradict itself. One can scarcely think without a positive criterion; 'to think is to judge, and to judge is to criticize, and to criticize is to use a criterion of reality'. The criterion of reality is absolute.

In so far as phenomena are appearances of the real, they must somehow belong to the real. This gives further knowledge about reality that everything, which appears, is somehow real in such a way as to be self-consistent.<sup>11</sup>

According to Bradley, the reality must be one. Reality is really one, and therefore, the whole alone is genuinely real; the parts are real only so far as they are in the whole. The Absolute is the unified integration of all finite experiences.

If reality is to be harmonious and free from conflict, there cannot be many independent reals. Because if there are many independent reals, we have to suppose that they are connected together into a harmonious whole by some relations. He says:

<sup>10</sup> William Sweet, ed., *Approaches to Metaphysics*, New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004, p. 146

<sup>11</sup> F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, London: Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1897, p. 123

*"Bewildering mass of phenomenal diversity must hence somehow be at unity and self-consistent; for it cannot be elsewhere than in reality, and reality excludes discord."*<sup>12</sup>

It is necessary not to confuse reality as the concrete all-inclusive whole with the abstract Kantian Thing-in-itself, which does not include phenomena but excludes them completely. Bradley holds that the Absolute must be made up of the very stuff of which every given or immediately present fact is composed, namely experience.

However, Bradley says that our minds cannot grasp the process by which finite experience arises, and how the plurality of finites becomes merged into the harmonious Absolute experience.

As the Absolute reached by intellect is free from all contradiction, it being the complete whole bereft of internal and external conflict and disharmony, there cannot be any imperfection of any kind in it.

It should be clear that Bradley's Absolute is neither a self-conscious spirit nor a person. Selfhood and personality are essentially marks of finitude. Bradley says thus:

*"....a person is finite or is meaningless.....assuredly the Absolute is not merely personal. It is not personal because it is personal and more. It is, in a word, super-personal."*<sup>13</sup>

Personality, like self-hood, is a finite appearance of the Absolute; the Absolute has this appearance, but only transcends it.

### Conclusion

Both Sankara and Bradley maintain that reality is basically spiritual or psychic in its nature when it is viewed from the standpoint of its own essence. Sankara maintains that reality or Brahman is of the nature of pure intelligence or consciousness. Bradley maintains that reality is of the nature of pure existence or feeling. So far the views of Sankara and Bradley almost identical with the exception that whereas Sankara characterizes reality as pure intelligence, Bradley characterizes it as pure sentience.

Both Sankara and Bradley maintain that nature is appearance. Sankara holds that the world is illusory in its nature. The ultimate ground of the universe cannot be apprehended through empirical experience. Reality or the world-ground can be known super conscious intuition. On the other hand, Bradley maintains that the universe appears to be structured and differentiated when it is apprehended through discursive thinking. Discursive thinking has the characteristic of analyzing an undivided whole into endless part of qualities and relations. Thus, it gets involved in an insoluble relational situation.

The appearances therefore present a differentiated, fragmentary and self-discordant picture when they are apprehended through relational thinking. But, when the universe is apprehended through pure experience or feeling the self-discordant character of the appearances disappear, the apparent differences become integral aspects of an undifferentiated whole. Thus, both Sankara and Bradley agree on the point that appearances are fragmentary, partial and incomplete.

Both Sankara and Bradley maintain that space, time and causality are appearances of for they involve discordant elements. The apparent nature of God is realized when the nature of reality is clearly apprehended. However, both Sankara and Bradley agree on the point that the existence of God and religious experience have significance from the practical point of view.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 471



However, a subtle point of difference may be observed between the positions of Sankara and Bradley. Sankara maintains that reality is pure identity. On the other hand, Bradley maintains that reality is identity-in-difference. Notwithstanding this, Bradley gives ample indications to the fact that reality is pure identity without difference. This leads to the conclusion that in spite of minor differences the systems of Bradley and Sankara are almost identical.

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