

Appearance and Reality: Misinterpreting Śaṅkara

MICHAEL LEVINE

ABSTRACT *Betty claims that 'Śaṅkara's philosophy [and non-dualism generally] fails definitively at the point where he leaves the human experience—"sin and suffering"—unaccounted for'. It is because Śaṅkara sees sin and suffering as ultimately illusory that Betty claims he leaves sin and suffering unaccounted for. However, Betty misconstrues Śaṅkara's view in the worst way possible. It is precisely because Śaṅkara seeks to account for sin and suffering, to take it seriously and as significant—a genuine problem for life—that Śaṅkara constructs the particular metaphysical account of reality that he does; an account he sees as consonant with scripture. In part one of this paper I examine Betty's argument. In part two, I explain why philosophical systems (Eastern and Western) that employ pervasive appearance/reality distinctions—like Śaṅkara's—cannot be dismissed out of hand in the way Betty has done.*

... pantheistic pathos. That it should afford so many people a peculiar satisfaction to say that All is One is, as William James once remarked, a rather puzzling thing. What is there more beautiful or more venerable about the numeral one than about any other number? ... [W]hen a monistic philosophy declares, or suggests, that one is oneself a part of the universal Oneness, a whole complex of obscure emotional responses is released. [1].

... the problem of the One and the Many ... is so ancient that I am glad to be able to quote unchallengeable evidence that it is still modern, still alive, still troubling and urgent ... if a man's decided Monism or decided Pluralism is the sincere and genuine expression of his life ... it is the best evidence not only of what the rest of his *opinions* are, but also of what are his interests, his concerns, his feelings, sentiments, emotions, his desires and aspirations, his aims, purposes and volitions. [2]

Introduction

It is not true that great philosophers do not make obvious mistakes—mistakes that are often central to their overall views. Indeed, arguably, many if not all great systematic philosophers have made such glaring errors. Nevertheless, when smacked by such apparent error, it is good sense to see if the text cannot be interpreted or reinterpreted in such a way as to dismiss the alleged error as a misinterpretation of one's own, rather than attributing fatal and obvious flaws to the philosopher. No formal 'principle of charity' in interpretation is required—merely the supposition that there is often more to seemingly blatantly erroneous views than may at first appear—especially when a thinker of stature is involved. Where the alleged mistake is crucial to the coherence of a system

it will often be the case that even if a mistake is made it is rarely as obvious as it may have first appeared.

In attributing a 'fatal mistake' to Śaṅkara, [3] L. Stafford Betty misinterprets Śaṅkara's understanding and critical distinction between 'appearance' or the 'illusory' and 'reality'. He attributes to Śaṅkara the glaring error of denying the reality of something (e.g. 'pain') that we are all too aware exists. In doing so he is of course echoing the principle and immediate objection to Śaṅkara that students raise when Śaṅkara's peculiar doctrine about the illusory nature of the phenomenal world is first introduced. Indeed, the first task in teaching Śaṅkara's thought is to make sense of this doctrine and to dispel the air of nonsense that surrounds it. Yet Betty claims that Śaṅkara's non-dualism is to be dismissed—for the simple reason discussed below—and that "the fruitful way to approach Śaṅkara and teach his philosophy to our students" is to see Śaṅkara as a mystical theologian who is not really concerned with the metaphysics of the matter. [4]

What is startling about Betty's claim is not that it is wrong, but that he makes no effort to interpret the doctrine in a way that makes sense of it. Furthermore, his article demonstrates a serious lack of scholarship. If Betty had consulted even a single secondary source that explicitly discusses the issue, for example Deutsch, [5] he would have seen that in denying the 'reality' of pain and describing it as illusory, Śaṅkara was by no means denying the obvious about any experienced feature of the phenomenal world. [6]

In part one of this paper I examine and reject Betty's argument that Śaṅkara's philosophy contains a 'fatal mistake'. In part two, I explain why philosophical systems (Eastern and Western) that employ pervasive appearance/reality distinctions—like Śaṅkara's—cannot be dismissed out of hand in the way Betty has done.

Betty's Account of Śaṅkara's 'Fatal Mistake'

Betty claims that "Śaṅkara's philosophy fails definitively at the point where he leaves the human experience—'sin and suffering'—unaccounted for". [7] What sins and suffers according to Śaṅkara is the *jīva* (or soul)—the *ātman* in conjunction with *antaḥkāraṇa* (inner mental organ). It is because Śaṅkara sees sin and suffering as ultimately illusory, "as illusory as the *antaḥkāraṇa* itself", that Betty claims he leaves sin and suffering unaccounted for. The fact of the matter is, however, that for Śaṅkara, seeing sin and suffering as ultimately illusory is fundamentally a metaphysical thesis that may (should) inform one's attitude towards suffering and evil, but in no non-ultimate way mitigates its significance and reality. Not only does Śaṅkara account for sin and suffering through his account of ignorance, etc., more importantly he in no way dismisses its relevance or 'reality' as Betty suggests. Betty misconstrues Śaṅkara's view, and non-dualism generally, in the worst way possible. It is precisely because Śaṅkara seeks to account for sin and suffering, to take it seriously and as significant—a genuine problem for life—that Śaṅkara constructs the particular metaphysical account of reality that he does; an account he sees as consonant with scripture and experience.

Betty quotes Śaṅkara as saying: "The pain of the individual soul ... is not real, but imaginary, caused by the error consisting in the non-discrimination of (the Self from) the body senses ..." [8] And he further quotes Śaṅkara: "... 'the soul does not really suffer', although as far as the 'phenomenal world' goes 'we may admit the relation of sufferer and suffering just as it is observed, and need neither object to it nor refute it'". [9] This crucial point by Śaṅkara about suffering in the phenomenal world is rejected

by Betty as inadequate. Betty says, "Śaṅkara is saying here that the *jīva*'s suffering is merely apparent, not real ... The pleasure and pain, the rewards and punishments caused by karma, are merely apparent, not real ... they have an empirical reality only, not an ultimately true one." [10] Betty rejects Śaṅkara's account of suffering in the phenomenal world because it is an account of suffering in 'empirical reality' in 'the phenomenal world' only and not in 'reality'.

But why does Betty insist that Śaṅkara's acceptance of pain as empirically real but rejection of pain, etc. as 'ultimately real' amounts to a 'fatal mistake' in his philosophy? Here is Betty's argument.

Let us begin with a plain fact: we sometimes experience pain. What is this 'we' that suffers? Śaṅkara calls it the *jīva*, the soul, the conscious seat of personality ... But then Śaṅkara reminds us that the pain is imaginary. But I would answer that whether you call the pain real or imaginary is irrelevant, for an imagined snake causes as great a fright as a real snake ... what does it mean to say the *jīva* does not really suffer, but suffers 'only as the phenomenal world goes'? I examine what it means for me to suffer, and I know of no distinction between seeming suffering and outright suffering. Who has ever seemed to suffer who did not really suffer? ... All suffering is subjective; if someone feels that is suffering, he is suffering, and there the matter ends. It is invalid, therefore, for Śaṅkara to claim that the *jīva* does not really suffer but merely seems to. And since ... the sole principle of consciousness in the *jīva* is none other than the *ātman*, it follows necessarily that the *ātman* really suffers. But if the *ātman* ... is in turn ... *Brahman* ... *Brahman* is the sinner and sufferer. I see no legitimate way out for Śaṅkara and non-dualism ... The *reductio ad absurdum* is complete. Śaṅkara has been slain with his own sword. [11]

But of course for Śaṅkara it is not true that 'the matter ends' once we note that 'if someone feels that is suffering, he is suffering'. For one thing, Śaṅkara would not and does not deny this latter statement. Again, it is not simply that Betty incorrectly interprets Śaṅkara. What is the matter is that he totally neglects the metaphysics in which Śaṅkara tries to explain how and why experience of the phenomenal world is sublatable by other experiences; and why despite pain and suffering being all too much with us in the phenomenal world they are nevertheless—from a different and higher perspective—ultimately 'unreal' and imaginary. [12] The issue of whether or not Śaṅkara is correct is not the issue. The issue Betty raises only has to do with the internal coherence of his systematic views, and Betty finds incoherence by conveniently neglecting just about everything Śaṅkara has to say.

Betty's objection to Śaṅkara is vaguely reminiscent of John Stuart Mill's objection to Mansel concerning the predication of goodness and other moral properties to God. [13] Roughly, Mansel maintained that such predicates, as applied to God, are not simply quantitatively different but qualitatively different. As applied to God, predicates like 'goodness' mean nothing like what they mean when predicated of persons. But as Mill points out, if the equivocation on the meaning of such terms as applied to God is absolute, then we do not know what is meant by applying such terms to God at all. If saying God is 'good' would mean something totally different from saying a person is good, we might as well use a different word entirely (certainly not 'good') for whatever it is that is being predicated of God. Mill argues that while moral predicates may not mean exactly the same things applied to God as they mean when applied to ordinary

persons, they nevertheless have to have enough in common by way of their meaning and application if the use of the same predicates is to be warranted.

Betty tries to construct an argument not unlike Mill's in relation to Śaṅkara's denial of the reality of pain. Since the conditions for the application of the term are essentially connected to the way the term is actually applied ('meaning as use' is implied in Betty's argument), Betty claims Śaṅkara is simply wrong (i.e. commits a 'fatal mistake') in claiming that pain is not real—i.e. that we are not really in pain when we think we are because the phenomenal world is unreal. But Betty's argument is completely misdirected. Śaṅkara never denies that what we mean by pain is somehow changed, or the actual pain mitigated by his metaphysical view concerning the ultimate 'unreality' of the phenomenal world in some respects. What is mitigated, if anything, is the ultimate significance of pain and the rest of the phenomenal world. This is definitely not to say that Śaṅkara denies the significance and importance of pain, love, material objects or the rest of the phenomenal world seen through *māyā*. But the criterion for the application of predicates such as 'pain' and what pain means is exactly as one would ordinarily have it according to Śaṅkara. It is not that given Śaṅkara's views the term 'pain' must be equivocated upon to at least some extent in ordinary usage. No equivocation whatsoever is called for.

Śaṅkara's point is that the experience of pain—and indeed everything else in the phenomenal world—is ultimately sublatable in terms of a higher (*Brahman*) reality and a higher experience of that reality. There is an important sense in which the phenomenal world, including pain, does exist according to Śaṅkara—and is in a sense 'real'. It is only not real when considered from the perspective of a higher experiential 'reality'. There are, in short, degrees of reality—or perspectives to be taken account of according to Śaṅkara. This is all explained in detail in, for example, Deutsch. [14] Note, I am not for a moment suggesting that Śaṅkara's metaphysical views are remotely plausible, let alone correct. I am simply stating his view and that Betty's interpretation is as simplistic as it is obvious.

II. Distinguishing Appearance from Reality: It Is Not So Easy

The central tenet of Advaita Vedānta is that 'Reality' is ultimately non-dual and that *Brahman* is 'Reality'. Its ontology is strongly or 'radically' monistic, maintaining as it does that there is only one thing and/or kind of thing—*Brahman* or Reality. Since our experience of the world is on all accounts (including that of Advaita Vedānta) in many ways obviously pluralistic, it is apparent that the coherence or plausibility of this world-view, and its associated metaphysics, rests on the viability or acceptability of its essential and pervasive distinction between appearance and reality. Indeed, one way of looking at Advaita Vedānta is to see it as elaborating on the appearance/reality distinction in an effort to support its absolute monism in the face of pluralism. It does this via its doctrines or theories concerning *māyā*, *avidyā* (ignorance), etc. The question then is this. How plausible is the kind of radical appearance/reality distinction that is essential to Advaita Vedānta—as well as to so many other Eastern and Western philosophies? One thing is certain: it is absurd to think that such a distinction can be rejected outright because it conflicts in some obvious way with ordinary experience.

There is no reason to dismiss all versions of the appearance/reality distinction (A/R) out of hand. [15] For one thing, mind/body dualism may rest upon such a distinction, and not all dualisms are vestiges of an unacceptable Cartesianism. In fact, it is materialist analyses of mind, rather than dualist ones that usually rely upon

A/R. Surely our thoughts appear to be something other than brain states. Yet reductive materialists have claimed that thoughts are strictly identical to brain states. Nevertheless, the particular type of A/R that must be accepted to maintain that what we regard as substances (whether individually existent things or kinds of things) are not what we take them to be is a deep and pervasive application of the distinction. Ordinary phenomenological criteria of individuation would have to be taken as completely different from, and in conflict with, criteria of individuation based upon a metaphysical ontological rationale. The acceptance of this pervasive type of A/R rests on criteria of individuation that are part of metaphysical presuppositions. Therefore, unless one is prepared to argue independently for the applicability of this radical kind of A/R as applied to substance (e.g. particular existent things), one should not rely upon it as a basis for the ultimate 'oneness' of Reality in terms of *Brahman* or substance—'despite appearances'.

Apart from a formidable argument for A/R the price is too great in terms of commitment to what is at least *prima facie* an implausible metaphysical theory. Śaṅkara is of course well aware of the *prima facie* implausibility of his non-dualism. Indeed, it is this feature of non-dualism (i.e. its *prima facie* absurdity) that is the principle philosophical motivation for the construction of the Advaita Vedāntic system. It is the philosophical attempt to bring the experiential intimations of 'oneness' in line with ordinary experience that is admittedly pluralistic.

Monistic theories or doctrines—whether Eastern or Western, idealist, pantheist or whatever—are nearly always committed to A/R. Their arguments are usually embedded in complex metaphysical systems such as those of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Spinoza or Bradley. In these cases the apparent plurality of substance or experience cannot be rejected as a basis for the 'oneness' of Reality unless A/R itself is discredited. To do so one must consider the metaphysical scheme in which the distinction is found.

Those who maintain A/R do not generally deny the reality of the phenomenal world and experience in a limited sense. It is rather that the existence of such a phenomenal realm should not be confused with ultimate reality. Thus, Śaṅkara, Advaita Vedānta generally, and Nāgārjuna do not categorically deny the reality of the phenomenal world. It exists as a kind of cosmic illusion. In the senses in which they affirm the phenomenal world's existence there is no point for those who adhere to A/R to deny its existence. In their most plausible forms, theories such as Berkeley's idealism that rely on A/R, do not conflict with ordinary accounts of the phenomenological content of experience. (I take it Berkeley mistakenly denies that his idealism involves A/R.) Experience of the phenomenal world cannot, in any straightforward way, count as evidence against these theories. Because such theories correctly maintain that they accord with ordinary views concerning the phenomenological content of experience, they can suppose that whatever occurs in terms of that experience cannot count against their theories. This is why these theories, though they include A/R, are *prima facie* the most plausible.

Thus, Śaṅkara maintains that his non-dualism accords with experience no less than Berkeley claims his idealism does or than Spinoza thinks his substance monism does. If the views of Berkeley, Śaṅkara, etc. on the material world do conflict with experience, why they do must be explained in terms of an account of experience and not the phenomenological content of experience. Mere reference to 'experience' will not refute A/R in Plato, Berkeley, Bradley or Advaita Vedānta, because if A/R does conflict with experience it is not supposed to do so in terms of the phenomenological content of experience. Therefore, if there is a conflict it is not phenomenologically obvious.

Indeed, the point of invoking A/R is to show how, appearances notwithstanding, reality is not what it appears to be.

The only thing that could really make it possible to posit monism based on substance is an analysis of the concept of substance. Such an analysis could be a reason for accepting A/R as applied to substance. Alternatively, an account could claim that substance has no phenomenal properties at all, or at least none that are individuating. Since substance has no phenomenologically individuating characteristics whatsoever in such an analysis, there is, *a fortiori*, never a question of any commitment to A/R.

Suppose one admits a plurality of things and kinds of things in the world. An analysis of substance rather than adherence to A/R may lead one to claim that although there are many things and/or kinds of things (e.g. infinite attributes and modes), there is only one substance. This view could rest on an analysis of substance as it did for Spinoza, rather than adherence to a doctrine of appearances. Whereas appearances are significant criteria for individuating objects phenomenally understood, they may be irrelevant criteria for the individuation of substances. In this case substance could not be taken in some Aristotelian senses of the term (e.g. concrete individual thing) where criteria for the individuation of substance are taken to be identical with criteria for the individuation of ordinary phenomenally perceived objects. However, it could still be taken in some of its other Aristotelian senses such as 'substratum' and (possibly) 'what is capable of independent existence'. Whatever the criteria for identity of particulars may be, the criteria for substance may be different; they will be different if substances are not taken as phenomenologically identifiable.

Whereas we have a pre-analytic notion concerning criteria for individuating things, we have none for the identity of the philosophical concept of substance. Therefore pluralism of various kinds (e.g. in experience) need not, even informally, commit one to substance pluralism or dualism. This means it is possible to maintain substance monism apart from any commitment to A/R. Alternatively, one's analysis of the concept of substance could be the basis for positing A/R in the first place.

Conclusion

Taking into account what has been said thus far, an important but ultimately trivial objection to Śaṅkara's non-dualism can be refuted. This is simply a more generalised version of Betty's objection. The objection is raised by H. P. Owen with respect to pantheism, but it is equally applicable to monism as he sees it, since he claims that pantheists are monists. [16]

Owen objects to pantheism partly because it "... fails to explain our awareness of distinctness and autonomy in things and persons ... Our total experience of both personal and sub-personal entities is pervaded by the conviction that each is an independent form of existence." [17] He claims that, contrary to experience, pantheism denies there are independently existing entities. But I have shown that 'awareness of distinctness and autonomy' is compatible with metaphysical theories that include A/R. Generally integral to A/R is the assumption, set in a broader metaphysical context, that such an awareness cannot provide reasons for making certain claims about reality. Therefore, by invoking such a distinction (A/R) one need not deny the awareness Owen points to. One need only deny the reality, in some metaphysical or ontological sense, of the alleged referents. That is, one need only deny the objects of awareness are 'real' or fully real entities. Given the account of reality that A/R views offer, our experiential 'awareness of distinctness and autonomy' of entities must sometimes be differentiated

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from 'the conviction that each is [ultimately] an independent form of existence'. The latter is a view about the referents of experience and not about the phenomenological content of experience. The phenomenological content of the experiences is compatible with there being no real referents, given accounts of reality of which A/R is a part.

Moreover, on certain understandings of 'substance' in which criteria for their individuation are not the same as those for things and persons (i.e. where substances are not taken to be 'things and persons'), it could not be true that our 'awareness of distinctness and autonomy in things and persons' conflicted either with pantheism based on substance monism or the 'oneness' of Reality more generally. So even without invoking A/R there is no reason to suppose that pantheism or substance monism necessarily denies 'our awareness of distinctness and autonomy'. Indeed, not only need pantheism or substance monism not deny our awareness of such distinctness, it need not deny that such things really are distinct and autonomous in important ways. Neither the Unity that the pantheist claims for the whole, depending on what it is, nor the non-dualism that Śaṅkara sees as constitutive of Reality, will conflict with the view that things are distinct or 'real' in a variety of ways.

Make no mistake. Śaṅkara knows what pain is. He affirms rather than denies both its 'reality' and significance—and to believe otherwise really is absurd.

Michael P. Levine, Department of Philosophy, The University of Western Australia, Nedlands, W.A. 6009, Australia

NOTES

- [1] LOVEJOY, ARTHUR (1960) *The Great Chain of Being* (New York, Harper and Row) pp. 12–13. Lovejoy continues: 'psychologically the force of the monistic pathos is in some degree intelligible ... It affords ... a welcome sense of freedom, arising from a triumph over, or an absolution from, the troublesome cleavages and disjunctions of things.'
- [2] SMITH, J. A. (1925/6) The issue between Monism and Pluralism, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 26, pp. 7–8. Smith quotes William James, *Pragmatism*: 'I suspect ... that in but few of you has this problem occasioned sleepless nights ... I myself have come, by long brooding over it, to consider it the most central of all philosophical problems ... I mean by this that if you know whether a man is a decided monist or a decided pluralist, you perhaps know more about the rest of his opinions that if you give him any other name ending in *ist*.' Smith intends his view to be taken literally. Either Smith was as mistaken then as he would be now, or times have changed.
- [3] BETTY, L. STAFFORD (1994) Śaṅkara's fatal mistake, *Asian Philosophy*, 4 (1), pp. 3–7.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- [5] DEUTSCH, ELIOT (1969) *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu, HI, University of Hawaii Press).
- [6] The two secondary sources Betty cites besides three of his own are as follows: IYER, M. K. V. (1964) *Advaita Vedanta According to Śaṅkara* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House); and DAS GUPTA, SURENDRANATH (1932) *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol IV (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- [7] BETTY, *op. cit.*, note 3, p. 3.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [9] *Ibid.*
- [10] *Ibid.*
- [11] BETTY, *op. cit.*, note 3, p. 5.
- [12] Cf. DEUTSCH, *op. cit.*, note 5.
- [13] MILL, JOHN STUART (1964) Mr. Mansel on the limits of religious thought, in: NELSON PIKE (Ed.) *God and Evil: Readings on the Theological Problem of Evil* (Princeton, NJ, Prentice-Hall) pp. 37–45.
- [14] DEUTSCH (*op. cit.*, note 5, pp. 42–44) asks: 'Can this Advaitic analysis of the relation between Brahman and the world be vindicated? Is it a valid or fruitful philosophical analysis?' He claims it is. He also claims that 'the final teaching of Advaita on causation—that no causal relation can

be established between Brahman and the world, in that the world as effect must be only an appearance of Brahman and not something put forward by it as a substantial reality—does seem to be sound.' I forgo discussing these implausible claims or Deutsch's scanty arguments on behalf of them.

[15] See LEVINE, MICHAEL P. (1994) *Pantheism* (London, Routledge) chapter 2.3, 'Monism'.

[16] OWEN, H. P. (1971) *Concepts of Deity* (London, Macmillan), pp. 71–72.

[17] Owen does not base his rejection on experience alone, but on other considerations as well; for example, the implications of denying that experience counts against A/R. See p. 72.