

## BRAHMAN, GOD, SUBSTANCE AND NATURE : SAMKARA AND SPINOZA

Before we can reasonably determine whether Spinoza's substance is similar to Brahman in Śaṅkara, we must have a clear understanding of what it means for two things to be similar. The concept of similarity is indeed quite complex and has given rise to a great deal of philosophical debate. Problems emerge when we investigate common usages of the concept of similarity since there are a number of meanings commonly attached to this concept. Let us consider a few of the more common usages. (1) Similarity may be used to mean the *identity of essence* in objects which are different but are of the same kind, e.g., in our everyday perceptions we may talk of two pieces of gold as being alike since they are made of the same material substance though they differ in colour, shape and weight. (2) Similarity may be used to indicate the *identity of characteristics or properties* in different objects that belong to the same class. For example, we may talk of two coloured pieces of cloth, red and green as being alike because they share the common quality colouredness; or, we may speak of two red pieces of cloth as being alike because they share the common quality redness. (3) Similarity may refer to the *identity of form or structure*, e.g., we may talk of two houses as being alike in that they have a certain form, structure, or style. (4) Finally, similarity in some usages might mean *identity of function*, e.g., we may talk of two medicines as being alike in the sense that they serve the same purpose, though they may have different chemical make-up. There are, of course, many additional usages of the concept of similarity. I believe, however, that this brief description of some of the more common usages makes it quite clear that there is no central usage of the concept, and that it can be used in various senses. This is not to suggest that these different uses of similarity are mutually exclusive but rather that the concept of similarity can be understood in one or more of the senses given above.

A complete theory of the problem of similarity will have to deal with all the issues surrounding the concept. The purpose of this

paper is not to provide such a complete analysis of similarity, but to investigate whether Spinoza's substance is similar to Śaṅkara's Brahman. Such comparative discussions are, of course, easier to handle when the philosophers being considered are contemporaries, when they explicitly examine the same philosophical questions, and when they live and work in essentially the same socio-cultural environment. Unfortunately, such is not the case with Spinoza and Śaṅkara who lived nearly one thousand years apart in entirely different socio-cultural environments.

I begin my investigation by examining the following two issues : (1) whether the concept of substance in Spinoza has the same ontological import as that of Brahman in Śaṅkara, and (2) whether these two concepts play essentially the same function/role in their respective philosophies. In so doing, I (i) give a brief analysis of Spinoza's concepts of substance, attributes, and levels of knowledge; (ii) present an explication of Śaṅkara's Brahman, and (iii) give a comparative analysis of the two philosophers by pointing out similarities and differences. Finally, I consider what reasons, if any, I have for thinking that Spinoza's substance is similar to Śaṅkara's Brahman,<sup>1</sup> in whatever sense of similarity seems allowed by the foregoing analysis.

## I

Spinoza's philosophical position, foreshadowed in his earlier works, was fully developed in his most important work, *Ethics*. Spinoza, like Descartes, was interested in mathematical method, especially that of geometry. In Spinoza's systems, everything follows necessarily from first principles in the same manner as the propositions of geometry follows from their presuppositions. The goal of philosophy is the complete knowledge of things and this can be attained by clear and distinct thinking. He begins with what he believes to be the most basic definitions and axioms and then proceeds to deduce propositions in geometrical order, where each proposition follows the earlier ones by logical necessity. Propositions are followed by *Corrolaries*, necessary consequences of the propositions; and *Scholia*, informal discussion of the propositions. He begins with certain self-evident metaphysical truths in order to develop an absolutely certain and universal philosophical science with the same level of logical certainty as mathematics.

The concept of substance, for Spinoza, was logically primitive and formed the starting point of his philosophy. At the outset of Part I of *Ethics*, he defines substance as "that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception."<sup>2</sup> This substance, Spinoza maintains, is not only independent but also self-caused, *causa sui*, because if it were to be caused by something other than itself it would be dependent on it. It is infinite, and individuality cannot be ascribed to it because every determination implies limitation: *omnis determinatio est negatio*. Thus substance, for Spinoza, is independent, all-inclusive, involves no negation, and nothing can affect or modify it.

In his *definition* of substance, Spinoza did not depart very much from his rationalistic contemporaries. However, he drew radical implications from this definition. Whereas Descartes postulated God as an independent substance on which other so-called secondary substances depend, Spinoza argued that if substance is something which needs nothing other than itself in order to exist, then this existing substance could be nothing else but God. He defines God as "a being absolutely infinite—that is, a substance consisting of infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality."<sup>3</sup> And, a little later, he adds that

if any substance besides God were granted, it would have to be explained by some attribute of God, and thus two substances with the same attribute would exist, which..... is absurd; therefore, besides God no substance can be granted, or, consequently, be conceived. If it could be conceived, it would necessarily have to be conceived as existent; but this..... is absurd. Therefore, besides God no substance can be granted or conceived.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, there is nothing over and above and beyond God, and everything follows from God. And, since substance or God is an all-inclusive whole, an all pervading principle of the Universe, he concludes that Nature is identical with God. God and Nature are one. God is immanent ground, the source of all reality, he is *Natura Naturans*; as the plurality of objects, as the sum total of all that exists, he is *Natura Naturata*. He states that "by *natura naturans* we are to understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself...that is to say, God..."<sup>5</sup>. Individual things,

on the other hand, are caused by Nature, because they cannot exist apart from it. However, that does not imply that "they cannot be accounted for in terms of particular causal connections, provided we remember that *Natura Naturata* is not a substance distinct from *Natura Naturans*. There is one infinite system, but it can be looked at from different points of view."<sup>6</sup> Consequently, in turning our attention from God or nature to the world, we are not turning to something different from God but rather looking at it under different aspects or from different points of view.

This immediately gives rise to the issue : How does Spinoza account for the diversity of the phenomenal world ? Spinoza not only believed that there is only one substance but also argued that anything that is not itself a substance must be a property of substance. Therefore, he maintained that anything which is not God is either an "attribute" or a "mode" of God. An attribute is defined by him as that "which the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of substance."<sup>7</sup> Infinite substance, for Spinoza, entails infinite number of attributes; each one of them is infinite and eternal in essence. However, out of these infinite attributes, the human mind can perceive only two, namely, thought and extension. These two attributes do not limit each other. Moreover, each of them is infinite in its own kind and therefore, he conceives the possibility of an infinite number of attributes co-existing at the same time.

These attributes appear in specific ways or modes. Modes are defined as "the modifications of substance, or that which exists in and is conceived through something other than itself."<sup>8</sup> Modes are the individual things of our experience. They cannot exist without the substance although substance can exist with these modes. Every mode is in God because nothing can exist without God. But, then again, he also believed that whatever is finite and has a determinate existence cannot be produced by the absolute of any attribute of God, because whatever follows from the absolute nature of any attribute of God is infinite as well as eternal. Therefore, he argues that "every mode which exists necessarily and infinitely must necessarily follow either from the absolute nature of some attribute of God, or from some attribute modified by a modification which exists necessarily and infinitely."<sup>9</sup> Thus, there are two ways of viewing modes. Modes are said to be *actual*

insofar as they exist at a certain time and place, and in this sense they do not follow from God. However, modes are also said to be *real* when they are conceived under the form of eternity. In this sense they are viewed to follow from God. The eternal infinite substance expresses itself in different ways, more specifically, in a system of ideas and a system of bodies. The system of ideas i.e., intellect, and the system of bodies i.e., motion and rest, together constitute the entire Universe.

Everything is either a mode of mind or a mode of matter. Particular finite objects and minds are not direct effects of God, as each finite thing has its finite cause in another finite thing and so on *ad infinitum*. Any particular thought or body was not necessary for the existence of God, yet no single thought or body could exist without the substance. Thus, whereas Descartes regarded thought and extension to be two distinct substances, Spinoza took thought and extension to be the two essential attributes or modes of the infinite substance. And, given such a substance, thoughts and bodies follow by necessity: as all the properties of a triangle follow from the definition of a triangle, all the properties of the universe follow from the substance. Therefore, conceived under the form of eternity, God is his infinite attribute; conceived under the form of imagination, God is the world. In the mathematical system of Spinoza, the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things *as they actually exist* everything is both mind and body. God and Nature are only two different words meaning the same substance, i.e., the essence that involves existence. His conception obviously implies the unity of God as creator, *Natura Naturans*, and God as the created world, *Natura Naturata*. Minds and bodies constitute two parallel systems held in an intimate relation in one substance or God. There is no ontological distinction between God as the infinite substance and God as Nature.

Before considering the concept of Brahman in Śaṅkara, I would like to note that up to this point, I have examined Spinoza's metaphysics. That is not to suggest that his epistemological and ethical views are any less significant, and I will examine several pertinent epistemological and ethical issues when I compare the two philosophers.

## II

In his philosophical works, Śaṅkara remained faithful to the teachings of the Upaniṣads. However, his philosophical views were based not only on the Upaniṣads but also on direct experience. At the outset of his commentary on the *Brahma Sūtra*, Śaṅkara states that the world is superimposed on Brahman and that this superimposed world is not real. “*Yushmad-asmad-pratyaya-gocara*”; that object and subject, have as their province the ‘Thou’ (the not I) and the ‘I’, and are in nature as opposed to each other as light and darkness.

And therefore, the superimposition of the sense-objects which are within the range of the denotative power of the word ‘Yushmat’ and its attributes, on the subject of sense-objects which is within the range of the denotative power of the word ‘Asmat’ and has pure intelligence as its self, and its attributes, is necessarily unreal (*Mithyā*). All the same, it is a natural course of worldly conduct resulting from false-ignorance (*Mithyājñāna*) (in a person), to superimpose the sense-objects and the subject of sense-objects which are absolutely different from each other, and their respective attributes, mutually on each other, through failure to discriminate or distinguish either of them from each other, and by coupling truth and untruth together and to imagine thus—‘I am this’, ‘This is mine.’<sup>10</sup>

The nature of Brahman is consciousness and it is the only reality. It is that state of being wherein all subject/object distinction is obliterated.

Following the Upaniṣads, Śaṅkara claims that it is not possible to give any positive characterization of Brahman. Brahman, the Real, can at best be described as “*neti neti*” ‘not this, not this’. *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* clearly states that “there is no other more appropriate description than this ‘Not this’.”<sup>11</sup> Brahman is free from all determinations; to apply a predicate to it is to impose limitation on it. To say that Brahman is truth is to say that it is not untruth. However, although Brahman can at best be described *via negativa*, the *via positiva* has also been used. In the second sense Brahman is known as *saccidānanda* : it is “being” (*sat*), “consciousness” (*cit*), and “bliss” (*ānanda*). These three are

not attributes of Brahman but rather the expression of its essence. In reality, Brahman is beyond conception and any description of it would always fall short of revealing its true nature. However, since human language is grounded in the phenomenal world and any intelligible discourse about Brahman is possible only with the help of language, we are forced to use language when we reflect on Brahman. The role of positive characterizations is to orient the mind toward Brahman. It is intended for those who have not realized Brahman but are in search of it. As Professor Deutsch so aptly explains : ".....these terms are really being used properly not so much in a logical as in a phenomenological manner, for the problem is not so much of defining Brahman as it is one of describing the fundamental features of man's experience of Oneness."<sup>12</sup> Brahman is the only reality. It alone really exists. It is the real which cannot be sublated by any other experience. It is true existence. All subject/object distinctions are transcended and it is *nirguṇa* Brahman. It is the highest level of being.

This position immediately raises certain questions, the most important of which is : If Brahman is the only reality, what is the status of the world in Śaṅkara's philosophy ? What is the relationship between Brahman and the world ? Śaṅkara maintains that the phenomenal world is a product of *māyā* or ignorance. Because of our ignorance we superimpose names and forms on the unitary, unsublatable Brahman. For Śaṅkara, sublatibility is the criterion of the ontological status of any content of consciousness. Anything that is in principle sublatable is of lesser value and it is through this concept he arrives at his ontological hierarchy. Keeping this in mind, to say that Brahman is unsublatable, is to say that no experience can contradict it, that it is Reality. The world is an appearance and appearance is that which in principle can be sublated. However, this should not be taken to mean that the world of appearances is unreal. The phenomenal world, though sublatable by Brahman, is not *asat* or non-being, because unreal or non-being in Śaṅkara is not an object of our experience, e.g., square circles. It is that which neither can nor cannot be sublated by any other experience. It is the lowest level of being. Thus, the world is neither real nor unreal. It is not real because it can be sublated, it is not unreal, because if it were it neither could nor could not be sublated. The world can at best be described as *anirvacaniya* or inexpressible.

A proper understanding of the philosophy of Śaṅkara depends upon the recognition of two standpoints from which Reality can be viewed. The one is the standpoint of the absolute; the other, the standpoint of the relative. From the standpoint of the absolute or Brahman, there is no real creation, because duality disappears as soon as Brahman is known. Reality transcends all distinctions. From the standpoint of the relative, the world of plurality, the multiplicity of names and forms, is real. Because of *māyā* or ignorance, one attributes names and forms to Brahman and the phenomenal world comes into existence. By freeing oneself from ignorance, one can realize Brahman. The phenomenal world disappears for him. He realizes that Reality is only one, although one experiences it as many.

Even though I have only sketched a very rough outline of Śaṅkara's metaphysics, I believe it will suffice for our purposes. Where relevant, however, I will elaborate on specific metaphysical issues and bring in several pertinent epistemological and ethical issues in our comparison of the philosophers under consideration.

### III

Spinoza begins his philosophical analysis with the conception of substance, or reality, which he considers in its totality. This substance, for Spinoza, is infinite, exists in itself, and is indeterminate. At this juncture, we see an amazing similarity between Spinoza and Śaṅkara (Śaṅkara viewed substance in much the same way as Spinoza). Śaṅkara also believed Brahman to be the only reality. It is indeterminate, transcends all subject/object distinctions and alone could properly be said to exist. Thus, for both, one substance exists, comprises all of reality, and forms the starting point of their respective philosophies. However, they draw different implications from their conceptions of substance. For Spinoza, substance consists of infinite attributes and each of these attributes express a certain eternal and infinite essence. These attributes are not our ways of knowing substance but rather the constituents of substance. Of the infinite attributes, we can know only two, viz., thought and extension. He believed that the entire universe could be adequately explained through the categories of thought and extension. In as much as everything follows necessarily from substance, and he assumes God to be the cause of everything, he



uses substance synonymously with God. God is not only the cause of himself (*causa sui*) but also the cause of the world. And as all things that exist are in God and must be conceived through God, God is the immanent cause of the world. In other words, things were not created by God at one point in time but rather flow from his nature by the same necessity as it follows from the nature of the triangle that its three angles must be equal to two right angles. Spinoza's views on creation clearly imply the unity of God as the creator (*Natura Naturans*) and God as the created world (*Natura Naturata*). Thus, it is not surprising that by the time he reaches proposition XXIX, he uses God, Substance, and Nature interchangeably. He states that

by *natura naturans* we are to understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself, or those attributes of substance which express eternal and infinite essence, that is to say..... God in so far as He is considered as a free cause. But by *natura naturata* I understand everything which follows from the necessity of the nature of God, or of any one of God's attributes, that is to say, all the modes of God's attributes in so far as they are considered as things which are in God, and which without God can neither be nor can be conceived.<sup>13</sup>

For Śaṅkara, on the other hand, although Brahman is the only reality, unlike Spinoza, no attribute can be ascribed to Brahman. To describe Brahman as having attributes or as a thing is to misunderstand the essential nature of Brahman. The nature of Brahman is consciousness and it is the only reality. He accepted the reality of Brahman from the Upaniṣads, and explained the world as *māyā* or superimposition on the Brahman. The world of phenomenon belongs to the realm of *māyā*, the product of ignorance, which in turn is produced by superimposing names and forms on Brahman. Śaṅkara uses the example of rope and snake to suggest the onesided dependence of the world on Brahman. Just as a person stepping on a rope in a dark room mistakenly believes that it is a snake, man, due to ignorance, believes that the changing world of appearances is real. However, this is not to suggest that the world of appearances is *unreal*. On the contrary, it tells us that whereas the appearance of the snake is dependent on the existence of rope, the existence of the rope is in no way dependent on

the appearance of the snake. As one cannot experience a snake in a dark room without the existence of rope, similarly, one cannot experience the appearance of the world without the existence of Brahman. The appearance of the world is sublata by the knowledge of Brahman. The world is neither real nor unreal. All distinctions occur within the realm of appearance. Brahman, the only reality, appears to us as many, as the empirical world, and by freeing ourselves from ignorance we can see the reality in its essential nature. Brahman is the only reality underlying the world of appearances. The one-sided relationship between Brahman and the world is termed *vivarta* in Advaita, and I will return to this concept shortly. Thus, although both Śaṅkara and Spinoza accept the reality of one substance, for Śaṅkara, the material world and its creation are merely an appearance; for Spinoza, the world is an objective reality.

Before we proceed any further, it is appropriate to talk about the creation of the world in Śaṅkara. If Brahman is "one only without a second", how does he explain the appearance of the world? At this juncture, Śaṅkara distinguishes between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* Brahman. *Saguṇa* Brahman is said to be the cause, creator, and sustainer of the world. It is the personal God, and finite individual beings worship it under different names and forms. In other words, it is the living god, the totality of all things that appear. *Nirguṇa* Brahman, on the other hand, is beyond the name/form complex. It is neither the creator nor the destroyer of the world. It is pure being, pure consciousness, pure bliss. It is beyond the subject-object distinction. This distinction between two Brahman might mistakenly lead one to conclude that Śaṅkara really believes that there are two different Brahman. However, this is not the case. There is only Brahman which assumes various forms on account of various adjuncts. It is clearly stated that :

One and the same object cannot be at the same time with and without attributes, and with and without form; in Himself (*svatas*) Brahman is therefore without attributes, forms, differences, and limitations; and this higher Brahman becomes the lower when Ignorance (*avidyā*) for the purpose of worship ascribes to him the limitations or *Upādhis*. That Brahman is subject to *Upādhis* is only an illusion (*bhrama*), just as much as it is an illusion to hold

a crystal for red in itself because it is painted red. As the clearness of the crystal is not changed by the red colour, so the essence of Brahman is not altered by the limitations ascribed by Ignorance.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, whereas Spinoza's views on creation clearly point to the unity between God as the creator and the created world; in Śaṅkara, although Brahman is in a way both the efficient and the material cause of the world, the material world and its creation belong merely to the realm of appearance. All distinctions occur only within the realm of appearance because under the superimposition of names and forms we are mesmerized into believing that the phenomenal world exists. But once *māyā* is overcome, it is seen that there is no world and that Brahman alone exists.

The foregoing analysis points to another important distinction between Spinoza and Śaṅkara. Spinoza conceives modes to be affections of substance, which cannot exist without the substance although substance can exist without them. As forms of eternity, modes are conceived to be *real*. The universe is itself regarded as an infinite mode. The exact opposite is the case in Advaita. Śaṅkara maintains that "Brahman appears to become susceptible of (i.e., appears to be the basis of) all phenomenal behaviour by way of modifications, etc., by reason of the distinctions of aspects or forms characterized by names and forms imagined through Nescience ....."<sup>15</sup> However, in reality

Brahma subsists only in its unmodified aspect, and is beyond all phenomenal behaviour, and, as names and forms imagined through Nescience are merely made current by speech, the fact that Brahma has no parts is not thereby vitiated. Besides, on the one hand this Scriptural statement about the modification (of Brahma) is not meant to propound the fact of modification itself, as such realization is not understood to have any fruit as such, while on the other hand it *is* intended to establish how Brahma which is the self of all is devoid of any *real* phenomenal behaviour, as it is understood that a fruit results by such realization.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, there is fundamental difference between Śaṅkara and Spinoza. Whereas for Śaṅkara, the material world and its creation are merely an appearance, for Spinoza, the material world and its

creation is real. The above analysis also helps one understand the distinction between monism and non-dualism. Spinoza, being a monist, believed that the existence of substance is not antithetical to the existence and diversity of the phenomenal world. Śaṅkara, as a non-dualist, would reject such a conception and, accordingly, provides us with a metaphysics which holds that the existence of substance is antithetical to the existence of the world of plurality and that because of ignorance we believe in the existence of the phenomenal world of plurality. Therefore Śaṅkara does not so much assert the absolute oneness of Brahman and the world as rather deny their difference. The goal of Advaita is to show the ultimate non-reality of all distinctions—that there is only reality which is not constituted of parts, and to lead finite human beings to a realization of it.

As a matter of fact, both Spinoza and Śaṅkara claim that the ultimate goal of human being is to attain the highest intuitive knowledge, the knowledge of the real. Both philosophers provide us with an epistemological methodology which is necessary for the attainment of this goal. Therefore, it seems appropriate to investigate the relationship between their epistemological and ethical or moral theories.

In part II of his work *Ethics*, Spinoza delineates three stages, or degrees of knowledge. The first stage of knowledge is *imagination*, which produces obscure and inadequate ideas. In this stage ideas depend on sense-perception and sensation and have as their objects the modifications of the body. Imagination yields only confused and inadequate knowledge and we get ideas of other objects as they affect our own bodies. In short, imagination or sense-perception does not yield genuine knowledge. It fails to give adequate ideas because it separates them into unrelated compartments. However, as everything is a unified whole and participates in the nature of the substance, we also have clear, adequate, knowledge, which Spinoza terms rational knowledge. This is the second level of knowledge for Spinoza. By virtue of *reason*, we perceive things as they are, *sub specie aeternitatis*, in their real connection. It grasps the universal nature of things, what these things have in common with other things, and comprehends these necessary and eternal essences in relation to God's being. The

key point Spinoza makes in this connection is that reason provides us with the logical form of empirical knowledge. Reason certainly is adequate as far as it goes; however, it falls short of the highest level of knowledge: *intuitive* knowledge. "This kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things."<sup>17</sup> It is immediate and direct, and in it the objects appear in a single, momentary flash of intuition. Rather than proceeding from part to the whole, we begin with the whole and then proceed to the parts. Intuition views each thing in its concrete fullness. This kind of knowledge is knowledge of necessary truth. In it everything is substance, which is the eternal source of everything; therefore, everything is viewed under the form of eternity. Intuitive knowledge totally alters one's perspective of the world. Rather than seeing the world as a conglomeration of various substances, one sees individual essences in their relationship to God or Nature.

The preceding outline of Spinoza's epistemology, when compared with Śamkara's theory of knowledge, reveals striking similarities.

In Advaita there is a distinction between two types of knowledge: *Parā vidyā*, the higher knowledge; and *aparā vidyā*, the lower knowledge. *Mūṇḍaka Upaniṣad* clearly states that there are two kinds of knowledge. It is said: "Two kinds of knowledge must be known—that is what the knowers of Brahman tell us. They are the Higher knowledge and the lower knowledge."<sup>18</sup> *Parā vidyā*, the higher knowledge, is knowledge of the Absolute or Brahman and its content is Reality. *Aparā vidyā*, the lower knowledge, is knowledge of the phenomenal world—of objects and events of the world. These two kinds of knowledge are incommensurable. *Parā vidyā is sui generis*, and it can be attained intuitively. No other form of knowledge can either prove or disprove it—it is self-certifying.

Śamkara's *aparā vidyā* would include the first two levels of Spinoza's degrees of knowledge, viz., sense-perception or imagination and reason. Like Spinoza, Śamkara believed that sense-perception and reason cannot yield the highest knowledge. The inadequacy of reason is clearly explained in the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*.

It is stated that any skillful logician with the help of reason can establish his own point of view. However, another equally skillful logician with the help of reason can establish his own view and a third logician with the help of reason can refute the first two standpoints. There is, in Śaṅkara's opinion, no absolute certainty about truths established by reason. Both Śaṅkara and Spinoza, while admitting that the highest knowledge is beyond the powers of reason, do not reject reason as totally useless. Spinoza clearly states that reason is discursive and indirect, and it sees things under a *certain* form of eternity. However, this perspective of things *sub specie aeternitatis* is essential, even though only fully realized in intuition. Similarly, Śaṅkara repeatedly claims that reason is an important tool. It helps one understand and explain our everyday experiences. It serves as a guide in our search for new facts and helps one attain immediate knowledge, which is the highest goal of human beings. Thus, both Śaṅkara and Spinoza give reason an important place in their philosophies; both however subordinate reason to intuitive knowledge.

Furthermore, Spinoza and Śaṅkara both claim that intuitive knowledge leads to release from bondage. Spinoza maintains that each individual being, viewed as he is in himself, has a tendency, which he terms *conatus*, to persist in his own being. This consists of strivings, impulses, instincts, and so on. His concept of *conatus* is grounded in the structure of human emotions, which leads him to his views on bondage. At the very outset of Part IV, *Ethics*, he states: "The impotence of man to govern or restrain the affects I call bondage, for a man who is under their control is not his own master, but is mastered by fortune, in whose power he is, so that he is often forced to follow the worse, although he sees the better before him."<sup>19</sup> Passions keep us in bondage and give us a divided view of the reality. The more passions and desires we have, the deeper we are in bondage. The clearer our knowledge, the more rational we are—the better we understand the universe in all its relations. Thus, the goal of ethics is also the goal of epistemology. To obtain intuitive knowledge is the goal of epistemology as well as ethics. He says:

The highest virtue of the mind is to know God....., or to understand things by the third kind of knowledge....., and therefore he who knows things by this kind of know-

ledge passes to the highest human perfection, and consequently ... from this kind of knowledge arises the highest possible peace of mind.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the intuitive knowledge frees one from bondage and leads one to release, or, in Spinoza's terminology, it helps one "attain highest human perfection."

Similarly, Śaṅkara also believes that ignorance is the root cause of our bondage. Under the superimposition of names and forms, we take the phenomenal world of appearance to be real. Because of *upādhis*, the limiting adjuncts, the self identifies itself with the body or the ego, and functions as an enjoyer—subject to rebirth or bondage. This wrong identification of the self with the not-self is the root cause of our bondage. Because of ignorance, ignorance which is beginningless, the self erroneously associates itself with the body, gross as well as subtle. In this state it forgets that it is Brahman, behaves like a finite creature, desires material, transitory, objects, and is pleased when it gets them. Advaitins would agree with Spinoza that because we are aware of our desires we lead ourselves into believing that we are free. However, in reality we are not free because we do not understand the cause, or causes, of these desires, which can be traced back to ignorance. Right knowledge helps one displace this wrong identification. By overcoming ignorance, by intuitive knowledge, one can end one's karmic chain and attain *mokṣa*. For Śaṅkara, like Spinoza, knowledge is the ultimate goal of human endeavour. To become what we are is our ultimate goal. Śaṅkara prescribes a mental-spiritual discipline of *jñāna-yoga* which can help one attain the ultimate goal. The study of Vedānta helps one conquer ignorance. However, the study of Vedānta is of no help if the mind is not receptive to the truth. Only repeated meditation on the truths, accepted and understood by listening to the teacher, can help one remove wrong beliefs. He realizes that the Self is Reality—*tat tvam asi*, that all is Brahman : Brahman is one.

Though both Śaṅkara and Spinoza believe that intuitive knowledge leads to release from bondage, however, they give somewhat different answers to the question as to what exactly happens when one attains release from bondage. Spinoza maintains that from the third kind of knowledge "arises the highest possible mental

acquiescence.”<sup>21</sup> And a little later he adds that in intuitive glance, “All things speak of God, or are seen only as they exist in God, all passions that relate only to things finite and transient are quelled and every other emotion is absorbed in that ‘intellectual love’ which is only another aspect of the intuitive knowledge of God.”<sup>22</sup> This highest stage of freedom, which is as well the highest stage of knowledge, Spinoza terms *amor intellectualis dei* or the intellectual love of God. This is the supreme emotion and it subdues all lower passions which are the cause of bondage. Realization of this ultimate end, for Spinoza, implies freedom from the feelings of excitement and depression which respectively accompany the fulfillment and frustration of desires. Our highest good consists in the intellectual love of God : our knowledge of God as attainment of our eternity, and so in the final analysis, God’s knowledge of us as in Him which is our salvation or “freedom from bondage”.

Śaṅkara would agree with Spinoza that from intuitive knowledge or *parā vidyā* arises “the highest possible mental acquiescence” or *mokṣa*. In its negative sense, it implies freedom from *karma* (actions which bind us to the world) and freedom from *saṁsāra* (the cycle of births and deaths in the world). However, “freedom from” is not something that we aspire to attain and therefore it becomes a state of utter blankness. Thus, *mokṣa* for Advaitins, implies much more than “freedom from karma”. In its positive sense, *mokṣa*, “means the attaining to a state of ‘at-one-ment’ with the depth and quiescence of Reality and with the power of creative becoming. Spiritual freedom means the full realization of the potentialities of man as a spiritual being. It means the attaining of insight into oneself; it means self knowledge and joy of being.”

Thus, both Spinoza and Śaṅkara maintain that 1) release is the highest goal of human endeavour, and 2) it is intuitive knowledge which helps one attain this highest goal. However, for Śaṅkara, when once *parā vidyā*, i.e., the higher knowledge is obtained, all other modes of knowledge are *aparā vidyā*. When once Brahman is realized, all other orders of knowledge are seen merely as an appearance. For Spinoza, on the other hand, when once the intuitive knowledge is attained, all other orders of knowledge are seen not as merely an appearance but rather, the person with the



intuitive knowledge is able to interpret the universe in its proper perspective; he becomes aware of the ontological status of the universe—that all individual things exist only as an attribute of God and participate in its eternal essence.

In the foregoing analysis, I have tried to identify and analyze important similarities as well as differences in the philosophies of Spinoza and Śamkara. As one would expect with two philosophers who come, as I indicated earlier, from such different times and cultures, it is difficult to reach a conclusive judgment on the similarities of their philosophies. Whether a difference in terminology is just that, a matter of words, or indicates a deeper underlying difference of content, can be amazingly difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, let me suggest the following points of difference and similarity.

Spinoza attributes to the world a real but dependent existence. The modes of substance cannot exist without the substance; nevertheless, they really do exist. To understand substance is to understand its attributes and modes. There is, in Spinoza's system, a necessary relation between substance and its modes which seems to be lacking in Śamkara. Brahman is unqualified, indeterminate, in a way Spinoza's substance is not, and things in the world are not determined of necessity by Brahman's nature since Brahman has no nature.

The intuitive knowledge of God which Spinoza seeks is a way to understand the world as it really is. It is not a flight from the material world, but a celebration of its essential nature and oneness. The pursuit of Brahman, on the other hand, implies repudiation of this world : it is the realization that Brahman is the only reality; the world is merely an appearance and the *jīva* and Brahman are non-different.

Keeping these differences in mind, we will next consider two questions raised in the introduction of this paper. The first is, specifically, does the concept of substance in Spinoza have the same ontological import as that of Brahman in Śamkara ? The answer is yes. Spinoza's substance and Śamkara's Brahman are essentially

the same in that both exist in their own right, are real, and do not require anything else in order to exist. The truths conveyed are the same although the methodology varies. Both have the same starting points and cover the same area of ontological inquiry irrespective of their different methods, and the difference in methodology loses much of its significance, when we consider the identity of truths conveyed by them and the mode of realizing these truths.

The second question is, do substance and Brahman play essentially the same role in their respective philosophies? Again the answer is yes. Both Spinoza and Śaṅkara emphasize the limitations of human existence and the necessity of freedom therefrom. Both believe that lack of knowledge is the cause of human suffering and the resolution of suffering is through the acquisition of knowledge of the Real. In Spinoza, it is "the intellectual love of God," God's knowledge of us as in Him, which is the highest human perfection. In Śaṅkara, it is *mokṣa*: the realization of one's potentialities as a spiritual being; the realization that all is Brahman. Brahman is one. Thus, both God and Brahman are the ultimate goal of human endeavour.

Thus, we can safely conclude that Spinoza's substance and Śaṅkara's Brahman are the same in a strong sense of "sameness." In talking about substance and Brahman each, respectively, is talking about the only existent thing, the totality of all that truly exists, the one ultimately existent thing. If substance and Brahman are not the same, in a sense of "same" that is stronger than any of the similarities mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the same in the sense of being one and the same thing, they are certainly similar in senses one and four. So nearly as I can conclude they have identical essences and perform identical functions.

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## NOTES

1. Some of the questions dealt with in this paper were originally raised in a paper co-authored by Bina Gupta and William Wilcox, "Are All Names of the Absolute Synonymous?" *Philosophy East and West*, forthcoming.
2. R. H. M. Elwes, editor and translator, *The Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 45.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid* p. 55
5. John Wild, editor and translator, *Spinoza Selections* (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), p. 122.
6. Fredrick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. IV (New York : Image Books, 1963), p. 228.
7. Elwes, p. 45.
8. *Ibid.*
9. John Wild, p. 121.
10. V. M. Apte, translator and editor, *Brahma-Sūtra Shāṅkara-Bhāṣhya* (Bombay : Popular Book Depot, 1960), p. 1.
11. Swami Nikhilananda, editor and translator, *The Upanishads* (New York : Harper Torchbooks, 1963), p. 200.
12. Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu : East-West Center Press, 1968), p. 10.
13. John Wild, p. 126.
14. Paul Deussen, *The System of the Vedānta* (New York : Dover Publications 1973), p. 456.
15. Apte, p. 333.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Elwes, p. 113.
18. Swami Nikhilananda, p. 109.
19. Johan Wild, p. 282.
20. *Ibid.*, pp.386-87.
21. Elwes, p. 261.
22. Y. Masih, *A Critical History of Modern Philosophy* (Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), p. 84.

REVIEWS

1. Some of the questions dealt with in this report were originally raised in a paper submitted by Miss Cooper and William Wilson, "The All Nations of the Atlantic Provinces," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Canada*, 1911, p. 11.
2. Dr. H. M. Cooper, editor and translator, *The First Nations of America in the Atlantic Provinces*, Toronto, 1911, p. 11.
3. Ibid., p. 11.
4. Ibid., p. 11.
5. *The First Nations of America in the Atlantic Provinces*, Toronto, 1911, p. 11.
6. *The First Nations of America in the Atlantic Provinces*, Toronto, 1911, p. 11.
7. *The First Nations of America in the Atlantic Provinces*, Toronto, 1911, p. 11.
8. *The First Nations of America in the Atlantic Provinces*, Toronto, 1911, p. 11.
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20. *The First Nations of America in the Atlantic Provinces*, Toronto, 1911, p. 11.
21. *The First Nations of America in the Atlantic Provinces*, Toronto, 1911, p. 11.
22. *The First Nations of America in the Atlantic Provinces*, Toronto, 1911, p. 11.