

ŚAṂKARA'S NOTION OF SĀKṢIN : ITS ANTICIPATIONS IN UPANIṢADS AND GAUḌAPĀDA

Vedānta is the most important philosophical school of Indian thought. Vedāntic texts have been the subject of numerous commentaries which have given rise to seven principal schools of Vedānta. Advaita Vedānta is the non-dualistic system of Vedānta expounded primarily by Śaṁkara (ca. 788-820). It has been, and continues to be, the most widely-accepted system of thought among philosophers in India, and it is one of the most challenging and provocative philosophical achievements to be found in the East or the West.

In recent times a great deal of work has been done on many facets of Advaita philosophy, but relatively little attention has been paid to its epistemology. Professor Eliot Deutsch points out that "except in the later phases of the tradition, and even here to a limited extent, ...there is little awareness of epistemology as a distinct philosophical discipline."¹ One possible explanation for this phenomenon of philosophic issues is the Advaitic taxonomy. Advaita does not treat epistemological issues separately but rather interweaves them with metaphysical considerations.

The goal of Advaita Vedānta is to show the ultimate non-reality of all distinctions; reality is not constituted of parts. Advaita is not so much a theory of monism as it is one of non-dualism. The term "advaita" etymologically means non-dualism. Identity is not so much asserted as that distinction is denied. The "oneness" that Advaita upholds, does not require variety and multiplicity in order to be affirmed. Identity exists as an element in the system of presuppositions rather than being explicitly by these presuppositions. It is the background against which all the presuppositions have a use. What distinguishes pre-Śaṁkara non-dualistic Vedānta and Śaṁkara's non-dualistic Vedānta is the very utilization of this negative approach. Every proposition, by presupposing this background, implicitly asserts the identity which is a portion

of that background. All claims of distinction have meaning only against the background of that recognition of identity. A philosopher's job is to peel away the layers of apparent distinctions which have accrued rather than to directly establish the identity. Philosophy is only a means of approaching reality. It is the road that takes one to its goal but never itself enters the goal thereby becoming a part of that reality.

Brahman, the ultimate reality, is of the nature of consciousness. Brahman is the only reality that there is, one only without a second, non-dual. It is the source of whatever could appear in consciousness, a single undifferentiated whole. To borrow from Aristotle's metaphysics, it is "impassable." It is impervious to any ascription that might be imposed on it. It is a whole which transcends any efforts to describe it, in so much as any effort to characterize it as "this" or "that" denies its essentially infinite nature. Accordingly, any effort to talk about Brahman, even for that matter to think about it, is to undertake the impossible. Thinking and talking presuppose description, and description is inherently limiting.

The problem is of undertaking a journey toward a goal which is completely transcendent. How can a finite, imperfect, limited being achieve identity with Brahman where all subject/object distinction is obliterated? Since its non-duality seems inconsistent with the plurality of empirical existence, what is the status of this duality? The task is to elucidate reality as the essence inherent in all appearances. It not only transcends the world of appearance but is present in all of that appearance. Transcendence and immanence are not incompatible; they are two complementary facets of the same situation. If the empirically given world had a reality of its own, then one could indeed speak of Brahman's transcendence, as contrasted with its immanence within empiricity. Only Brahman exists and therefore it is transcendent. However, it remains the case that when one strips away the cloak of the empirically given, one is left only with Brahman; the reality of the empirically given world.

The problem is to explain how that which is real and that which is an appearance become interrelated, and hence confused. How do we retrace the path which leads to this confusion,

and then away from this confusion, when both paths take us through the realm of that which is only apparent. From an ontological point of view, this movement, this process, this journey never did and never could occur. Nevertheless, the appearance of the movement, at least to those who seem to have moved, is a fact about them. This interrelationship, that between the real and the apparent, gives rise to two different but complementary, approaches to the absolute. To be an object in the world is to be a subject presented with other objects. Both nevertheless have the same essential being, and accordingly can only be understood as different aspects of that reality. There appears to be a difference, there is a phenomenal difference, but each is of the same essence, the only reality. They are brought together, have intercourse with each other, through Brahman, and Brahman is reached by understanding that which is essential to both the knower and that which is known.

The initial involvement of the real in what is apparently real and a subsequent withdrawal or retracing of the real from the apparent are addressed by the Advaitins as a problem in an epistemological context. From the noetic perspective, being in the world is confrontation between what is present as an object and that to which it is thus present. These are the objective and the subjective poles of a knowledge relation. Even though appearing as two different sorts of entities with natures apparently opposed to each other, like light and darkness, they are essentially one and the same reality. The platform on which the two meet and make one relevant to the other is reality in the ultimate sense (*Brahman*). That reality is sought by the respective analysis of the knower and the known. The knower (*ātman*) and the reality to be known (*Brahman*) coalesce into one, i.e., *ātman* is *brahman*. The epistemological inquiry thus takes the form of an investigation into the nature of the ground on which all duality, including the duality of the knower and the known, is based.

Investigation of this apparent duality, and of the reality upon which it is founded involves us in two separate activities. Initially we must understand the world of objects, the world of phenomena, and that which generates, their status as objects. Additionally, we need to understand what it is to be a subject,

a knower. We need an analysis not only of what it is to be a knower, but also what is involved in knowing. What is it that knows? What is it that makes this knower both 'this' and a knower? How do we distinguish it from both the object that it knows, and more important, from the object that another knower knows? An Advaitin of course tries to answer these questions. As part of the effort to completely explicate the process of knowing, it puts forth the concept of *sākṣin*.²

What or who is "*sākṣin*"? It is notorious that there are words, and the underlying concepts, which are difficult to translate from one language to another. In many cases, the translation might require an entire book in order to fully explicate the meaning. The term "*sākṣin*" etymologically means "witness" or "a disinterested observer." It signifies seeing without being the agent of the act under consideration. I have translated the word "*sākṣin*" as "witness", but it must be understood that *sākṣin* refers to a witness in the sense of the phenomenologically pure observer; the observer who observes without bringing anything to the observation. Its interests are not involved in what occurs. Witness in Advaita is intelligent but indifferent or detached. Its indifference or detachment is really its refusal to acknowledge the illusory distinctions of names and forms which fragment reality.

Sākṣin, for Advaitins, is eternal, non-dual, and remains unchanged. While consciousness as Brahman is eternal and is non-different from Brahman, it also persists in empirical-practical experiences. Pure consciousness, on account of nescience, appears as witness.

For Advaitins, *Sākṣin* helps reveal at once the ground of the empirical world that is experienced as well as the ground of the notion of the "I" It bridges the gap between the real and the empirical; or, better yet, provides the link between the empirical and the real.

...on the one hand, *sākṣin* which participates in the process of empirical activity (*vyavahārāṅgatva*) cognitive or otherwise, is not taken as completely *transcendent* in character. On the other hand, *sākṣin* need not exhaust itself within the confines of the empirical individual (*jīva*). In approaching the concept of *sākṣin*, its *jīva*-transcending character comes first into consideration. The primary point of departure in the question of *sākṣin* is the empirical

individual, who not only cognizes but also feels and enjoys.³

Sākṣin, in other words, mediates the polarity of the real and the apparent, because it participates in the empirical individual. However, it is more fundamental than the merely empirical. It is a form apprehension, which is direct, nonrelational, non-propositional, and non-evaluative, both in cognitive and practical affairs. It is the basis of all knowledge:

it is wrong to speak of *sakṣin* as knowable, for it is the element of awareness in all knowing; and to assume that it is knowable would be to imply another knowing element—a process which leads to the fallacy of infinite regress. But the *sākṣin* does not therefore remain unrealized, for being self-luminous, by its very nature, it does not require to be made known at all. Its presence is necessarily equivalent to its revelation and it is therefore never missed [as] the pure element of awareness in all knowing.⁴

Sākṣin as the principle of revelation is not different from the self-luminous *ātman*. Standing behind all objects of knowledge, it furnishes illumination for all that which is known, making that knowledge possible. Accordingly, *sākṣin* carries with it a kind of accessibility which is not available to either Brahman or *ātman*. It is completely independent, existing in its own right and not in relationship to anything else; it is seamless, eternal existence, the ground of our understanding of 'I', and the ultimate reality which the "I" names. It is the basic Advaita Vedānta epistemological principle; the Advaitin's solution to the problems of epistemology. In the Advaita system, the concept of the witness-consciousness (*sākṣin*) is the single most important postulate of the principle of revelation operative in experience, cognitive and noncognitive alike.

The source of *sākṣin* as a philosophical concept is obscure.⁵ It is virtually nonexistent in the Upaniṣads, although compounds, such as *sarvasākṣin*⁶ and *nityasākṣin*⁷ do occur. It is difficult to assign any precise referent to these. They could be construed as referring to Brahman, *sakṣin*, or even *Īśvara*. There is too little evidence to make an informed decision. These scattered references, however, can undoubtedly be construed as anticipating the later systematic development of this concept.

Any scholar working on Advaita is well aware that although the Upaniṣads are not systematic philosophical treatises; they, nevertheless, without any doubt remain the foundations on which rest the entire edifice of Advaita ontology and epistemology. Almost every later theoretic development of Advaita of Śaṅkara can with some propriety be looked upon as exegesis of some fragmentary, and admittedly obscure, Upaniṣadic passage. The important Advaitic concept of *sākṣin* provides an excellent example of such an exegesis.

My goal in this paper is to trace the evolution and growth and the early crystallizations of the epistemological ideas associated with this notion in some major Upaniṣads. I shall analyse some of the key terms and passages that foreshadow this important notion in some major Upaniṣads. These Upaniṣads echo the same point in different ways; that which lies beyond the plurality of names and forms, i.e., the self is not accessible through empirical modes of knowing.

If the question should arise as to why I am concerned only with the Upaniṣads, the reply is that Upaniṣadic texts were Śaṅkara's concern. I am not so much interested in the historical development as I am in the conceptual development of the notion of *sākṣin*. I believe that I can adequately explicate the conceptual development of *sākṣin* in Advaita without concerning myself with other literatures, such as *Mahabhārata* and *Sāṃkhya-Kārikās*; the literatures necessary for an historical analysis of this notion. I am appealing to the Upaniṣads because Śaṅkara found them to be authoritative, and he did not believe that he needed any other foundation for his analysis.

Although the term "*sākṣin*" does not occur in the early Upaniṣads, the epistemological ideas associated with this term are very clearly presented and developed in the Upaniṣads. For example, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BU) contains the most detailed analysis of knowing and its presuppositions, *draṣṭā* or *vijñātā*⁸, *antaryāmi*,⁹ *ātma-jyoti*,¹⁰ or *svayamjyoti*¹¹ are some of the concepts that have been analyzed in detail in this Upaniṣad. These terms anticipate the later notion of *sākṣin*. Therefore, the primary focus of my investigation will be BU.

Whenever the term "*sākṣin*" appears in the Upaniṣada, it appears as an alternate designation for the self, especially when viewed in an epistemological context. The definition of the self is one of the central of the Upaniṣads, and BU is no exception to it. Among the Upaniṣadic teachers, Yājñavalkya¹² is well known for his instructions regarding the knowledge of the self. In the course of discoursing with his wife, Maitreyi, Yājñavalkya informs her that the self is the basis of all knowledge. It is different from the objects that are known. Therefore, it cannot be known in the manner in which the objects are known: "You cannot see the seer of seeing, you cannot hear the hearer of hearing, you cannot think the thinker of thinking, you cannot understand the understander of understanding (*na dr̥ṣṭer draṣṭāraṃ paśyeh na śruteh śrōtāraṃ śṛṇuyāḥ, na mater mantāraṃ manvīthāḥ, na vijñāter vijñātāraṃvijñāniyāḥ*)."¹³ This is the best evidence for a forerunner of *sākṣin* in the BU for Yājñavalkya. The self is the ultimate subject that can never be made an object of knowledge. That is why it can only be described as "*neti*", "*neti*" ("not this," "not this"). It is not an exaggeration to say that this passage is an anticipation of the later conception that the cognitive functions are apperceived by the seer which in itself is not an object of more ultimate awareness. Again the passage: "He entered in here, even to the finger-nail tips, as razor would be hidden in a razor case, or fire in a fireholder. Him they see not..."¹⁴ when translated into the epistemological terms states that the self is not knowable by any empirical means of knowledge.

The *Kena* Upaniṣad makes the same point when it states that the self is other than the known and the unknown.¹⁵ The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (TU)¹⁶ declares that words and mind turn back, not being able to attain it. Words and thought are applicable in the realm of names and forms where plurality is manifested; they are simply pointers and in that sense useful. The self is to be comprehended as "It is."

This very same self is said to be the self of the world. In response to the question about the inner controller (*antaryamī*) of the world, Yājñavalkya in BU states that the principle which lies behind the everything, which controls everything from within is the inner controller, and this inner controller is the immortal

self: "He is never seen but is the seer, he is never heard but is the hearer. He is never perceived, but is the perceiver. He is never thought but is the thinker. There is no other seer but he, there is no other hearer but he, there is no other perceiver but he, there is no other thinker but he. He is your self, the inner controller, the immortal (*adr̥ṣto draṣṭā aśrutaḥ śrotā, amato mantā, avijnata vijnata nanyo'to'sti dr̥ṣta, nanyo'to'sti śrota, nanyo'to'sti manta, nanyo'to'sti vijñātā: esa ta ātmantaryāmy amṛtaḥ: ato'nyadārtam*).¹⁷

The self of the Upanisads is never objectified, since it is not an object of any empirical knowledge. The "I" is an ascription; since all characters are objects of the self, it is characterless. The products of ignorance are agency, enjoyment, and empiricity,¹⁸ what is essentially Brahman is self. At the level of pure self¹⁹, individuality is indistinguishable. The stuff of the sleeping self is *vijñānamaya*, pure consciousness.²⁰ Individuality persists even though the specifics, say of the empirical self, are discarded and the vital airs are withdrawn. The function of seeing is given up by the sleeper,²¹ who is untainted and unrelated, and is as pure as water. Because the all-knower cannot be known by something else, in can be defined as not knowing anything. The essence of all being is the unconditionally immediate self.²² The seer of seeing is not seen²³ and the indwelling essence of the individual is the self.²⁴

Another very important and well-known section of BU, which anticipates the notion of *saksin* discusses the self as its own light: "The self, indeed, is his light", said he, 'for with the self, indeed, as the light, one sits, moves about, does one's work and returns (...*ātmaivāsyā jyotirbhavati, ātmanaivāyam jyotiḥgāste, palyayate, karma kurute, vipalyeti iti*)."²⁵ This sought after "light" is more basic than the physical light which makes for the perception of physical objects. It is significant to note that the above reply is given in response to the question "what light does a person here have?" In the waking state a person moves with help of various lights that are outside his/her body. But what serves as a light for a person in dreams and in deep sleep? one cannot see dream objects without light. From deep sleep, again, one awakes with the remembrance that one slept happily and knew nothing; this shows that some kind of light functions in

deep as well. Therefore, Janaka asked about the light which serves a person when he is asleep. Yājñavalkya answers that the self is the light that serves a person in all the states: waking, dreaming, and the dreamless sleep. Light, in this context, does not simply signify consciousness and its conditions in an abstract sense, but that which helps one to sit, walk about, work, and return.

Janaka further asks: "Which [among the sense-organs] is the self?"²⁶ Yājñavalkya replies "The intellect performs the function of thinking. However, the self assuming the likeness of the intellect creates the appearance of thinking."²⁷ Śaṅkara in his commentary on BU explains why such a confusion occurs: "the intellect being transparent and next to the self, easily catches the reflection of the intelligence of the self."²⁸

To overcome this problem, a kind of physico-psychological method is used that progressively unfolds the essence of *ātman*. In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (CU), Indra and Virocana approach Prajāpati for knowledge of the immortal self.²⁹ Initially, Prajāpati informs them that the true self is nothing but the self seen in a reflection. This answer satisfies Virocana. Indra, not satisfied with Prajāpati's explanation returns to him for further explanation. Prajāpati tells Indra that the self is experienced in the deep sleep; "When a person is asleep with senses withdrawn, [when one] is serene, and sees no dream—that is the self. This is immortal, this is Brahman."³⁰ Indra is not satisfied with this answer either because this explanation suggests that when everything is withdrawn, and when only unconsciousness remains, that is the self. Indra returns to Prajāpati again and lives with him for five years, and finally Prajāpati reveals to Indra the true nature of the self—the self is immortal, the body is destructible; it is the abode of the immortal self.³¹ The real self continues in all states. This passage stresses the continuity of the real self. The self is progressively identified with the bodily self, the dreaming self, and self the dreamless sleep, until finally it is declared to be that which is not affected by the changing modes. It is present in all three states.

Again, the description of self as self-luminous (*svayamjyoti*) in BU anticipates the theory of sākṣin, where the ultimacy of

the self is again explicated by indicating that the seer is unseen and that the knower cannot be known. The sun illuminates objects in waking life. Since the sun does not shine in our sleep, and yet objects are revealed, there must be another source of illumination. It is said: "When he goes to sleep he takes along the material of this allembicing world, himself tears it apart, himself builds it up; he sleeps (dreams) by his own brightness, by his own light. In that state the person becomes self-illuminated (*sa yatra praspapiti, asya lokasya sarvāvato māttram apādāya, svayam vihatya, svayam nirmayā, svena bhāṣā, svena jyotiṣa praspapiti; atrāyām puruṣaḥ svayanjyotirbhavati*)³² In the waking state, the subject is aware of the subject-object distinction. While dreaming, subject is only aware of the dream objects; the waking individual himself become both the subject and the objects so to speak.

Since the objects revealed are similar it follows that, even in the waking state, there must be a single source of illumination. This illumination, existing where other sources do not, or cannot exist, can only be from the self itself. As with knowing and seeing, just so is self, while illuminating everything not itself illumined. The dreaming self forsakes everything else while enjoying objects, bliss and pain. The dream world, being his own creation, is lighted by nothing other than the Self. He himself becomes the light and accordingly must shine in its own light. The self is continuous in all three states, and just as a large fish extends over both the banks of a river and cannot be identified with either bank or the river,³³ so the self is not identical with any of the three states. In both dreaming and waking stages, duality is present. In deep sleep, however, there is a lack of relatedness which is bliss (*samprasanna*). The ultimate self, being of the nature of consciousness itself, has no self-consciousness; it is without a second.³⁴ The ultimate consciousness being intrinsically unrelated has its self-luminosity made manifest only in relation to an object. The self-luminosity of the ultimate self, lacking an object as in deep sleep, is not evident.³⁵ It is pure consciousness, lacking anything of which it is conscious. The seeing of the seer, being its own intrinsic nature, never ceases, even in deep sleep where there is nothing to be seen. It cannot be distinguished from not seeing, since there is no other thing to be seen or not seen. Seeing can

be empirically realized only when an other is posited by ignorance. There can be no seeing when everything becomes the self and there is nothing to be seen. The notion of self, remaining the same in all three states being the self-effulgent light in them, clearly anticipates the later notion of witness-consciousness.

One of the key Upaniṣadic passages that is cited by the later Advaitins³⁶ occurs in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BU). The question is raised about “what directly and manifestly is the Brahman?” Then such a Brahman is defined (or rather left undefined). It is said; Brahman is direct and immediate (*yat sākṣād aparokṣād brahma*).³⁷ In this text, Brahman is described as the essence of all that there is. Brahman in this context is not *sakṣin* in the technical sense, or even for that matter in a non-technical sense, but what is rather an undifferentiated and undifferentiable principle which can signify indifferently either *sākṣin* or Brahman.

What is stated here is obvious. The self is what continues in the three states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep and is therefore not identical with any of them. This is a clear description of the notion of self as witness standing behind everything that is known-known discursively in wakeful life, known dreamingly in dreams, and known as unknown in deep sleep-shining forth in its own light revealing eternally and continuously.³⁸

The three states of the self discussed above, become the focus of investigation in some major Upaniṣads. It is one of the common methods adopted in the Upaniṣads for arriving at the knowledge of the self. For example, the entire *Māndūkya Upaniṣad* (MAU) is devoted to a discussion of these three states of the self. It contains one of the most succinct and systematic treatments of this method. At the outset, this Upaniṣad identifies the sound *aum* with all-that-there-is. *Aum* is what was, what is and what will be. It signifies a correlation between microcosmos and the macrocosmos. It is also what is beyond time; the unmanifest basis of the manifest universe. *Aum* stands for Brahman; it is the most affective sound symbol of Brahman. The word “*aum*” consists of three letters; a, u, m which correspond to three forms in which the self appears in the states of waking, dreaming, and the dreamless sleep respectively. The knowledge of Brahman

encompasses not only the three states, but also the fourth turiya, the undifferentiated state of pure of consciousness, which is beyond the changing and conditional, phenomenal modes of existence.

The three states of the self are known as: *vis̥va*, *taijasa*, and *prajñā*.³⁹ *Vis̥va* is the waking self. It cognizes the external objects. It has seven limbs⁴⁰ and nineteen mouths.⁴¹ Since in this state the self is in contact with the external objects, its experiences are gross. The waking self is the first part (*pāda*)⁴² of Brahman. *Taijasa*, the dreaming self is the second part, in which the mind enjoys impressions imprinted upon the mind during the waking experience which are then presented as if real. In this state, the self is "internally conscious", it experiences subtle objects created out of the mental impressions. This state is contradicted by waking experiences. Dream-objects, irrespective of how real they might appear in one's dreams, disappear upon waking up. This concept is not treated consistently throughout the history of Vedānta, the latter tradition explaining them as simply products of *avidyā*. The third part, *prajñā*, is a state of dreamless sleep during which the mind and the senses are quiescent. Consequently, there is a cessation of normal consciousness. Subject-object distinction no longer exists, nor a distinction among objects. There are no desires, no dreams. There is no experience of pleasure and pain etc. It is an entirely undifferentiated state. There is a sense of bliss, because there is a temporary union between the Absolute and the embodied self. It is a state in which the knowing self, while still capable of knowing does not know anything. This self still has the capability of knowing all objects and therefore is called *prajñā*; "It is not a state of consciousness in the ordinary sense; but it is not a state of blank or absolute consciousness either, for some sort of awareness is associated with it. It is not, however, 'the objectless knowing subject that endures in it...; for along with the object, the subject also as such disappears then. It is rather a state of non-reflective awareness, if we may so term it."⁴³

The phenomenon of deep sleep is especially significant since in it all mental activities are suspended, and the consciousness of individuality is absent. It points to the fact that knowledge of duality is only a conditional and temporary feature of finite lives. From deep sleep, one awakes and recalls that he slept

happily and remembered nothing. In this state distinctions are not overcome. The self being hidden by a kind of undifferentiated darkness absorbs duality and multiplicity. Deep sleep demonstrates that something permanent, unchanging, and foundational to all experiences must be present even when the consciousness of external objects is not present. This state is different from *turiyā*, the state of release, which is the underlying substratum of the triple states of waking, dreaming, and the dreamless sleep.

This tri-partite distinction by means of which the self-successively occupies, yet remains independent of; the three states is elaborated by Gaudapāda.⁴⁴ “*Viśva* is he who cognizes in the right eye, *Taijasa* is he who cognizes in the mind within and *Prajñā* is he who constitutes *Akāśa* in the heart. Thus, one *ātman* is conceived as threefold in the (one) body.”⁴⁵ What we have are three states of embodiment of the self that remain pure, unrelated, and with a oneness, which is confirmed by the judgment, “I am he.” *Viśva*, *taijasa*, and *prajñā* are all self, but only as embodied. The *viśva* can not only perceive objects, it can also approach these objects mentally, by remembering, imagining, or dreaming about them. The dreaming self is the same self is the waking self. When consciousness rests in itself, all imagery ceases, and the self is *prajñā*. The self exists although all mental processes stop, only the potentiality or vital airs persists. The undifferentiated nature of the self is clearest in this state. The fact that the *prajñā* self reawakens, and can say “I am he”, proves that even if in the sense of potentiality, *prajñā* had been embodied. It is only when there is not even potentially the change of embodiment that *prajñā* passes into the real, unconditional nature of the self, *turiyā*. The “I” reemerges after deep sleep, it is not recreated. The self, in itself *turiyā*, is embodied in different forms or states.

A determination of what characterizes *viśva* and *taijasa* is necessary, so that we are able to ascertain the true nature of *turiyā*. Keeping this in view, Gaudapāda states; “*Viśva* and *taijasa* are conditioned by cause and effect.”⁴⁶ Since the effect actualizes only when certain conditions are fulfilled, and at other times it remains potentially contained in the cause, *viśva* and *taijasa* are governed by causality; being conditioned by both non-apprehension and misapprehension. Ignorance, the state of not knowing, is

the substance of causal potentiality. Its actualization is knowing otherwise, to be positively mistaken.

Gauḍapāda further notes; “*prajñā* does not know anything of the self or the non-self, nor truth nor untruth. But *turīya* is ever-existent and ever all-seeing.”⁴⁷ *Prajñā* is conditioned by cause alone. Unlike *visva* and *taijasa*, *prajñā* does not comprehend itself or others. It therefore is in a state of not knowing, covered by undifferentiated darkness. *Turīya*, on the other hand, is not conditioned by cause and effect. It is effulgent and all-pervasive source of objects. It is beyond ignorance. It is *sarvadṛk* (the seer of everything that there is) as well as its witness. It exists in all beings during the waking and the dreaming states, and is called the seer of everything.⁴⁸ There is nothing beside *turīya*. Therefore, it is never associated with the causal condition that may result from non-apprehension of reality. Accordingly, the non-apprehension and mis-apprehension of reality are not possible in *turīya*.

At this juncture, Gauḍapāda reminds his readers that although non-perception of duality is common to both *prajñā* and *turīya*, only *prajñā* is conditioned by cause, because *prajñā* is sleep and consists in the non-apprehension of reality, and gives rise to the cognitions of variety and multiplicity. It is the causal state that immediately precedes the state of waking up. *Turīya*, on the other hand, is non-dual witness and by nature pure consciousness itself. Therefore, it is said that *turīya* is not governed by the conditions of cause and effect.⁴⁹ In the one case, the undifferentiated darkness absorbs duality while still containing it; while in the other there is not even the potentiality of duality, and no darkness. These are different states. The dormant darkness (*bijanidrā*) is present in *prajñā*, but it does not, cannot, affect *turīya*.

Prajñā also anticipates the later notion of *saksin*. *Prajñā* consciousness is the self as unified; distinctions are not overcome in this state but rather are present in an undifferentiated state. The senses do not function in sleep and therefore the “I” as explicit awareness is absent. The *jīva* is said to be the perceiver of *avidyā* in this context; the cause of the manifold world of appearances. “The self in this state is not aware of itself, or of others, and therefore shrouded by undifferentiated darkness

in which duality is absorbed.... But it is only the self in the third stage that is epistemologically significant as containing the potentiality for a cognitive relation characteristic of wakefulness."⁵⁰

Several other Upaniṣads argue along the same lines. For example, *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (KU)⁵¹ makes a clear distinction between the self which is associated with the body, the senses, the mind, and the self which is pure and not associated with either the body or the mind or the sense. The first is empirical, unlike the changing consciousness, the pure self. It is Brahman, beyond *buddhi*, the witness of all, *sarvasākṣī*. But, how can *sākṣin* be equated with supreme reality, as it is here, and still be relegated to the empirical *bhokta*? *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* provides the following answer; Brahman is *sarvasākṣi* or *sarvadṛk* only to the extent that its nature as seer is not affected when there is nothing to see; *sākṣin*, on the other hand, is the witness of everything that appears, it is literally a seer.⁵² This also explains seemingly contradictory claims that pure consciousness (*cit*) cannot be known as an object of mediate knowledge, yet it is known as involved in every act of knowing. The absolute self does not possess enjoyership; its enjoyership is created by the limiting adjuncts, e.g., intellect. Another Upaniṣad reiterates the same point, when it states that "The absolute self thinks as it were, and shakes as it were, and so on."⁵³ Passages such as "when there is duality, as it were..."⁵⁴ reinforce the idea that the knowledge takes place in the phenomenal world, and therefore is not applicable to *ātman*.

Prasṅga Upaniṣad (PU) argues in the same vein in its argument for the existence of the self. The assertion that there is consciousness is a necessary condition for the assertion that there are things. To say that there are things, and yet no consciousness is to contradict yourself. The experientially invariable can only be isolated against the background of the invariable. Without consciousness, there can be no objects. Such a consciousness is never absent, not even in deep sleep.

This analysis of the notion of *prañā*, and the relationship among the three states raises a number of questions. What role, if any, does the *prañā* play during dreaming, or, for that matter, during waking stage? Is *prañā* different in different individuals?

Or, is there one *prañā* in all individuals? Equation of *sākṣin* with God only confuses the issue further.⁵⁵ We have a principle associated with body, the experiencer of pleasure and pain; and on the other hand, pure consciousness, the observer of both the enjoyer and the enjoyed. It witnesses objects, it does not enjoy them. It is not an exaggeration to say that we may have here in an obscure form an anticipation of *Īśvara-Sākṣin* (God-defining-consciousness), a later doctrine.⁵⁶

In his writings, Śaṅkara seeks to give a systematic, and rationalistic, account of the theory of the self that he largely takes from the Upaniṣads. The whole notion of selfhood remains unchanged from that of the Upaniṣads, while he endeavors to flesh out a theory of *avidyā* sufficient to unify the diverse and at times inconsistent Upaniṣadic teachings. Reflecting the inconsistencies of the Upaniṣads, he sometimes speaks of pure consciousness as Brahman, and at other times as the witness-self, even at other times as *Īśvara*. In his discussion of the self and its functioning, Śaṅkara is perfectly clear as to his conception of the real nature of the self. However, he is not so clear, when he discusses the immanent self of empirical experience. Brahman, *Īśvara*, *sākṣin*, and even *ātman* appear to be synonymous in many contexts and the distinct nuances of these terms are not clearly explicated.

These ambiguities have given rise to a number of confusions for modern interpreters of Advaita Vedānta. For example, Tara Chatterjee, in her article on the notion of *sākṣin* notes; "Advaita Vedānta combines in the concept of *sākṣin*, two aspects. As described in the Upaniṣads it is absolutely passive, and as presented by Śaṅkara, it is [a] never-to-be objectified principle of awareness present in every individual."⁵⁷ While Dr. Chatterjee is to be commended for distinguishing between the two aspects of the *sākṣin* notion-passivity and non-objectivity-she misattributes the passivity aspect to the Upaniṣads and non-objectivity to Śaṅkara. In point of fact, the reverse is the case. It is indeed true that Advaita Vedānta combines in the theory of *sākṣin* the two senses outlined in her paper. However, the passivity of *sākṣin* is not a motif in the Upaniṣads. Not surprisingly, she does not, because she cannot, provide any textual references from the Upaniṣads to support her claim. First, as pointed out elsewhere in this

paper, the theory of *sākṣin* is not clearly articulated in the Upaniṣads. The term "*sākṣin*" does not occur there, although some of the elements embodied in the Advaita notion of *sākṣin*, e.g. the self as the ultimate subject, do occur. These elements, however, have not congealed in a single concept in the Upaniṣads.

Second, the non-objectivity of the self is repeatedly emphasized in the Upaniṣads, while its passivity is contributed by the Advaitins. The Upaniṣads repeatedly emphasize that self is the ultimate subject; it can never become an object of knowledge. The notion of self as light in the Upaniṣads provides a clear counter example to Professor Chatterjee's claim. The light metaphor in the Upaniṣads underscores the freedom, and not passivity, of the self. It is a way of explaining the unvarying nature, unrestricted freedom of the self. Self is luminous by its very nature. It is the principle that makes perception and conscious action possible. All cognitions point to the activity of the self. Upaniṣads nowhere explicitly deny the activity of the self. Specific activities start at a given point in time and terminate at another point. What remains constant through them all is the self as pure consciousness, which makes manifestation possible. *Sākṣin*, like the self of the Upaniṣads, is self-luminous. A light does not require another light to manifest it. Similarly, *sākṣin* being self-luminous illumines all; it does not require anything outside of itself to illuminate objects. In Śaṅkara's philosophy, one finds the term "*sākṣin*" in its technical aspect. Śaṅkara defines the concept; it fulfills a well-defined function in his system. The theory of *sākṣin* provides for Śaṅkara the much needed epistemological foundation to defend the Upaniṣadic metaphysics.

Metaphysics and epistemology, as they constitute elements in western philosophy, can be isolated from each other. It is frequently suggested that, e.g., in Kant, epistemological conclusions can be arrived at independently of any metaphysical theory. For example, Dryer notes; "Princharde writes, Kant's problem is similar to Locke's. Locke states that his purpose is to inquire into the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge (*Kant's Theory of Knowledge*, p.2) Similarly, Kemp Smith presents the Critique as concerned with the theory of knowledge generally, without referring to its concerns with metaphysics."⁵⁸ Accordingly, these philosophers maintain that Kant's theory of the transcendental

unity of apperception is postulated by him on epistemological grounds. Other interpreters of Kant, notably D.P. Dryer and Martin Heidegger, vehemently disagree with such an epistemological reading of Kant. Dryer further notes that according to Heidegger, "The aim of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is fundamentally mistaken if this work is interpreted as a 'theory of experience' or as a theory of positive sciences. The *Critique of Pure Reason* has nothing to do with 'theory of knowledge.'"⁵⁹

Whether or not metaphysics and epistemology can be isolated from each other is true in the western context, it certainly is not the case in the Indian philosophy, and is especially not so in the theory of *sākṣin*. The theory of *sākṣin* does not require logical justification; it does not require proof, because besides being an epistemological theory, it also reveals the ultimate nature of reality, and is mandated by that reality. The conclusion is that there is a level of experience, wherein knowledge and existence are the same. Thus it should come as no surprise to the readers, that the concept of *sākṣin* in Advaita is established on epistemological grounds, and accordingly, is called on to perform that function. It would be wrong to assume, however, that this concept is postulated solely on epistemological grounds. One must not lose sight of the fact that *sākṣin* is grounded in the metaphysical reality as revealed by the scriptures, and therefore approximates reality.

I hope I have shown in this paper that the epistemological foundation of the notion of *sākṣin* are to be found in the Upaniṣads. The fact that these ideas are adumbrated in the Upaniṣads does not, of course, compel the theory of *sākṣin* that one finds in Śaṅkara, but when taken together with the philosophical requirements of his system, they do require a development such as is to be found in his works. The theory of *sākṣin* forms the epistemological foundation for his metaphysics. It is a natural shaping of the elements to be found in the Upaniṣads into a form that serves his purposes. It is as if Śaṅkara were a midwife assisting in the birth of elements that were gestating in the Upaniṣads.

However, it is important to notice that this is not simply a work of exegesis. The Upaniṣads are essentially open texts that allow considerable creativity in their interpretation. Śaṅkara

is not simply making clear things that already exist in the Upanisads, nor even simply synthesizing the elements that are to be found there, but taking these elements and using them as a background against which to develop an original theory. Original philosophical work occurs when people bring their own intellectual abilities and accomplishments to the historical corpus of the discipline. The resulting work represents both, a historical development of the discipline, even if it radically transforms the discipline, and also a new and contemporary way of understanding that corpus. And of course, once Śaṅkara puts forth a theory of *sākṣin*, it then becomes a part of that corpus, and is available to later philosophers for the same sort of work. The people who have followed after Śaṅkara—criticising, reforming, refining and developing the theory—provide clear evidences of such a continuity. The theory of *sākṣin* illustrates Śaṅkara's creativity and originality—the aspects of his philosophy so often underplayed.

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NOTES

1. Eliot Deutsch. *Advaita Vedānta; A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1973). p.81.
2. This study on *sākṣin* represents the second phase of my research on Advaita Vedānta. This article is part of a detailed study that I wish to do on the notion of *saksin*. I became interested in the notion of *sākṣin* while working on my book *Perceiving in Advaita Vedānta; Epistemological Analysis and Interpretation*, recently published by Bucknell University Press. Section 6 and 7 of this work deal with *saksin* and some of the issues surrounding this important notion. The best available current resource on the notion of *saksin* is A. K. Chatterjee and R. R. Dravid's monograph *The Concept of Sākṣin in Advaita Vedānta* (Banaras: Banaras Hindu University, 1979). This short monograph has helped me to focus on some of the important issues surrounding the notion of *saksin*.

While making some useful points, the monograph either at times uses technical terms with insufficient precision and at other times without English equivalent. As a result, the significance and ramifications of these terms is not clear to the readers.

3. A.K. Sinha, *The Idealist Standpoint: A Study in the Vedāntic Metaphysic of Experience* (Visva-Bharati, Centre of Advanced Study in Philosophy, 1965), p.73.
4. M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), p.343.
5. As a philosophical concept, *saksin* is found in the later Upanisad such as *Śvetāśvatara* (6.11) and *Maitrī* (6.16). It also occurs in the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* (19), in which the *puruṣa* is said to be the witness of *prakṛti*.
6. *Kāṭha*, II. 3.2 (see Śaṅkara's commentary on it).
7. *Mundaka Upanisad*, 3.1.1 (see Śaṅkara's commentary on it).
8. BU. 3.4.2.
9. *Ibid.* 3.7.23.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.3.6.
11. *Ibid.*, 4.3.9.
12. Yājñavalkya appears twice in BU: first in a verbal contest with other 'brahmins and subsequently in a dialogue with King Janaka of Videha.
13. BU. 3.4.2.
14. *Ibid.*, 1.4.2 R. E. Hume (tr.), *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 82.
15. 3.4.2.
16. II. 4.
17. *Ibid.*, 3.7.23.
18. *Ibid.*, 1.4.10.
19. *Ibid.*, 1.5.20.
20. *Ibid.*, 2.1.17.

21. *Ibid.*, 2.1.19.
22. *Ibid.*, 3.4.1.
23. *Ibid.*, 3.4.2.
24. *Ibid.*, 3.7.1. & 3.7.23.
25. *Ibid.*, 4.3.6. Also see Katha. 2.2.15: "He shining, everything shines after him": CU. 3.4.13: "His form is light..."
26. BU. 3.4.7.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *The Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya* (tr.). Swami Madhvananda (Madras: Advaita Ashrama, 1941). p. 612.
29. CU. VIII. 7-12.
30. CU. VIII. 11.1.
31. CU. VIII.12.1.
32. *Ibid.*, 4.3.9.
33. *Ibid.*, 4.3.18.
34. *Ibid.*, 4.3.11.
35. *Ibid.*, 4.3.23.
36. See *Vedānta Paribhāṣā* (VP) Passage #2.11, in Bina Gupta. *Perceiving in Advaita Vedānta: Epistemological Analysis and Interpretation* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1991). p. 139. Hereafter this book will be cited as *Perceiving in Advaita Vedānta*.
37. BU. 3.4.1.
38. *Perceiving in Advaita Vedānta*, p. 56.
39. MAU. 3.5.
40. CU. 5.18.2.
41. 19 mouths are: the five organs of sense (hearing, touch, sight, taste, and smell), the five organs of action (speech, hands, locomotion, generation, and excretion), the five vital breaths, the mind (*manas*), the intellect (*buddhi*), the ego-sense (*ahaṅkāra*), and the mind-stuff (*citta*).

42. "Part" should be construed not as spatial part, but rather a mode or an aspect of Brahman. It is to understand Brahman in a certain way, from a certain perspective.
43. Hiriyanna, *Outlines*, p. 71.
44. *The Māṇḍukyaopaniṣad with Gauḍapāda's Kārikā and Saṃkara's Commentary* (tr.), Swami Nikhilananda (Mysore:Sri Ramakrishna Asrama, 1974), 1.6.1-2, p.26 Hereafter this book will be cited as *Māṇḍukya Kārikā*.
45. *Ibid.*, 1.6.2.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
47. *Ibid.*, 7.12, p. 58.
48. *Ibid.*,
49. *Ibid.*, 7.13, p. 59.
50. *Perceiving in Advaita Vedānta*, kp. 57.
51. KU, I.3.4.
52. *Māṇḍukya Kārikā*, 7.12.
53. BU, IV, iii.2.
54. *Ibid.*, 2.4.14.
55. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 3.1.1 (see Saṃkara's commentary on it).
56. See VP passages 37-41 in *Perceiving in Advaita Vedānta*. "Consciousness conditioned by *māyā* is *Īśvara* or the supreme lord. When *mayā* is a qualifying attribute, it is the state of being a God (*Īśvaratva*); and when it is a limiting adjunct there is the state of being a witness (*sākṣitva*). Such is the difference between the state of being a God (*Īśvaratva*) and the state of being a witness (*sākṣitva*), and not between God and the witness-consciousness possessing these attributes." Introduction, p.71.
57. *The Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 10 (1982), p.341.
58. Quoted in D.P. Dryer's *Kant's Solution for Verification in Metaphysics*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966, p.18.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 18.