

## THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF ENTITIES IN *ADVAITA* METAPHYSICS: SOME CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

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The ontological status of all the possible entities in *Advaita* Metaphysics is divided into four logical categories. They are:

- a. *sat* (real)
- b. *asat* (unreal)
- c. *sadāsat* (both real and unreal)
- d. *sadāsadvilakṣaṇā* (neither real nor unreal)

The objective of this paper is to show that when the words ‘*sat*’ and ‘*asat*’ are taken in absolute senses, they leave no ontological gap for any entity to occupy space inside and/or outside the categories (a) and (b) because they divide the whole universe of discourse between them collectively and exhaustively being the complimentary terms. Since they leave no gap for any entity to occupy space inside and/or outside them, the alternatives (c) *sadāsat* and (d) *sadāsadvilakṣaṇā* are not logically possible because for any entity to be in either of these categories logically presupposes some ontological gap between the alternatives of ‘being *sat*’ and ‘being *asat*’ which is completely ruled out by ‘*sat*’ and ‘*asat*’ when they are taken in absolute senses. They allow only two alternatives logically possible: being *sat* and being *asat*. But when the words ‘*sat*’ and ‘*asat*’ are taken in relative senses, they create some ontological gap for an entity to be inside and/or outside the categories (a) *sat* and (b) *sat*. The reason is that because once a ‘gap’ is created between being *sat* and being *asat*, that new space can be occupied by any entity different from *sat* and also different from *asat*; the new gap enhances the logical possibility of *sadāsadvilakṣaṇā* entities. When we go through the different uses of the words ‘*sat*’ and ‘*asat*’ within the *Advaita* metaphysics, we find that they are not used in a single sense. They are used in double senses: absolute and relative. When the words ‘*sat*’ and ‘*asat*’ are taken in both the senses to understand the nature of different entities recognized by the *Advaita* metaphysics, we find that the *Advaita* classification of all the possible entities into the logical categories of (a) *sat* (b) *asat* (c) *sadāsat* and (d) *sadāsadvilakṣaṇā* is perfectly well grounded. *Sadāsadvilakṣaṇā* entities can be ascribed some sort of *sattā* different from *sat* and also different from *asat*. Once we ascribe some sort of *sattā* to

*sadāsadvilakṣaṇā* entities different from *sat* and also different from *asat*, both (c) and (d) fall under a broader category of ‘whatever is different from *sat* and/or *asat*’. To establish these points, let me first begin with the Advaita’s different uses of the words *sat* and *asat* within its conceptual framework.

When the *Advaita* uses the word *sat* with reference to *Brahman* and says that *Brahman* is the only *sat* (real); *Brahman* and *Ātman* are one and the same; there is no difference between *Brahman* and *Jiva*, it uses the word *sat* in absolute sense. According to it, *sat* is what not *asat* is. *Sat* means true for all the times, the eternal existent. In other words, *sat* means that which is necessarily and wholly true in every logically possible world and can never turned out to be *asat* because of its eternity nature. It is neither sublated nor can it be sublated at any point of time. *Sat* has no origination. *Sat* always remains *sat* for all the times. *Sat* is uncaused, everlasting, unchangeable, pure and self-existent entity. It is in this sense *Advaitins* say that *Brahman* is the only *sat* and nothing else and put *Brahman* entity alone in the category (a). They do not include any entity other than *Brahman* under the category (a). According to them, *Brahman* is the only reality (*sattā*) which is absolute, eternal, uncaused, unchangeable, pure, wholly true, unborn and self-existent. To them, *Brahman* and *sat* means one and the same thing. There is no difference between them. “*Brahman* is *sat* and *sat* is *Brahman*” is a necessary truth. It holds well in every logically possible world. *Brahman* is truly experienced and anything which is truly experienced has the basic nature of existence. In contrast to *Brahman* when the *Advaitins* talk about the entities like a hare’s horn, a barren woman’s son and a sky-flower and say that these entities are *asat*, they use the word *asat* in absolute sense. To them, *asat* is what not *sat* is, and what not *sat* is absolutely nothing (non-existent). These entities are called absolutely nothing because they have no existence for all the times in every logically possible world. They always remain in the state of not being. Since these entities always remain in the state of not being; they are neither experienced nor can they be experienced and anything which is never experienced cannot be sublated. It is from this point of view the *Advaitins* say that the entities like a hare’s horn, a barren woman ‘son and a sky-flower are eternally non-existent and put them under the category (b) *asat*. So, when the *Advaitins* use the words *sat* and *asat* in their absolute senses and say that *sat* is what not *asat* is and *asat* is what not

*sat* is, they divide the whole universe of discourse between them exclusively and exhaustively and leave no ontological gap for any entity to occupy space inside and/or outside the categories (a) and (b) because anything which is truly *sat* always remains in the state of being for all the times in every logically possible world; it never becomes *asat* later on. So also is the case vice versa. Anything which is truly *asat* always remains in the state of not being for all the times in every logically possible world; it never becomes *sat* later on. Here ‘truly *sat*’ means wholly *sat* and ‘truly *asat*’ means wholly *asat*. Based on the absolute meaning of the words *sat* and *asat* the Advaitins reject the possibility of any entity to be in the category (c) *sadāsat* and say that the combination of both *sat* and *asat* is not logically possible. It is self-contradictory in terms because according to them nothing can be both *sat* and *asat* at the same time. Everything is either *sat* or *asat* but not both. To them, the category (c), thus, is null. No entity belongs to it. But when the Advaitins make this claim, they do it by using the word ‘or’ in exclusive sense and the words ‘*sat*’ and ‘*asat*’ in absolute sense.

When the words ‘*sat*’ and ‘*asat*’ are taken in their absolute senses, they entail that there is no entity which is neither *sat* nor *asat* nor both because *sat* and *asat* leave no ontological gap for any entity to occupy space inside and/or outside them. If *sat* and *asat* leave no ‘gap’ for any entity to occupy space inside and/or outside them, then the alternative (d) is not logically possible. Only two alternatives are logically possible: ‘being *sat*’ and ‘being *asat*’. The last two alternatives are not logically possible: (c) ‘being *sadāsat*’ and (d) ‘being *sadāsadvilakṣaṇā*’. If this view is correct, then the Advaita’s classification of the total number of possible entities into the categories of (a), (b), (c) and (d) is not logically well grounded. But if the ontological gap is to be created inside and outside *sat* and *asat*, then the words *sat* and *asat* will have to be taken in double senses to avoid the logical difficulties for accommodating the entities caused by *māyā* or *avidyā*. And this is exactly what the Advaitins have done by using the words *sat* and *asat* in double senses. They grant some ontological status to the physical, the mental and the illusionary entities caused by *māyā* or *avidyā* by using the words *sat* and *asat* in relative senses which are to be treated as being different in nature from the eternally existent *sat* and also equally different in nature from the eternally non-existent *asat*.

The Advaitins create some ontological gap between the alternatives of ‘being *sat*’ and ‘being *asat*’ to accommodate the entities caused by *māyā* or *avidyā*. They say anything that is caused by *māyā* or *avidyā* can neither be said to be absolutely *sat* nor can they be said to be absolutely *asat*. They cannot be said to be absolutely *sat* because they are sublated later on after the dawn of higher knowledge. They also cannot be said to be absolutely *asat* because they are perceived and exist so long they are not sublated. The mental entities of the dreaming state of experience, the illusionary entities like snake in rope-snake illusion and the physical entities of the waking state of experience which are caused by *avidyā* and *māyā* respectively are neither absolutely *sat* nor absolutely *asat*. They hang over in between *sat* and *asat*. These entities are not called *sat* the sense in which *Brahman* is called *sat* simply because they are liable to sublation. They are sublated after the dawn of higher knowledge. These entities are also not called *asat* the sense in which a hare’s horn, a barren woman’s son and a sky-flower are called *asat* because they are perceived and anything that is perceived has existence in some sense, i.e., contingent. Its existence cannot be abnegated altogether being the object of perception. Based on this the Advaitins say that the mental, the physical and the illusionary entities are neither absolutely *sat* nor absolutely *asat* nor both *sat* and *asat*. To say this, the Advaitins argue, does not mean that these entities are totally devoid of existence and non-existence in every sense of the term; they cannot even be said *sat* and/or *asat* contingently. These entities have contingent existence. The Advaitins include all the entities caused by *māyā* or *avidyā* under the category (d) *sadasadvilakṣaṇā* simply because these entities possess both the characteristics, *sat* and *asat*, contingently. They are perceived but sublated later on after the dawn of higher knowledge. When the Advaitins grant some ontological status to *sadasadvilakṣaṇā* entities, they do it by using the words *sat* and *asat* in double senses: relative and absolute. To them, to say that something is different from *sat* (*sadvilakṣaṇā*) is not to say that it is necessarily identical with *asat*; and to say that something is different from *asat* (*asadvilakṣaṇā*) is not to say that it is necessarily identical with *sat*. This statement holds well only when *sat* and *asat* words are taken in double senses. To Advaitins, the ontological status of *Brahman/Ātman* is conceptually different from the ontological status of the entities that we see and experience in our daily life which they call as *Anātman*. According to

them, *Brahman* is truly *sat* because it is never contradicted and what is never contradicted is necessarily and wholly true. While everything other than *Brahman/Ātman* that we see and experience in our illusionary, dreaming and waking states of life are not truly *sat* because they are contradicted later on by the higher knowledge. It is because of this reason when the Advaitins say *Anātman* is *sat*, they say it is contingently *sat* and what is contingently *sat* might be *asat* too in some other conditions. They never say *Anātman* is truly *sat*. Entities like a hare's horn are called as truly *asat* because they involve self-contradiction and anything which is truly *asat* is always false.

The Advaitins make, thus, a distinction between *nitya* (eternal) *sat* and *anitya* (non-eternal) *sat* within the notion of *sat*, *nitya* (eternal) *asat* and *anitya* (non-eternal) *asat* within the notion of *asat*. When we understand the words *sat* and *asat* in contingent senses, the combination of both *sat* and *asat* does not result in a self-contradiction because they are used in relative senses. Their relative meanings allow both the alternatives (c) and (d) logically possible. The law of identity, the law of excluded middle and the law of non-contradiction operate on *sat* and *asat* only when they are taken in their absolute senses because they divide the whole universe of discourse between them exclusively and collectively and leaves no gap for the logical possibility of the other alternatives (c) and (d). These laws do not operate when four logical possibilities are created or admitted by using the words *sat* and *asat* in double senses to accommodate the different kinds of entities: *nitya sat*, *nitya asat*, *anitya sat* and *anitya asat*. The qualification of *nitya* to *sat* and *nitya* to *asat* signifies their absolute meaning. The qualification of *anitya* to *sat* and *anitya* to *asat* signifies their relative meaning. When the Advaitins talk about *Anātman* and say that *Anātman* is neither *sat* nor *asat* nor both *sat* and *asat* nor neither not *sat* nor not *asat*, they push *Anātman* out of the categories (a), (b) and (c) by characterizing it as *sadāsadvilakṣaṇā*. The qualification of *vilakṣaṇā* to *sat* and *asat*, thus, signifies some ontological gap between being *sat* and being *asat* and that makes sense only when *sat* and *asat* is understood in double senses, otherwise not. When *sat* and *asat* are understood in double senses, *sat* does not mean truly *sat* only and *asat* does not mean truly *asat* only. *Sat* signifies both the values: truly and untruly. So also is the case with *asat*. *Asat* also signifies both the values: truly *asat* and untruly *asat*. 'Truly *sat*'

means eternal existent and ‘untrue *sat*’ means contingent existent. ‘Truly *asat*’ means eternal non-existent and untrue *asat* means contingent non-existent. The qualification of *vilakṣaṇā* to *sat* and *asat* signifies contingency; and *sat* and *asat* without the qualification of *vilakṣaṇā* signify eternal existent and eternal non-existent. When the words *sat*, *asat* and *vilakṣaṇā* are taken in these senses to understand the nature of different entities recognized by the *Advaita* metaphysics, we find the *Advaita*’s classification of all the logical possible entities into the categories of (a) *sat*, (b) *asat*, (c) *sadāsat* and (d) *sadāsadvilakṣaṇā* is perfectly well grounded.