

RECONCEPTUALIZING NON-DUALISM: SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S INTERPRETATION OF  
ŚANKARA'S ADVAITA VEDĀNTA IN MODERN RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

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**Introduction:**

Advaita Vedānta constitutes to be one of the most influential philosophical traditions within Indian thought, with Śaṅkara widely recognized as its foremost systematizer. Grounded in the Upaniṣadic assertion that reality is ultimately non-dual, Śaṅkara's Advaita posits the identity of *Ātman* and *Brahman*, emphasizing liberation through knowledge and the negation of empirical distinctions arising from ignorance. For centuries, this classical Advaita remained the preserve of renunciatory monasticism, transmitted through specialized institutions and commentarial traditions.

The philosophical landscape of India has been shaped by profound metaphysical inquiries, scriptural commentaries, and the emergence of spiritual reformers who have reinterpreted traditional systems to respond to the evolving needs of society. Among the most influential traditions within Hindu philosophical thought is Advaita Vedānta, articulated and systematized by the 8th-century philosopher Śaṅkara. His doctrine of non-dualism asserts that absolute reality alone is real, and the empirical world is an appearance projected by *māyā*, an epistemic principle of misapprehension. Liberation arises from the direct realization of *Brahman*, a truth revealed through the *Upaniṣads* and refined through rigorous inquiry. For centuries, Śaṅkara's Advaita remained the intellectual cornerstone of monastic Hinduism, preserved by highly trained scholars within monastic institutions. However, the advent of colonial modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with scientific rationalism, Christian missionary activity, Orientalist scholarship, and emerging global discourses on religion, created a new milieu in which Indian philosophical systems were compelled to engage with modern intellectual paradigms. It was within this context that Swami Vivekananda, a principal disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, emerged as the most influential modern interpreter of Advaita Vedānta.<sup>1</sup>

Swami Vivekananda's appearance at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago marked a watershed moment. Through his speeches and writings, he presented Advaita Vedānta not merely as a sectarian Indian philosophy but as a universal spiritual science capable of harmonizing diverse religious

traditions. His interpretation combined classical metaphysics with modern sensibilities, rational inquiry, psychological analysis, ethical service, and global unity.<sup>2</sup>Unlike Śaṅkara, who emphasized monastic renunciation, Swami Vivekananda encouraged a form of *Practical Vedānta* that engaged directly with social issues such as poverty, caste discrimination, and national degradation.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze Swami Vivekananda's reinterpretation of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta and examine how Swami Vivekananda transformed classical non-dualism into a modern, globally relevant philosophy. This exploration is necessary for several reasons. First, it helps illuminate the dynamic nature of the Advaitic tradition, which has exhibited remarkable capacity for adaptation. Second, it demonstrates how Indian philosophical ideas underwent reinterpretation in response to the pressures of modernity. Lastly, it contributes to current scholarship on global Vedānta, religious pluralism, and the modern Hindu intellectual tradition.

Advaita Vedānta is not simply a metaphysical theory, it is a comprehensive worldview. Śaṅkara's Advaita aims primarily to remove ignorance through knowledge, emphasizing the illusoriness of empirical distinctions. Swami Vivekananda, while accepting this metaphysical core, extends Advaita into the realms of ethics, psychology, and social engagement. For him, non-duality implies the divinity of every individual, thereby creating a philosophical basis for universal human dignity. This shift transforms Advaita from a monastic, world-renouncing system into a dynamic philosophy that affirms life and action.

Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of Advaita Vedānta has played a decisive role in shaping modern Hinduism, fostering interreligious dialogue, and facilitating the global dissemination of Yoga and Vedāntic thought. His emphasis on the inherent divinity of the human person continues to resonate with contemporary discourses on human dignity, global ethics, and spiritual psychology.<sup>3</sup>At the same time, Śaṅkara's rigorous articulation of non-dualism remains a foundational reference in philosophical debates concerning consciousness, the nature of reality, and the problem of liberation. Ongoing scholarly discussions regarding the relationship between classical Advaita and Swami Vivekananda's so-called Neo-Advaita the paper proceeds with the understanding that religious traditions are not static; they evolve through reinterpretation and engagement with new contexts. Swami

Vivekananda's vision represents one of the most significant modern articulations of Advaita Vedānta and analyzing his reinterpretation offers profound insight into the dialogical relationship between tradition and modernity. By comparing Swami Vivekananda's interpretation with Śaṅkara's classical formulation, the study aims to reveal how the ontological core of Advaita can be preserved while expanding its ethical and social applications.

Śaṅkara and Swami Vivekananda stand as two towering figures separated by nearly twelve centuries, yet united by a shared commitment to non-dual truth. Their contributions, though distinct, reflect the philosophical elasticity and spiritual depth of the Advaitic tradition. Thus, this dissertation not only contributes to historical and philosophical scholarship but also offers a lens through which to examine the continuing relevance of Advaita in addressing questions of identity, meaning, and global interconnection in the modern world.

### **Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara:**

Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta stands as one of the most intellectually sophisticated and spiritually profound systems in the history of Indian philosophical thought. Rooted in the interpretative tradition of the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahma Sūtra*, and *Bhagavad Gītā*, Śaṅkara's systematization of Advaita in the eighth century established non-dualism as a dominant theological and philosophical force in India. His primary contribution lies not in inventing non-dualism but in providing a coherent, rigorous, and logically consistent account of the metaphysical, epistemological, and soteriological foundations of non-dual reality. To understand Swami Vivekananda's position as a modern exponent and interpreter of Advaita, it is necessary to examine Śaṅkara's system in its classical form and recognize the philosophical pillars upon which later reinterpretations were built.<sup>4</sup>

Śaṅkara's ontology is grounded in the fundamental assertion that Brahman alone is the ultimate reality, eternal, infinite, unchanging, and non-dual. The Upaniṣadic declarations such as "*Ekam eva advitīyam*" and "*Sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ Brahma*"<sup>5</sup> serve as the foundation for this metaphysical monism. Brahman, in Śaṅkara's thought, is nirguṇa, devoid of attributes or forms, and cannot be circumscribed by conceptual categories or empirical distinctions. It is pure consciousness, infinite existence, and bliss. Any perception of multiplicity, change, or

difference belongs to the realm of empirical appearance and not to absolute reality. This distinction between absolute and empirical reality is crucial to Advaita's metaphysical architecture. The *paramārthika-sattā* alone is ultimately real, whereas the *vyavahārika-sattā* forms the domain of everyday experience, conventional truth, and functional activity. A third level, *prātibhāsika-sattā*, encompasses illusory or dream-like reality. Through this tripartite schema, Śāṅkara explains the seemingly conflicting experience of oneness and multiplicity without compromising the primacy of non-duality.

Central to his philosophy is the doctrine of *māyā*, which accounts for the manifestation of the phenomenal world. *Māyā* is neither real nor unreal but *anirvacanīya*, indefinable. It projects names and forms onto the undifferentiated Brahman while simultaneously concealing *Brahman*'s true nature. At the individual level, this power operates as *Avidyā*, ignorance of one's identity with the absolute. Śāṅkara's theory of *Adhyāsa*, or superimposition, describes the fundamental error of attributing the characteristics of the non-Self to the Self and vice versa. This primordial confusion gives rise to the *jīva*, the body-mind complex, and the entire structure of worldly bondage. The world, therefore, is experientially real but metaphysically dependent upon *Brahman*, much like the appearance of a snake on a rope. The rope is real; the snake is projected. In a similar way, *Brahman* is the substratum upon which the universe appears.<sup>6</sup>

Śāṅkara's epistemology is grounded in the traditional *pramāṇa* system, with a special emphasis on *śruti* as the authoritative means of knowledge for *Brahman*. Sensory perception and inference can reveal empirical truths but cannot apprehend the non-dual reality. *Śruti*, particularly the Upaniṣads, serves as the primary source for the knowledge of *Brahman*, while reasoning ensures consistent interpretation, and *anubhava* verifies the truth of scriptural revelation. For Śāṅkara, *śruti* is not dogmatic instruction but a revelatory guide that must be critically examined and experientially internalized.

The path to liberation in Śāṅkara's system is fundamentally a path of knowledge. He describes a threefold methodological discipline: *śravaṇa*, the attentive hearing of the non-dual truth from a competent teacher; *manana*, the rational reflection upon these teachings to remove doubts; and *nididhyāsana*, continual meditation that dissolves deep-rooted identification with the non-Self. Liberation is

not something to be attained but something to be realized, for the Self is always already Brahman. Ignorance alone veils this truth, and therefore, the removal of ignorance through knowledge constitutes liberation.<sup>7</sup> Ritual actions, devotional practices, and yogic disciplines may purify the mind and prepare it for knowledge but cannot directly cause liberation. Śaṅkara thus upholds a radical epistemic and soteriological monism: knowledge alone liberates.

The liberated individual, or *jīvanmukta*, while living in the world, is inwardly free from the world's dualities. He perceives no real distinction between himself and others, between subject and object. His actions are not motivated by desire or fear but arise spontaneously from the fullness of knowledge. While Śaṅkara's system is often criticized as world-negating, it does not dismiss ethical life. Rather, it situates ethical virtues, such as non-harming, truthfulness, compassion, dispassion, and self-control, as preparatory disciplines essential for the development of a purified and stable mind capable of grasping non-dual truth. Renunciation, especially monastic renunciation, occupies a privileged place in Śaṅkara's system, not as a rejection of life but as the most conducive condition for the realization of *Brahman*. Śaṅkara's approach to bhakti, devotion to *Īśvara*, is more nuanced than commonly assumed. While knowledge of nirguṇa *Brahman* alone grants liberation, devotion to saguna Brahman serves a vital preparatory role. For aspirants incapable of grasping the abstract notion of *nirguṇa Brahman*, devotion offers emotional integration, moral purification, and gradual inner refinement. Yet even this devotion ultimately culminates in the realization of *Brahman* beyond attributes, for *Īśvara* is ultimately *Brahman* conditioned by *māyā*.<sup>8</sup>

Śaṅkara's hermeneutical method is also central to understanding his system. His interpretation of the *Mahāvākyas* involves both the direct and implied meaning of words, employing techniques such as *lakṣaṇā* and the method of superimposition and subsequent negation. His commentaries aim to reconcile seemingly contradictory scriptural statements, arguing that teachings concerning duality or qualified non-duality belong to provisional levels of instruction meant for less advanced aspirants. The ultimate message of scripture, according to Śaṅkara, is unequivocally non-dual. Ethically, Śaṅkara's thought emphasizes detachment, inner purity, and contemplative focus rather than active engagement with the world. He does not deny the empirical reality of suffering or moral obligation but regards them as part of

vyavahāra, the transactional plane governed by ignorance. From the standpoint of the absolute, the world has no independent existence; from the empirical standpoint, ethical action becomes necessary to purify the mind. This dual perspective reflects the flexibility and sophistication of Advaita's ethical framework.

Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta thus presents a systematic vision of reality in which unity is foundational, multiplicity is derivative, and liberation is the intuitive recognition of one's eternal identity with *Brahman*. His system privileges contemplative discipline, renunciation, and the pursuit of knowledge over social activism or ritualistic performance. While profoundly spiritual and metaphysical, Śaṅkara's Advaita is not indifferent to human experience but seeks to transcend its limitations through the transformative power of knowledge. This classical framework sets the stage for understanding the innovations introduced by Swami Vivekananda, whose reinterpretation of Advaita would reorient its metaphysical insights toward practical, ethical, and global concerns that extend well beyond the scope of Śaṅkara's original formulation.<sup>9</sup>

### **Vivekananda's Interpretation of Advaita Vedānta:**

Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of Advaita Vedānta represents one of the most significant philosophical transformations in the modern history of Indian thought. While deeply rooted in the classical non-dualism of Śaṅkara, Swami Vivekananda's Advaita is not merely a reiteration of past doctrines but a creative re-envisioning of non-dual philosophy suited to the spiritual, intellectual, and social demands of the modern world. His engagement with Advaita is simultaneously reverential toward its scriptural foundations and radically innovative in its methodological, ethical, and global applications. Whereas Śaṅkara emphasized metaphysical contemplation, epistemic discernment, and renunciation, Swami Vivekananda presented Advaita as a dynamic, life-affirming, and socially engaged philosophy capable of addressing the crises of human identity, inequality, and spiritual fragmentation.<sup>10</sup> His reinterpretation thus marks a decisive moment in the transition of Advaita from a primarily monastic and contemplative system to a modern spiritual humanism with global reach.

A central characteristic of Swami Vivekananda's Advaita is its insistence on the practical relevance of non-dual philosophy. He frequently asserted that Advaita is

not an abstract metaphysical doctrine confined to monastic life or scriptural study but a living truth that must inform every aspect of human existence. In his view, the realization of the divine in every being is not merely a philosophical insight but an ethical imperative, demanding service, compassion, and social responsibility. This view stands in marked contrast to classical Advaita's emphasis on world-transcendence; Swami Vivekananda championed a world-embracing spirituality grounded in the recognition of the same universal Self in all. He articulated this principle through his famous dictum: "*Jiva is Śīva*",<sup>10</sup> which encapsulates his reinterpretation of non-dualism as an ethic of service. If every being is a manifestation of the divine, then serving others becomes a direct expression of spiritual realization, not merely a preparatory discipline. Service is elevated to a form of worship, and the boundaries between spiritual life and active life dissolve.

Swami Vivekananda's reinterpretation is also deeply influenced by his engagement with Western modernity. Encountering Western philosophy, science, and comparative religion during his travels, Swami Vivekananda saw Advaita as uniquely positioned to address the challenges posed by secularism, materialism, and religious exclusivism. He presented Advaita as a universal spiritual framework capable of harmonizing science and religion. By identifying the ultimate reality as pure consciousness, not tied to dogmatic formulations, Swami Vivekananda offered a metaphysics that resonated with contemporary scientific and philosophical currents. He argued that the evolutionary impulse toward unity, seen in the progress of science, politics, and culture, is reflected in Advaita's vision of oneness. In this sense, Advaita becomes not only a spiritual ideal but an interpretive key to understanding the unfolding of human civilization. This integration of traditional metaphysics with modern scientific sensibilities contributed significantly to the global appeal of his ideas.

Furthermore, Swami Vivekananda reinterpreted the relationship between the individual and the absolute in a more psychologically and ethically accessible manner than Śāṅkara. While Śāṅkara emphasized the unreality of the world and the illusory nature of individuality, Swami Vivekananda maintained that individuality is a necessary and positive stage in spiritual evolution. He affirmed that the journey toward realizing one's divine nature does not entail denying or suppressing individuality but expanding it until it becomes universal. The individual self becomes

the gateway to realizing the universal Self; therefore, human development, intellectual, moral, physical, and spiritual, is integral to the realization of Advaita.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on the divine potential of the human personality reflects Swami Vivekananda's belief in the inherent dignity and sacredness of all human beings, a principle that shaped his educational, social, and humanitarian vision.

Swami Vivekananda also broadened the scope of soteriology in Advaita. For Śaṅkara, liberation is primarily the dissolution of ignorance through knowledge. Swami Vivekananda, while accepting the centrality of knowledge, insisted that knowledge must be accompanied by action, devotion, and meditation. He reformulated Advaita in the framework of the four Yogas, *Jāna*, *Bhakti*, *Karma*, and *Rāja Yoga*, arguing that each represents a valid and necessary approach to realizing the Self. In this way, he democratized Advaita, making it accessible to individuals with diverse temperaments, capacities, and life situations. Knowledge remains supreme, but it is no longer confined to scriptural study or renunciation; it becomes an integrated way of life that engages the whole human being.<sup>11</sup>

A particularly profound aspect of Swami Vivekananda's reinterpretation is his global vision of spirituality and religion, which emerges from Advaita's principle of unity. He saw Advaita not as a sectarian doctrine but as a universal spiritual philosophy capable of encompassing and harmonizing the world's religious traditions. This vision is reflected in his famous address at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1893), where he presented Advaita as the philosophical foundation for interreligious harmony. According to Swami Vivekananda, religious conflicts arise from ignorance of the essential unity underlying all spiritual paths. Advaita, by affirming this unity, provides a philosophical basis for universal acceptance, not mere tolerance. This universalism was one of the most influential contributions he made to global religious thought, positioning Advaita as a bridge between Eastern and Western spirituality.

Swami Vivekananda's reinterpretation also carries significant implications for social philosophy. In contrast to the predominantly monastic orientation of classical Advaita, Swami Vivekananda insisted that the realization of non-dual truth must manifest as active compassion and social engagement. He strongly criticized social inequalities, caste discrimination, and poverty, arguing that they contradict the fundamental Advaitic truth of the unity of all beings. His vision of social service, later

institutionalized through the Ramakrishna Mission, transformed Advaita from a purely metaphysical system into the foundation of a practical ethical movement. The mission's motto "*Atmano Mokshartham Jagat Hitaya Cha*"—"For one's own liberation and for the welfare of the world"<sup>12</sup> captures the essence of his synthesis of inner realization and outer service.

Moreover, Swami Vivekananda redefined the concept of renunciation. Rather than advocating physical withdrawal from the world, he promoted a deeper renunciation of ego, selfishness, and attachment. Renunciation becomes psychological and ethical rather than spatial or institutional. One may live in society and yet be a renunciate if one acts without attachment and with the consciousness of universal unity. This reinterpretation made Advaita meaningful to householders, students, workers, and people engaged in the everyday responsibilities of modern life. It transformed Advaita from an elite philosophical doctrine to a universal spiritual path accessible to all.

In Swami Vivekananda's hands, Advaita also becomes a philosophy of empowerment, especially relevant to colonized India. He used Advaita to counteract feelings of inferiority, defeatism, and fatalism. By proclaiming the divinity of the soul and the inherent strength of the human spirit, he offered a psychological and cultural foundation for national rejuvenation. His call to recognize one's divine nature became a call to awaken from social, political, and intellectual subjugation. In this sense, Swami Vivekananda's Advaita serves both spiritual liberation and collective empowerment. Thus, Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of Advaita is characterized by a profound shift from transcendence to immanence, from monastic contemplation to social action, from metaphysical abstraction to humanistic practicality, and from sectarian identity to universal spirituality. His philosophy remains faithful to the non-dual metaphysics of Śāṅkara while reimagining its application in ways that speak to the modern world's ethical, social, and existential needs. Through this synthesis, he succeeded in reviving Advaita as a global spiritual philosophy, reshaping both Indian self-understanding and the Western perception of Hindu thought. Through Swami Vivekananda, Advaita became not only a doctrine of philosophical monism but a living vision of universal human unity. His reinterpretation brought Advaita from the seclusion of the monastery into the public sphere of global discourse, transforming it into a constructive force for social harmony, personal empowerment, interreligious

understanding, and spiritual democratization. In doing so, Swami Vivekananda ensured that Advaita would become, not a relic of ancient metaphysics, but a guiding light for the spiritual evolution of humanity.

Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of Advaita Vedānta emerges as one of the most dynamic and influential philosophical undertakings in the modern history of Indian thought. While classical Advaita in the lineage of Śaṅkara foregrounded metaphysical non-dualism expressed through rigorous dialectics, renunciation, and scriptural exegesis, Swami Vivekananda recast this timeless system for the conditions of modernity, globalization, scientific rationality, and colonial subjugation. His reinterpretation did not constitute a departure from Śaṅkara's ontology but a strategic expansion of Advaita's horizon so that the perennial truth of non-duality could assume fresh relevance in a rapidly transforming world. In this sense, Swami Vivekananda's Advaita stands simultaneously as a continuity of the classical tradition and a creative philosophical rearticulation. The lack of divergence at the metaphysical level and the presence of robust innovation at the practical, ethical, and civilizational levels make Swami Vivekananda a pivotal figure in the evolution of Indian philosophy. His vision is not reducible to a mere revivalist gesture; it is an expansive reinterpretation where metaphysics, spirituality, ethics, psychology, social action, and interreligious dialogue become mutually informing strands of a lived non-dualism.<sup>13</sup>

Tracing the trajectory of Swami Vivekananda's Advaita requires contextualizing him within the intellectual ferment of nineteenth-century India, a period marked by colonial domination, Christian missionary critique, Orientalist interpretation, the Bengal Renaissance, the emergence of Indian nationalism, and the early formation of a globalized philosophical consciousness. Swami Vivekananda's work unfolds against the backdrop of these complex cultural forces. Yet despite the dramatic social and political circumstances in which he functioned, his philosophical concerns remained grounded in a profound search for the nature of the Self and the ultimate unity of existence. The foundation of his modern spirituality arose from his transformative encounter with Sri Ramakrishna, who embodied the experiential core of non-duality rather than its scholastic elaboration. Whereas Śaṅkara had systematized Advaita in highly technical terms with reference to the Upaniṣads, Swami Vivekananda witnessed Advaita as a living reality in his Master. Ramakrishna's firsthand realization of the unity of all religious paths and the nondual

divine acted as the existential backbone upon which Swami Vivekananda constructed his intellectual exposition of Advaita in the late nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> This experiential grounding allowed Swami Vivekananda to address spiritual and philosophical issues not merely as academic constructs but as truths to be realized in the conduct of life, in the pursuit of knowledge, in the practice of religion, and in engagement with society.

The most striking dimension of Swami Vivekananda's interpretation is his insistence that Advaita is not the exclusive heritage of monks and renunciants but the birthright of every human being. Classical Advaita, especially in its exegetical traditions, often directed its spiritual protocols toward the *saṁnyāsin* committed to the discipline of renunciation and the attainment of *jñāna*. Swami Vivekananda endorsed the legitimacy of the monastic path but refused to constrain non-dualism to it. Instead, he proclaimed the essential divinity of all human beings, insisting that the same *ātman* that the monk discovers in the silence of contemplation exists also in the ordinary individual seeking meaning and fulfillment in daily life. This universalism is not a dilution of Advaita but an extension of its deepest metaphysical claim: if the Self is one, then the potential for realization must be universal, not limited by caste, gender, education, or social status. Swami Vivekananda thus transformed a metaphysical doctrine into a humanistic and democratizing spiritual vision, enabling Advaita to function as a philosophical catalyst for the awakening of collective dignity. He famously stated that each soul is potentially divine and that the purpose of religion is to manifest this divinity through work, worship, concentration, and knowledge. This statement is a succinct encapsulation of his project to reinterpret Advaita as a practical philosophy that calls for transformative action rather than reclusive contemplation alone.

Swami Vivekananda's philosophical innovation becomes even more evident when examining his understanding of *māyā*. While Śaṅkara developed *māyā* as a sophisticated metaphysical principle explaining the appearance of duality, Swami Vivekananda widened the notion to accommodate modern scientific, psychological, and cosmological sensibilities. He interpreted *māyā* as the framework of limitation through which the infinite appears as finite and through which the Absolute expresses itself as becoming. The world was not dismissed as illusion in any trivial sense; instead, it was understood as a real manifestation of *Brahman*, endowed with provisional reality and moral significance. This shift allowed Swami Vivekananda to

justify social service, nationalism, education, and human uplift as authentic expressions of Advaitic realization. Where classical Advaita texts often described the world as *mithyā* to underscore its non-ultimate nature, Swami Vivekananda reframed the insight to affirm that the world is the field through which the *ātman* recognizes itself by transcending limitation.<sup>15</sup> This reinterpretation preserved non-dual ontology while expanding its ethical and existential implications. Through this lens, action in the world—when carried out with awareness of divinity, becomes a form of worship, a practice of seeing God in all beings, and a discipline of realizing unity in diversity.

One of the most significant contributions of Swami Vivekananda is his formulation of —*Practical Vedānta*,” a term that he used to describe the application of non-dual principles in ethical, social, and global contexts. For him, the realization of unity was not a private mystical achievement but a call to serve humanity as the living embodiment of the divine. —*Service to man is service to God*”, a statement often attributed to his teachings, summarizes this ethical program. While Śāṅkara did not reject ethics, the classical Advaita tradition did not elevate social service to the centrality that Swami Vivekananda granted it. Swami Vivekananda understood that the modern world demanded a spirituality grounded in compassion, solidarity, and social responsibility. Therefore, his *Practical Vedānta* urged individuals to treat other human beings as expressions of the same Brahman that constitutes oneself. This idea transformed Advaita from a solitary pursuit of liberation into a dynamic, socially engaged spirituality. It laid the philosophical foundation for the Ramakrishna Mission’s humanitarian activities, which Swami Vivekananda established as a means of translating metaphysical unity into concrete compassion. Thus, the ethical dimension of his Advaita is not ancillary but intrinsic: realizing unity means affirming the dignity, worth, and divinity of every person and acting accordingly.

Equally important is the way Swami Vivekananda reinterpreted Advaita for interreligious understanding. Drawing on Ramakrishna’s pluralistic spiritual experiences, Swami Vivekananda argued that the core of all religions reflects the same non-dual reality, although expressed in diverse symbolic and doctrinal languages. In classical Advaita, other religious systems received little systematic philosophical analysis, since the emphasis remained on interpreting the Upaniṣads. Swami Vivekananda, however, functioning in a global environment, articulated Advaita as the underlying metaphysical ground enabling mutual respect among

religious traditions. At the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago (1893), he presented Advaita not merely as a Hindu doctrine but as a universal spiritual philosophy capable of supporting pluralism. His vision of religious harmony stems from the conviction that if reality is one, then diverse paths can lead toward the experience of unity. This approach reframed Advaita as philosophically inclusive and made it a cornerstone of comparative religion and global interfaith discourse.

Another dimension of Swami Vivekananda's reinterpretation is his engagement with modern science. He frequently argued that Advaita Vedānta and scientific knowledge are not opposed but complementary expressions of the search for truth. He saw the scientific emphasis on unity, whether in physics, biology, or cosmology, as compatible with the Advaitic proposition of ultimate oneness. The convergence between Advaitic metaphysics and scientific monism became one of his strategies for making Vedānta accessible to Western audiences conditioned by scientific rationality. For Swami Vivekananda, non-duality offered a philosophical framework capable of integrating scientific insights with spiritual wisdom, thereby dissolving the artificial boundaries between matter and spirit. He argued that the same unity underlying consciousness manifests in the unity underlying physical laws, giving Advaita a universal scope. This philosophical move positioned Advaita not as an archaic metaphysic but as a living, evolving worldview relevant to the intellectual landscape of modernity.

Swami Vivekananda also emphasized the psychological and existential dimensions of Advaita. In his view, *avidyā* is not only metaphysical misunderstanding but also psychological bondage. Human beings suffer because they identify with limited aspects of their personality, forgetting the infinite Self that lies beneath all layers of experience. Liberation thus requires not only philosophical inquiry but also inner transformation. He presented *yoga*, especially *rāja yoga*, as a scientific method for attaining experiential knowledge of non-duality. His systematic exposition of *rāja yoga* in the West, combining Patañjali's philosophy with Vedāntic metaphysics, expanded Advaita's reach into the field of psychology, making it relevant to emerging Western discourses on the mind, consciousness, and self-realization. In presenting meditation as a method for realizing the unity of the Self, Swami Vivekananda bridged classical Vedānta with modern approaches to subjective experience and the exploration of consciousness.

A central innovation of Swami Vivekananda was his unique articulation of freedom. While classical Advaita placed ultimate freedom (mokṣa) in the transcendence of individuality and identification with Brahman, Swami Vivekananda broadened the notion to include psychological, social, intellectual, and political dimensions. He insisted that freedom is the fundamental nature of the Self and must be expressed not only metaphysically but also culturally and socially. This insight aligned Advaita with the aspirations of colonized India, contributing to the rising sense of national identity and collective self-confidence. Swami Vivekananda's message of strength, fearlessness, and dignity, derived from non-dual insights, became a philosophical resource for Indian nationalism. Many leaders of India's freedom movement acknowledged his influence. By presenting Advaita as a philosophy of empowerment rather than renunciation alone, Swami Vivekananda enabled it to contribute to the psychological liberation of a colonized people.<sup>16</sup>

Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of Advaita also offered a new understanding of the relationship between the individual and society. While classical Advaita focused primarily on the liberation of the individual self, Swami Vivekananda asserted that the collective good is inseparable from individual realization. The recognition of universal oneness implies a moral responsibility to uplift others. This stands in contrast to the stereotype that Advaita is world-negating; Swami Vivekananda refuted such misinterpretations by showing that non-duality provides the strongest foundation for compassion. If the Self in all beings is one, then harming others is equivalent to harming oneself. This insight transforms Advaita into a basis for moral universalism. It further links spirituality with social equality by affirming that all distinctions, whether based on caste, race, gender, wealth, or nationality, are ultimately illusory. In effect, Swami Vivekananda's Advaita becomes a radical vision of human equality.

In engaging with the West, Swami Vivekananda reshaped Advaita as a global philosophy. He introduced Vedānta to Western audiences not as an exotic curiosity but as a rigorous metaphysical system capable of addressing universal questions about consciousness, existence, and ethical life. His ability to articulate Advaita in modern philosophical language allowed it to enter global intellectual discourse, influencing scholars, psychologists, religious thinkers, and spiritual practitioners. Swami Vivekananda's synthesis of Eastern spirituality and Western rationalism gave

Advaita a cosmopolitan dimension that was absent in its classical form.<sup>17</sup> He argued that Vedānta must evolve, reinterpret itself, and communicate in contemporary idioms without compromising its essential truths. This view articulates a dynamic paradigm in which tradition remains alive through continuous renewal.

The global impact of Swami Vivekananda's Advaita has been profound. It inspired new religious movements, influenced academic studies of religion, contributed to the emergence of global yoga culture, and shaped discourses on spirituality, psychology, and consciousness. His emphasis on universal religion, unity, strength, service, and spiritual freedom continues to resonate in contemporary thought. Scholars recognize that Swami Vivekananda's Advaita marks a shift from classical Indian metaphysics toward modern, engaged spirituality. His work embodies a transition in which ancient wisdom becomes a framework for addressing modern existential challenges, including alienation, inequality, religious conflict, and the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of Advaita Vedānta represents a profound and far-reaching rearticulation of non-dualism. While remaining faithful to the ontological monism of Śaṅkara, he infused Advaita with fresh ethical depth, psychological insight, social relevance, and global significance. His synthesis is not an innovation that departs from tradition but an expansion that reveals the latent potential within classical Advaita. In Swami Vivekananda's hands, Advaita becomes spiritually experiential, socially engaged, intellectually modern, scientifically compatible, psychologically transformative, globally relevant, and ethically grounded. It becomes a philosophy not only to be studied but to be lived. This is the hallmark of Swami Vivekananda's genius: the ability to take a highly abstract metaphysical system and demonstrate its profound capacity to address human life in all its dimensions, from personal suffering to global civilization. His interpretation therefore stands as a major milestone in the history of Advaita Vedānta and a defining contribution to the spiritual heritage of humanity.

### **Śaṅkara and Vivekananda: A Comparison**

The comparative analysis of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta and Swami Vivekananda's modern reinterpretation reveals a complex interplay of continuity and transformation in the evolution of non-dualistic philosophy from classical India to the

global modern world. Although Swami Vivekananda repeatedly affirmed his profound reverence for Śaṅkara and drew heavily from the classical Advaitic framework, his writings, speeches, and institutional activities clearly demonstrate that his engagement with Advaita was not limited to exegetical reproduction. Rather, Swami Vivekananda intentionally recontextualized Advaita to address the intellectual, psychological, and socio-political challenges of his time. The result is a philosophical synthesis in which metaphysical non-dualism retains its essential structure but acquires new dimensions, ethical, practical, universal, and globally conscious, that redefine Advaita as a living spiritual ideology adaptable to modernity. The comparison between Śaṅkara and Swami Vivekananda must therefore be situated on multiple levels: metaphysical continuity, epistemological reinterpretation, ethical expansion, social orientation, global application, and psychological depth. These dimensions reveal a dynamic historical relationship wherein Swami Vivekananda's work cannot be understood simply as a departure from the classical tradition, nor as a mere continuation of it, but as a creative re-envisioning shaped by historical necessity, personal experience, and a global philosophical mission.

At the level of metaphysics, both Śaṅkara and Swami Vivekananda stand firmly on the doctrine of non-dual *Brahman* as the sole ultimate reality. Śaṅkara's meticulous commentaries on the *Brahma Sūtras*, *Upaniṣads*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* establish *Brahman* as *nirguṇa*, attributeless, infinite consciousness, and the only absolute truth. Swami Vivekananda consistently affirmed this metaphysical core, insisting that the essence of every soul is identical with Brahman and that liberation lies in the realization of this identity. However, the methods and emphases of the two thinkers reveal noticeable differences. Śaṅkara approached Advaita through rigorous dialectical reasoning, upholding śruti as the highest epistemic authority. His method was primarily philosophical, analytical, and contemplative. Swami Vivekananda, although deeply knowledgeable in classical logic and scriptural hermeneutics, did not prioritize scholastic method; instead, he grounded Advaita in spiritual experience and sought to communicate its transformative potential to a broader audience. His approach was existential rather than textual, expansive rather than exclusive. While Śaṅkara's audience consisted primarily of scholars, monks, and seekers familiar with Vedic learning, Swami Vivekananda addressed global audiences composed of

laypeople, scientists, reformers, and truth-seekers of diverse backgrounds. The difference in audience partly explains the difference in tone: Śaṅkara's Advaita appears austere and philosophical; Swami Vivekananda's appears universalist, practical, and psychologically resonant.<sup>19</sup>

Another major point of comparison lies in the interpretation of *māyā*. For Śaṅkara, *māyā* is the cosmic principle that projects the appearance of multiplicity upon the singular reality of *Brahman*, rendering the phenomenal world ultimately non-absolute. His position does not deny empirical reality but regards it as dependent upon Brahman and ultimately sublated through *jñāna*. In Śaṅkara's formulation, the empirical world (*vyavahāra*) is a realm of superimposition resulting from ignorance. Swami Vivekananda preserves the essential meaning of *māyā* as limitation but refuses to treat the world as insignificant. He frequently emphasizes that the world is “the gymnasium of the soul” and a field for spiritual growth. While Śaṅkara stresses renunciation from the empirical, Swami Vivekananda urges a transformation of one's perspective such that the empirical itself becomes a path toward the realization of unity. This is not a contradiction but a reorientation: the classical principle of *mithyātva* becomes in Swami Vivekananda a basis for spiritual engagement rather than withdrawal. He interprets *māyā* not as a metaphysical obstacle but as the evolutionary mechanism through which the infinite manifests itself in finite forms. Thus, one key difference is that Śaṅkara emphasizes transcendence of the world, whereas Swami Vivekananda emphasizes the divinization of the world through enlightened action.

Ethically, the divergence between the two thinkers becomes even more striking. Śaṅkara, consistent with the classical Advaitic view, regards karma, ritual duties, and ethical obligations as preparatory disciplines for purifying the mind prior to the attainment of *jñāna*. Ethical action is instrumental rather than ultimate in his system. Liberation arises purely through knowledge, not through action. While he does not negate the importance of ethical life, he does not promote it as a direct path to the highest realization. Swami Vivekananda, by contrast, elevates ethics to a central place in spiritual life. His reinterpretation of Advaita produces a new ethical vision, best captured in his doctrine of *Practical Vedānta*. For Swami Vivekananda, the realization of unity implies an ethical obligation to recognize and serve the divinity in other beings. This ethical universalism is a natural consequence of non-

dual metaphysics, not a mere auxiliary practice. To see God in every person becomes an application of Advaitic truth. Śaṅkara's ethics are predominantly soteriological; Swami Vivekananda's are universalistic and socially engaged. Śaṅkara's renunciation-oriented discipline contrasts with Swami Vivekananda's call for service, empowerment, and active compassion. This transformation of ethics marks one of the most significant expansions Swami Vivekananda brings to the Advaita tradition.<sup>20</sup>

A comparative analysis of the two thinkers also requires examining their differing attitudes toward society and the world. Śaṅkara's corpus contains limited engagement with social institutions. His emphasis rests primarily on metaphysics and individual liberation. His writings neither reject society nor advocate significant social reform; such concerns were not central to his philosophical mission. Swami Vivekananda, shaped by the socio-political realities of colonial India, viewed social stagnation, poverty, and inequality as national obstacles that required immediate attention. For him, Advaita offered the philosophical basis for social equality and uplift. If the same Self exists in all beings, then discrimination based on caste, gender, or wealth becomes spiritually indefensible. Thus, Advaita became the metaphysical ground for a new vision of Indian society marked by dignity, unity, and empowerment. Swami Vivekananda's call for education, human development, and national regeneration draws directly from his Advaitic conviction regarding the divinity of every human being. In this sense, he converts a metaphysical claim into a socio-political imperative. Śaṅkara's Advaita is individualistic in orientation; Swami Vivekananda's is both individualistic and collective. Śaṅkara addresses the mokṣa of the seeker; Swami Vivekananda addresses the awakening of an entire civilization.

The roles of renunciation and action also provide significant points of comparison. For Śaṅkara, the renunciant embodies the ideal path to liberation. Renunciation facilitates freedom from ignorance by removing attachments that bind one to phenomenal existence. Swami Vivekananda, although a monk himself, did not restrict spiritual life to monastic discipline. He insisted that householders, professionals, students, and ordinary people could attain the highest realization through dedicated work, meditation, devotion, or knowledge. This shift broadens the Advaitic path and democratizes spirituality. Swami Vivekananda's emphasis on karma yoga, understood not as action seeking reward but as selfless service rooted in awareness of divinity, reconciles action with non-dualism in a way rarely emphasized

in classical Advaita. Śaṅkara regards action as sublated in knowledge; Swami Vivekananda regards action, when performed with the right consciousness, as a path toward knowledge. This reinterpretation gives Advaita a practical dynamism suited to modern life, transforming it from a renunciatory system into a philosophy accessible to all.

Both thinkers share a deep commitment to the authority of the *Upaniṣads*, yet their hermeneutical strategies differ significantly. Śaṅkara reads the *Upaniṣads* through strict philosophical logic, aiming to establish a coherent non-dual doctrine aligned with the *prasthānatrayī*. His method is exegetical and syllogistic. Swami Vivekananda's hermeneutics, however, are synthetic and experiential. He draws not only from scripture but from Ramakrishna's mystical realizations, global spiritual ideas, science, and psychological introspection. His interpretation of scripture is therefore phenomenological, focused on lived experience, rather than purely analytic. While Śaṅkara prioritizes *śruti-pramāṇa*, Swami Vivekananda prioritizes *anubhava* as the true criterion of truth. In classical Advaita, scriptural reasoning leads to direct knowledge; in Swami Vivekananda's Advaita, direct experience validates scriptural truths. This experiential emphasis resonates strongly with modern seekers less inclined toward scholastic technicality and more toward inner spiritual development.

In comparing their philosophical temperaments, it becomes evident that Śaṅkara's method is more rigorously metaphysical whereas Swami Vivekananda's is more integrative. Śaṅkara's approach parallels the classical Indian philosophical tradition, where clarity, precision, and logical rigor are paramount. He resolves apparent contradictions within scripture, refutes rival schools, and establishes a unified doctrine of non-dualism. Swami Vivekananda's temperament is synthetic, universal, and pragmatic. He integrates Advaita with *bhakti*, *yoga*, *karma*, and even elements of Western science and philosophy. While Śaṅkara defended Advaita against other schools, Swami Vivekananda harmonized Advaita with other traditions. Śaṅkara's temperamental orientation is intellectual; Swami Vivekananda's is synthetic and expansive. Yet both converge on the essential truth that the Self is one and that realization of this truth is the highest goal of human existence.

One of the most striking differences between the two thinkers lies in their engagement with global audiences. Śaṅkara's mission was geographically and culturally rooted within India. Swami Vivekananda, by contrast, globalized Advaita

by presenting it on the world stage at a time when Eastern thought was largely unknown to the West. His ability to translate non-dualism into concepts accessible to Western audiences, often drawing analogies from science, psychology, and comparative religion, transformed Advaita from a regional philosophy into a global spiritual paradigm. This globalization did not distort Advaita but expanded its horizons. Swami Vivekananda's work marks the beginning of Advaita's entry into transnational discourse, influencing Western mysticism, psychology, comparative religion, and the modern yoga movement. This global engagement represents a major historical expansion beyond Śaṅkara's world.

Despite these differences, it is important to emphasize that Swami Vivekananda never abandoned the fundamental principles of Śaṅkara's Advaita. The ontological claim that Brahman alone is real, the epistemological claim that ignorance veils truth, and the soteriological claim that realization of unity is the goal of human life all remain intact in his writings. Swami Vivekananda repeatedly acknowledged Śaṅkara as one of the greatest philosophers in human history and described Advaita as the pinnacle of spiritual thought. Where he innovated, he did so not by altering Advaita's metaphysical foundations but by extending its implications into domains where classical Advaita remained silent or neutral. His expansions are interpretive, not revisionist. Swami Vivekananda stands not as a challenger to Śaṅkara but as his most creative modern successor.

What emerges from this comparative analysis is a nuanced picture of continuity and transformation. Classical Advaita, in Śaṅkara's formulation, represents one of the most sophisticated metaphysical systems in world philosophy, pure, precise, and focused primarily on the ultimate nature of reality and consciousness. Swami Vivekananda's Advaita, while grounded in the same metaphysics, integrates diverse dimensions of human life: ethics, psychology, social action, interreligious harmony, education, nationalism, and global spirituality.<sup>21</sup> Śaṅkara articulates the essence of non-dual truth; Swami Vivekananda translates that truth into a civilizational force. Śaṅkara builds the philosophical edifice; Swami Vivekananda opens its gates to the world. Śaṅkara offers the metaphysics of unity; Swami Vivekananda offers the manifestation of unity in action, service, and global understanding. Together they represent two phases of Advaita's historical evolution,

the classical and the modern, each indispensable to the continuity of Hindu philosophy.

**Conclusion:**

The sustained engagement between Śāṅkara's classical exposition of Advaita Vedānta and Swami Vivekananda's modern re-envisioning of the same tradition marks one of the most significant instances of continuity and creative transformation in the history of Indian philosophy, with resonances that extend to global intellectual discourse. The comparative inquiry undertaken in this study reveals that, although Swami Vivekananda remains firmly rooted in the metaphysical framework established by Śāṅkara, he simultaneously reshapes Advaita into a vibrant, dynamic, and socially responsive worldview capable of addressing the ethical, cultural, and existential concerns of the modern era. Accordingly, the concluding analysis seeks not only to clarify the philosophical points of convergence and divergence between these two seminal thinkers but also to assess the wider implications of their intellectual relationship for contemporary spiritual practice, social engagement, and global philosophical reflection.

Śāṅkara's vision of Advaita remains one of the most radical assertions of metaphysical non-dualism ever articulated: Brahman alone is real; the world is an appearance; and liberation lies in the intuitive realization of the identity between ātman and Brahman. This teaching, refined through rigorous dialectic and textual exegesis, has shaped Indian philosophical discourse for more than a millennium. Śāṅkara's intellectual legacy lies in his systematic clarification of *Upaniṣadic* non-dualism, his method of distinguishing levels of reality, and his insistence that liberation is attained only through knowledge born of contemplative discipline. His philosophical system, however, is one that privileges transcendence over immanence, contemplation over action, and renunciation over social involvement. His work is fundamentally world-transcending in orientation, directed toward the dissolution of empirical distinctions and the attainment of a higher, non-relational truth that exists beyond name, form, causality, and time.

In Swami Vivekananda's hands, Advaita becomes not merely a metaphysical doctrine but a universal human ideal capable of grounding spiritual democracy, interreligious understanding, and cross-cultural solidarity. By insisting that each soul is potentially divine and that the goal of life is to manifest this divinity through

selfless work, meditation, and knowledge, he gives Advaita an ethical and practical shape absent from Śāṅkara's original formulation. He dissolves the classical boundary between the worldly and the spiritual, arguing that if Brahman permeates all existence, then every human relation becomes an opportunity for realizing non-dual truth. This democratization of spiritual possibility represents one of Swami Vivekananda's greatest contributions: he elevates Advaita from an elite contemplative tradition to a global philosophy accessible to people of all cultures, classes, and abilities.

The ethical and social implications of this difference cannot be overstated. Śāṅkara's focus was liberation through knowledge, achievable primarily by renunciants devoted to contemplative practice. Swami Vivekananda expands the scope of liberation so that action, service, and social responsibility become pathways to non-dual realization. His famous doctrine that "service to man is service to God" reflects a revolutionary spiritual humanism grounded in Advaita but directed toward uplifting humanity. Through this shift, Swami Vivekananda offers a philosophical basis for modern social reform, education, and humanitarian work, dimensions almost entirely absent in the classical Advaitic discourse.

In conclusion, the comparative study affirms that both Śāṅkara and Swami Vivekananda represent indispensable pillars of Advaita Vedānta. Śāṅkara safeguards the purity of non-dual truth; Swami Vivekananda ensures its relevance in a rapidly changing world. Together, they embody the two necessary poles of a complete spiritual philosophy: the timeless and the timely, the transcendent and the immanent, the eternal and the historical. Advaita Vedānta, in their combined legacy, emerges as not merely a doctrine of liberation but a comprehensive vision of human potential, dignity, and unity. It becomes a philosophy capable of addressing the deepest metaphysical questions while also inspiring compassionate action and global harmony. In bringing Advaita from the seclusion of monastic cells to the global public square, Swami Vivekananda ensures that the ancient wisdom of non-duality continues to illuminate the path of humanity in the modern age and beyond.

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