

# AN ANALYSIS OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ASPECT OF REALITY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ŚANKARA AND G.W.F. HEGEL.

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## Introduction

The problem of reality always remains at the centre of Philosophical discussions with the different aspects of human exploration. The problem of reality presupposes the idea of consciousness in the philosophical exploration of existence. For philosophical purposes, the consciousness may be analysed at different levels - ontological, epistemological, psychological, ethical, and metaphysical. Here the paper will analyse the problem of reality at the ontological level only with the comparative analysis between Śankara and Hegel. Śankara was born in the village Kaladi in the central region of Kerala during 788-820 AD and was known as the commentator of Vedantic aphorisms. G.W.F. Hegel belongs to the era of 'German idealism' of western tradition thought. He was born in Stuttgart during 1770-1831 and spent his whole life in academic pursuit. The purpose of comparison lies in the approach of both the thinkers Śankara and Hegel. After putting it to reason it is identified that Śankara in the eastern tradition of thought and Hegel in the western tradition are the philosophers of one thought i.e., *Brahman (Ātman)* and *Geist* (Spirit) respectively. Hence the paper represents the philosophical understanding of both the tradition of thoughts to pass the argument from one tradition to another for the growth of knowledge in the context of historicity and culture. It is an effort to simulate the ontological arguments from both thinkers to analyse the philosophical understanding of concepts and phenomena that helps in establishing the idea of Ultimate reality.

## Comparison of ontological arguments of Śankara and Hegel

Śankara and Hegel both shares ontological arguments to approach the problem of reality. Śankara emphasizes the problem of reality at three levels viz., *Vyāvahārika* (Empirical), *Prātibhāsika* (Dreaming), and *Pārmārthika* (Absolute). Initially, Śankara did not believe in the reality of phenomenal or empirical existence because it appears to be true but in reality, he considers it as temporary due to its ever-changing character. Śankara tries to understand the idea of *Jīva* by emphasizing the ontological arguments. According to him, *Jīva* has an outfit of three coats i.e., the outer coat is the physical body and it is associated with the waking state of consciousness. Inside *Jīva* is the *Antahkarana* which is associated with the dream state and in more inner coat there is *avidyā* which is associated with it the state of dreamless sleep. The corresponding three states of *Jīva* are called the gross (*sthūla*), subtle (*sūkṣma*), and causal (*kāraṇa*)<sup>1</sup>. Ontologically, these three states of bodies are associated with the five sheaths (*kośas*) mentioned in the *Taittirīya Upanishad* with the three states of modified consciousness mentioned in the *Māndūkya Upanishad*. The five sheaths are the sheath of food (*annamayakośas*), the sheath of vital airs (*prānamayakośas*), the sheath of mind (*manomayakośas*), the sheath of self-consciousness (*viññānamayakośas*), and the sheath of bliss (*ānandamayakośas*)<sup>1</sup>. The sheath of food is related to the physical body, the sheath of vital air, the mind, and self-consciousness are related to the subtle body, and the sheath of bliss to the causal body. This association or relation of the body, states of consciousness, and five sheaths can be represented as follows:

S.no.	States of Consciousness given in <i>Māndūkya Upanishad</i> .	Forms of body	Sheaths ( <i>kośas</i> ) Mentioned in <i>Taittirīya Upanishad</i>
1.	Waking State	Physical Body	Sheath of Food ( <i>annamayakośas</i> )
2.	Dream-State	Subtle Body	Sheath of Vital-airs ( <i>prānamayakośas</i> ), the mind

			( <i>manomayakośas</i> ) and Self-consciousness ( <i>vijñānamayakośas</i> )
3.	Deep Sleep State	Causal Body	Sheath of bliss ( <i>ānandamayakośas</i> )

The above table indicates that *Jīva* is an envelope of five sheaths that undergoes various manifestations of Self. Śankara in *śruti* considers the five sheaths to reveal the nature of Brahman as an inward Self by eliminating the five sheaths, as rice is extracted from the grain by peeling the layers of husk.

Hence, the wise person knows the subtle effects of five sheaths corresponding to the five elements of existence viz., earth, water, fire, air, and ether. The five sheaths or *Panchakośas* are mentioned in *Taittirīya Upanishad* (2.1-5). Thus explained:

#### ***Annamayakośas***

The sheath of *Annamayakośas* is the physical body corresponding to the earth element and is the grossest sheath, which is nourished by food. The men living through this sheath of food identify themselves as humans - a mass of flesh and bones. Hence the physical body is the essence of food. Birth and death are the consequences of *Annamayakośas*. But in reality, the self identifies itself as its own self and distinct from the body.

#### ***Prānamayakośas***

It is the second layer of the sheath, which is composed of the element of vital air i.e., *prāna*. It is the principle that holds body and mind together to manifest the breath physically. The vital air in breathing coupled with the five organs of senses forms the sheath of *Prānamayakośas*. Life continues with this principle by the modification in the air that enters the body and comes out of it.

#### ***Manomayakośas***

It is the third layer of the sheath, which is constituted of the *mānas* (mind). It is related to the subtle body and manifested in the mind along with five sense organs. It is a reason for diversity in terms of 'I', 'me', and mine. The *Manomayakośas* is a sheath of mind or

manas that is truly associated with personhood than *Annamayakosās* and *Prānamayakośās*

### ***Vijñānamayakośās***

It is the fourth layer of the sheath, which is composed of *būddhi* or intellect or *Vijñāna*. It is also related to the subtle part of the body, which is a combination of intellect (*būddhi*) and the five senses. The sheath regulates the intellect to determine, and discriminate the things to identify the modifications that occur in perception and becomes the cause of transmigration. It is a sheath of knowledge that discern things and reflect in *cit*. its function is knowledge and identifies itself with the body.

### ***Ānandamayakośā***

It is the innermost and subtlest sheath. It is the sheath of bliss, as it is realized in deep sleep and related to the causal body. The state of *Ānandamayakośā* is attained when the mind and senses stop functioning and find themselves in between the world and self. It is a sheath of supreme bliss; it is perfectly realized in the deep sleep than a waking and dreaming state. The realization of *Ānanda* is the nature of *Ātman*, which is blissful and absolute truth. It is a formal manifestation of *Brahman*.

According to René Guénon, the sheath, namely, the *Ānandamayakośā* –the sheath made of beatitude- “is none other than the totality of possibilities of manifestation”<sup>2</sup> of the *Ātman*.

Śankara tries to explain physical existence concerning *Vyāvahārika* (Empirical) reality based on *Panchkośā* (Five Sheaths), which is relatively real but not real. On the other hand, comparatively, Hegel considered the world to be absolutely real by emphasizing the doctrine of spirit based on the triad of subjective, objective, and absolute truth. Hegel believes that subjectivity and objectivity are two independent entities, therefore, perceptually real. It is a production of sense-certainty hence it can't be considered fake or false. Consequently, it is deduced that logical knowledge is not easy to be falsified, as it is the knowledge obtained with the help of categories (perception and sense-certainty) with the realization of self-consciousness as an inward reality in terms of

consciousness. The subjectivity in form of self-consciousness is the nature that defines it as non-conflicting and non-contradicting with the outer world of perception and the inner world of passion, desire, thoughts, and emotions. Likewise, objectivity and subjectivity in spirit transcend to absolute spirit. Subsequently, according to Hegel, the absolute spirit can be realized in three forms i.e., art, religion, and philosophy. Art in form and beatitude is the mode of absolute in its immediacy. The form is considered in its immediacy as external in sense objects that manifested in absolute. Hence beauty is realized in two distinct forms: subjectivity (unity) and objectivity (plurality). Subjectivity follows the content and objectivity follows the form. Moreover, subjectivity is the internal consciousness, and objectivity is external to sense objects. The former provides spiritual experience and the latter provides the material experience concerning the subject itself to give it form. Likewise, both Śankara and Hegel did not negate the phenomenal world concerning knowledge and experience ontologically at the initial stage of the inquiry. It exposes the fact that both Śankara and Hegel valued subjective consciousness over the objective consciousness of the phenomenal world. It is the subjective consciousness or spirit that realizes the truth as the *Ātman* in *Brahman* by Śankara and the absolute spirit as *Geist* in Hegel. Hegel reiterates that the spirit is present in both subjective and objective forms, which transcends to absolute spirit. It validates the dialectical progression in a triad of Idea-Nature-Spirit. This progression of Hegel and Śankara's understanding of the nature of *Brahman* shows the distinction between the two thinkers in the approach. The Śankara tries to distinguish spirituality from rationality and negates rationality in realizing the *Brahman* and on the other hand Hegel identifies absolute in rationality that can only be realized in terms of phenomenology. It means the consummation of thought process in the absolute knowledge emerges in the spirit as rational knowledge is obtained successively in the preceded stages of knowledge. Hence the development of consciousness as absolute spirit in Hegelian philosophy is called absolute knowledge or philosophy, “as it is the reconciliation of Spirit in itself with Spirit for itself and the revelation of Spirit as the in and for itself.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore it can be analysed that consciousness in Śankara philosophy represents its divine or spiritual nature because

it is asserted by *śruti* that *Brahman* is ultimate, real, and bliss, on the other hand, Hegel's notion of spirit is fully rational and identifies the rationality as absolute spirit in practical purposes of art, religion, and philosophy.

These three stages are of different categories but it transcends into absolute in the terms of a perfect balance between content and form. The perfect balance can only be realized in the stage of philosophy. However, this is the state of self-knowing where the absolute spirit is infinite and realizing freedom. It exposes the fact that the mind is objective and subjective in form of a knower and known as an idea in itself. The gap between knower and known is transcended to absolute.

Successively, Śankara's concept of God is a religious aspiration of evolving humanity that there should be an idea of God in form of a 'personal god'. The concept of 'personal god' is the idea of empirical existence from the point of absolute it has no existence. Śankara resolves this problem by making the distinction between *Sagun Brahman* (qualified) and *Nirgun Brahman* (attribute less). The *Sagun Brahman* is called *Īśvara* (God). As a matter of difference between the two latter is the power of *Māyā* while the former is not. "The idea of a personal god is due to *Māyā*."<sup>4</sup> It can be depicted as, "*Īśvara* or the *saguna-Brahman* represents one reality, and that is a personal god who is supposed to be all-knowing, omnipresent, as well as the originator, destroyer and the sustainer of the world whereas the *nirguna Brahman* represents the ultimate reality, the absolute."<sup>5</sup> From an empirical point of view, the existence of reality is real in form of an idea of *Īśvara* (God). The dual nature that *Brahman* possesses is the object of knowledge or nescience and ignorance (*avidyā*). The world in scriptures is termed as *Māyā*, *Prakriti*, *Swabhava*, and *Ksetra*. *Prakriti* is not only inorganic matter but organic with life denoted in the intellectual, volitional, and emotional phenomenon of human life. Bhagwad Gītā, says, "the great elements *ahankara* (egoism), *būddhi* (willing), the *avyakta* (the principle connected with *būddhi*), ten senses, one mind, the five objects of sense; desire, hatred, pleasure, pain the aggregate, intelligence, firmness; this here described in brief, is the *ksetra* with its modifications."<sup>6</sup> It considered that the modifications in the world are the outer and inner consciousness present in gross matter, which is devoid of the life

principle, activity or intelligence in it. The body is just an object of the subject that acts like a means for the soul to work or function, it is nothing apart from it. At the inner level of consciousness, it is the soul in man and called *ksetragna*. The subject is the soul force or source of knowledge and intellectual activity. It is one, permanent, and unchangeable. If any of the subjects or objects get removed the world will get disappear. It proves the fact that the objective world has no existence apart subjective world. The appearance of the empirical world occurred due to *Prakriti* and the power of *Māyā*. The subject and object both are a mere manifestation of an absolute. *Māyā* and *Prakriti* are unreal existences even *Ātmanin* dependently has no existence apart from *Brahman*. Comparatively on the other hand, “Hegel equates absolute spirit with the god since it endowed with all the qualities of the absolute.”<sup>7</sup> It means the one absolute is realized in all individuals so that all individual selves get unified and transcendent ontologically in the consciousness of the absolute. Moreover, Hegel says, “God is God only so far as he knows himself.” This is the self-knowledge that God has man’s knowledge of God. However, it is the knowledge of man that construct the idea of God. Moreover, Hegel was influenced by Meister Eckhart’s thought of God and considered that the “eye with which God sees me is the eye with which I see him; my eye and his eye are the same...If God did not exist nor would I; if I did not exist nor would he.”<sup>8</sup> Hence Hegel believes that God is our construction of mind as a concept under the influence of a culture that is formed, structured, moulded, and created. It construes the concept that God is the construction of God is a phenomenon of self-knowledge or consciousness. Therefore, culture and religion design or presents the concept of God to exist absolutely in and for themselves.

Consequently, it can be considered comparatively that Śankara’s conception of God emanant to relate religion with the philosophy of life. In Advaita Vedanta, the idea of God remains real as long as the empirical world looks to be real. It begets the practice of morality as a value till it leads to the knowledge of ultimate reality. Therefore, Śankara’s conception of God followed as an instrumental value to regulate the moral order in the world. It is a temporary concept that remains until the empirical world has

existed. Finally, the revelation of Ultimate reality lies in realizing the real nature of *Ātman* as *Brahman*.

In comparison with Śankara, Hegel says in the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “The truth is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz., to be actual subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself.”<sup>9</sup> It infers the fact that the development of the spirit as the whole is the absolute spirit, which is the essence of being a subject that realizes in itself as the truth. It suggests that when the self-knowing spirit or absolute spirit becomes a phenomenon of mind realizes the freedom in true sense. Hence absolute spirit is freedom, which is endless and self-determined. As Hegel tries to pass each notion of rationality through dialectics so he classifies religion as natural, spiritual, and absolute. It can be understood as, “The self of existent Spirit has, as a result, the form of complete immediacy; it is posited neither as something thought or imagined, nor as something produced, as is the case with the immediate self in natural religion and also in the religion of art; on the contrary, this god is sensuously and directly beheld as a self, as an actual individual man; only so is this god self-consciousness.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The discussion of the ontological aspect of Śankara doctrine of *Ātman* and Hegel’s doctrine of spirit reveals a dramatic commonality between the thoughts of both thinkers with drastic contrast in the approach of realizing the concept of *Brahman* in Śankara philosophy and absolute of Hegel. As the approach of Śankara in realizing the problem of consciousness is spiritual and divine Hegel’s approach to consciousness is fully rational and dialectical. He tries to realize the absolute in the world of phenomena with the laws of dialectics. On the other side, Śankara rejected the external or empirical world to be real in the doctrine of *Māyā* so he discards and disregards the reality of the phenomenal world due to the power of *Māyā* by which superimposition of the subject on the object becomes possible. It is depicted as “an illusion, a dream, or a castle in the air.”<sup>11</sup> Resultantly the whole universe becomes illusory. It infers the thought that all



individual souls created their universe and the world is its imagination. However, the individual souls are part of the universal soul which merges with it through the practice of meditation by realizing the true nature of *Ātmanas Brahman*. This is non-dualism. Likewise, both Śankara and Hegel realize the internal consciousness either in the form of self-consciousness in Hegel or as an *Ātman* in Śankara. It follows that both give more impetus to subjectivity than objectivity because objectivity is temporary. Subjectivity is always trying to experience or realize the ultimate and this tendency comprehends everything and transcends everything to realize the absolute. Hence the problem of reality in view of consciousness arises in the thoughts of both Sankara and Hegel that culminates in realizing the reality as ultimate consciousness in subjectivity rather objectivity. Therefore, as both, the thinkers arise in different spaces and times with cultural lag then also their thoughts in believing reality as one is a growth in knowledge that proves the fact that whatever path we follow whether spiritual or rational leads to the same conclusion that reality may be linguistically termed differently but indicating towards the ontological reality that leads to the subjective experience of reality as one.

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