

6. Advaita and the Non-Dual Problem

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SOURCES

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6. Advaita and the Non-Dual Problem

quick read

- Advaita Vedanta says only Brahman (absolute, impersonal reality) is ultimately real. Everything else — the world, the body, the individual self, karma, time, space — is **maya** (illusion) or **mithya** (empirically real but ultimately not absolute). Liberation (**moksha**) means realising that the atman was never separate from Brahman.
- The core problem: Advaita says only Brahman exists, but it still needs karma, individual souls, multiple states of consciousness, and different "levels of reality" to make its system work. Every time it needs multiplicity, it retreats into a second layer. But that second layer is precisely what Advaita says is not ultimately real.
- **Bhagavad Gita 16.8** associates the claim "the world is unreal and without God" with **asuric** (demoniac) nature. Whether that applies to sophisticated Advaita is debatable, but the textual tension is real.

The Advaita section of any serious examination of Hindu philosophy is where the question stops being about history and geography and starts being about internal logic. And the logic, under pressure, begins to buckle.

The core claim of Advaita Vedanta — literally "non-dual end of the Vedas," the school founded by Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th century — is simple and radical. Only **Brahman** (the absolute, impersonal, undifferentiated reality)

exists. Everything else is [maya](#) (illusion) or [mithya](#) (empirically real but ultimately not absolute). The [atman](#) (individual soul) is not really individual. It is identical with Brahman. The sense of being a separate person with a separate will is [avidya](#) (ignorance). Liberation means realising you were never separate from Brahman in the first place.

That sounds profound. But when pressed, it runs into immediate trouble.

The first problem is karma. The karma system needs actions, consequences, moral choices, rebirth across different bodies. But if Brahman alone is real, then karma cannot be real – it is not Brahman. The Advaitin must say karma exists in a "vyavaharika" (empirical/transactional) sense, not in a "paramarthika" (ultimate/absolute) sense. Karma is real enough to matter, but not real enough to be Brahman. That is a two-layered reality. And a two-layered reality is, by definition, not non-duality.

The second problem is the self. [Bhagavad Gita 3.27](#) says the [gunas](#) (material qualities – goodness, passion, ignorance) perform all actions. The soul merely thinks "I am the doer" through [ahankara](#) (ego, literally "I-maker"). [Gita 14.19](#) says one must see no agent other than the gunas and know the Lord beyond them. The "two birds" metaphor from the [Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.1-2](#) and [Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4.6-7](#) shows one bird eating, the other watching. If the soul is the watching bird, there is a distinction between observer and observed. That is duality within a system claiming non-duality.

The third problem is [Bhagavad Gita 16.6-8](#). Krishna describes two kinds of created beings – divine ([daiva](#)) and demoniac ([asuric](#)). In verse 16.8, the demoniac ones say: "This world is unreal ([asatyam](#)), with no foundation, no God ([anishvaram](#)) in control. It is produced of sex desire and has no cause other than lust." The resemblance to Advaita's "the world is unreal" is uncomfortable. A sophisticated Advaitin will immediately say that Advaita does not deny God or say the world is sheer non-existence – it says the world depends on Brahman, like a pot depends on clay. Fair enough. But the textual association is there, and it is not easy to shrug off.

The fourth problem – and this is the one that matters most in practice – is what happens during argumentation. When pressed, the Advaitin keeps shifting between levels. "Does karma exist?" – "In the empirical sense, yes." "Is the

self the doer?" – "No, the subtle body is." "What about different states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep?" – "Those are three perceived realities; the fourth ([turiya](#) , the transcendent state) observes them all." "Is perceived reality different from absolute reality?" – silence, or a change of subject.

That pattern – of retreating into a second level every time a contradiction appears – is the core of the problem. It is not that layered language is always false. Philosophers use it all the time. The problem is that in Advaita, the second level is defined as not-ultimately-real, yet it is the level on which all moral, social, and practical life operates. A system that dismisses ordinary reality as illusion and then relies on ordinary reality to make its own arguments is a system that eats its own foundation.

The [Bhagavad Gita 18.14](#) adds another layer: five factors produce any action – the body, the doer, the senses, the effort, and the divine ([daiva](#)). That text insists on real causal plurality. If only Brahman is real, then these five factors are either illusory (in which case the Gita is teaching illusion) or they are real (in which case Advaita is wrong about non-duality). Either way, the system does not close cleanly.