

# Advaita Metaphysics and Environmental Sustenance

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**Abstract:** Ecological crisis is a felt need in our times. There has been much research and debate as to how to come out this crisis. This essay is an attempt to bring out the reverence to nature as God's body. Advaita philosophy of Śankara is known for its theory of *Mithya* (Illusion). But if we analyze his metaphysics we get a completely new picture and that is God (Brahman) Himself (Itself) is nature. It is mystical in nature. Advaita philosophy goes beyond any particular religion. Therefore the attitude of this philosophy can be a way out of the crisis.

**Keywords:** Indian Philosophy, Advaita, Metaphysics of Advaita, Environmental Crisis, Mystical Experience.

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## I. INTRODUCTORY

There needs no introduction to the ecological crisis felt by us. The responses from various branches like science, philosophy, religion etc. tells the story of urgency with regard to the crisis. There is a felt need to find out the roots for the same. The ground breaking article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" by Lynn White<sup>1</sup> triggered responses by many scholars. The salient features of the article throw light on the problematic. He starts the argument as the development of science and technology is the root cause of the destruction of nature. The foundation for this development is Christian religion as it promotes the anthropocentric environment. In the theory of anthropocentric environment human beings are not part of nature but the nature is in their service. He declares that we continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis if we do not reject the Christian axiom that nature exists solely to serve humans.

He gives an alternative model of St. Francis of Assisi as he addresses beings in nature as brother and sister. Establishing relationship between nature and humans St. Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures. At the end of the article he proposes St. Francis as a patron Saint for ecologists.

The question before us now is, what is the relationship between humans and nature? In response the Advaita metaphysics gives us an alternate model. In this essay an attempt is made to highlight the features of human and nature relationship in Advaita in order to propose some practical points to help in sustaining the environment.

## II. NATURE AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIP IN ADVAITA

Pragmatic utilitarianism caused a breach between nature and humans. The pragmatic and utilitarian philosophy argue, "...through a process of mutual adjustment and evolutionary co-determination"<sup>2</sup> is sufficient to develop an appropriate environmental ethic. That argument precisely is the cause of our present ecological crisis. What we need is a different outlook towards nature. Deutsch argues that reverence to nature is antidote to the pragmatic utilitarianism. He explains the alternative model, natural reverence, "By 'natural reverence' I simply mean the attitude, the awareness, of the belonging together of man and nature in freedom—in such a way that allows for a meaningful, creative play in that relationship."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis, [with discussion of St. Francis; reprint, 1967]," David Spring, Eileen Spring (eds.), *Ecology and Religion in History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp 15-31.

<sup>2</sup> J. Baird Callicott, "Conceptual Resources for Environmental Ethics in Asian Traditions of Thought: A Propaedeutic," *Philosophy East and West* 37:115-30 (1987).

<sup>3</sup> Eliot Deutsch, "A Metaphysical Grounding for Natural Reverence: East-West," J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (eds.), *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, (State University of New York Press, 1989), 259-265

The attitude that Deutsch indicates is 'belonging together of man and nature.' It is not Advaitic 'oneness.' Advaita metaphysics provides the oneness of Brahman (the Ultimate Reality) and the creation. This metaphysical realization naturally gives rise to reverence. A little more explanation is needed here to understand metaphysics of Advaita in relation with causality.

The first two *sūtras*<sup>4</sup> (aphorisms) of Bādarāyaṇa are taken as the ground for the relationship between Brahman and the creation. The first *sūtra* initiates the inquiry into the Reality. The next *sūtra* explains It as the cause of the world. Quoting *Taittirīya Upaniṣat* Brahman is explained as efficient and material cause of the universe, "Again the *Taittirīya* text, 'That from which all beings are born... Try to know that. That is Brahman' aims at defining a non-dual Brahman as the only reality and does not define a *Saguṇa* Brahman. It defines Brahman as the efficient and also as the material cause of the universe, since It is the place of dissolution of the world."<sup>5</sup> This gives the vision that the universe (human beings included) is Brahman. Then the reverence is not as if we are standing outside (aloof) nature and giving reverence but we are included in it.

How the Kantian analysis of sublimity brought breach between man and nature is shown in Deutsch, "The beautiful prepares us to love disinterestedly something, even nature itself; the sublime prepares us to esteem something highly even in opposition to our own (sensible) interest."<sup>6</sup> Kant's analysis brings separated-ness rather than unity, "...disinterestedness is not – brought into the service of creativity and kinship, but in further severing man from his natural world."<sup>7</sup> As the essay progresses we will see that Kant's 'disinterestedness' is closer to Advaitic vision than Deutsch's 'natural reverence.'

The idea of discontinuity between the (sensible) world and the Self (Reality) is shown as the separateness between man and nature by Deutsch. He quotes Sureśvara, "Between the world (Existence) and the rock-firm Self (Reality) there is no connection whatsoever except that of ignorance."<sup>8</sup> In this quote there is no reference to man at all. Man is included in the world (Existence). So the question of discontinuity does not arise. The discontinuity is between Reality (Brahman) and the world; man associates himself with the world and as a result there is discontinuity between man and Reality (and not between man and the world). Our interest here is to establish the relationship between man and the world. It is clear from the above argument that man is not separate from the world but one with it.

At the *pāramārthika* (the ultimate) level of understanding there are no two realities like Brahman and the world (of appearance); the world is Brahman, "All this, verily, is Brahman" (ChU 3.14.1). Śaṅkara's commentary on this verse throws light on how all this is Brahman; it is explained as 'beginning, ending and continuing in it.'

Everything, beginning with Light, Food, &c., is born out of Brahma: "hence beginning in It." Similarly in an order reverse of that of birth, all this dissolves in Brahma, - becomes identified with it: hence, "ending in It." In the same manner, during existence, everything lives and moves in It; hence, "continuing in It." Thus, at all periods of time this universe remains one with Brahma; and never cognized apart from It.<sup>9</sup>

Since man and nature are one unity there is no question of reverence. The wise man sees the apparent world phenomena being separate from the Reality is because of *avidyā* (non-knowledge). This *avidyā* is the cause for man to get identified with the world. With the identification the attachment and desire for more happens. Whereas with the knowledge the disinterestedness in the world arises. This leads to action without desire for the fruit. Desire-less action is called *karma yoga* in the *Bhagavad-Gīta*:

*karmanyevādhikaraste mā phaleṣu kadācana;*

*mā phalaheturbhūrmā te saṅgo-stvakarmṇi.*

Thy concern is with action alone, never with results. Let not the fruit of action be thy motive, nor let thy attachment be for inaction (B.G. 2.47).

<sup>4</sup> *Athāto Brahma jijñāsā. Janmādyasya yataḥ (Brahma Sūtras 1 and 2).*

<sup>5</sup> Swami Vireswarananda, *Brahma-Sūtras* (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1936), p. xx.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Deutsch, 1989, p. 262.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Deutsch, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Ganganath Jha, (transl.), *The Chandogya Upanishad and Sri Sankara's Commentary* (Madras: VC Seshachari, 1923), p. 180.

This is (in my opinion) the ‘disinterestedness’ of Kant. It is not that man is over and above the world but freeing oneself from the attachment to the world.

Arthur Schopenhauer attributes the desire as ‘will-to-live.’ He suggests asceticism as the way out of it:

Schopenhauer believes that a person who experiences the truth of human nature from a moral perspective — who appreciates how spatial and temporal forms of knowledge generate a constant passing away, continual suffering, vain striving and inner tension — will be so repulsed by the human condition, and by the pointlessly striving Will of which it is a manifestation, that he or she will lose the desire to affirm the objectified human situation in any of its manifestations. The result is an attitude of the denial towards our will-to-live, which Schopenhauer identifies with an ascetic attitude of renunciation, resignation, and willessness, but also with composure and tranquility.<sup>10</sup>

To achieve desire-less-ness Advaita metaphysics suggests the denial of the world as well as a sense of loathsome attitude towards the world. Lance E. Nelson highlights this attitude of Advaita towards nature (the world). We shall examine his way approach to it.

### III. ATTITUDE TOWARDS NATURE

Lance E. Nelson differed from the idea that Advaita fosters eco concern. Positively speaking he acknowledges the concerns for eco care, “In positive relation to the interests of ecology, it fosters values such as simplicity of life, frugality, and—for the ascetic at least—nonviolence.”<sup>11</sup> The rest of the paper tries to show how nature is irrelevant in Advaitic thought. Advaita promotes the attitude of devaluation and the neglect of the natural universe which can cause undermining of nature he writes, “While not, of course, directly responsible for environmental degradation, such attitudes, as they filter out into the general culture, carry the potential to seriously undermine environmental concern.”<sup>12</sup> Let us examine the reasons for this attitude.

The citation given by Lance E. Nelson in support of nature as irrelevance are many and convincing. The prominent among them are from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣat (BU)* 2.4, the incident of Yājñavalkya taking *sannyāsa* (renunciation). Self alone is dear (not anything else). *Chandogya Upaniṣat (ChU)* 5.10.8, “What should our attitude to participation in life be? Śāṅkara answers that we should regard *samsāra* as a terrible (*ghora*) and vast ocean, existence in which should be feared, even despised.” Here what is terrible is not nature but *samsāra* which can roughly be explained as attachment to the world. Nelson misses this point taking the meaning of the world itself is terrible. *BSS* 1.1.1 is taken as ‘objectification and devaluation.’ The citation is *nityānitya vastu viveka* (discrimination between the Eternal and non-eternal). Based on this commentary other citations are given as denying the multiple phenomenal world.<sup>13</sup>

Going on to the beholding of the world by *jīvanmukta* (living liberated) Nelson continues with the denial of the world. “If we look for indications of exactly how the liberated sage, the *mukta*, experiences the world, we find, in fact, no evidence of reverence for nature and no grounds for supposing it.”<sup>14</sup> He concludes the discussion the living liberated attaining the ultimate *videha-mukti* (liberation after death) in the state called *kailva* (isolation), “In *kaivalya*, the *mukta* attains complete disjunction from the world. Mind, body, and nature are left behind. This is the Advaitin’s true aim.”<sup>15</sup>

Nelson points out the basic metaphysical understanding of Advaita. Beholding the world as irrelevant is true for the ‘living liberated’ (*jīvan-mukta*). This is the ultimate truth (*pāramārthika satya*). This is the attitude of the *Jīvanmukta* towards the world that Nelson is pointing out.<sup>16</sup> But when we understand the metaphysics of Advaita we come to the awareness of relativity of reality. The expression in the *Br. Up.* (2.1.20) ‘*satyasya satyam*’ (truth of the truth) explains this relativity of reality. Applying this relativity Radhakrishnan remarks, “The world is not to be repudiated as false. It is true, but it is true only derivatively.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Wicks, Robert, "Arthur Schopenhauer", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/schopenhauer/>>.

<sup>11</sup> Lance E. Nelson, “The Dualism of Nondualism: Advaita Vedanta and the Irrelevance of Nature,” in Lance E. Nelson (ed.) *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-70.

<sup>14</sup> Nelson, 1998, 74.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-68.

<sup>17</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, (ed. and trans.), *The Principal Upanisads* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953), p. 190.

When we read Śankara's *pāramārthika satya* (ultimate truth) and *vyāvahārika satya* (proximate truth) we come to this relative reality. Since the world is relatively real (real for a short period of time, i.e., one's life time) one should not identify himself/herself with it. When later Advaitins speak of the attitude of a *Jīvanmukta* towards the world, this understanding has been expressed. In this understanding renunciation is one's attachment to the world (*saṃsāra*) and not the world itself (*jagat*).

#### IV. UNDERSTANDING MĀYĀ

There is a problem in reconciling the 'one' (Reality) and the 'many' (phenomenal world). It is good for us here to consider the point of reconciliation of the two. Advaita declares that there is only one reality but we confront 'two' (subject and object) in our daily life. Bradley comes to the conclusion that the relation between these two cannot be explained, "The immanence of the absolute in finite centres and of finite centres in the absolute, I have always set down as inexplicable . . . to comprehend it is beyond us and even beyond all intelligence."<sup>18</sup> The inexplicability of the relation between the two is named as *māyā* by Advaita. Radhakrishnan explains the doctrine of *māyā*:

While all finite experiences are limited and incomplete, they are so in different degrees, and it is not right to put them all on a general level or give to them all equal reality or, more accurately, equal unreality. The doctrine of *māyā* gives abstract expression to this general feature of all experience of the finite that it falls short of the absolute.<sup>19</sup>

Radhakrishnan gives the explanation to the doctrine of *māyā* from the Upaniṣadic understanding:

The objects of the world, including the finite selves, imagine that they are separate and self-existent, and seem to be engaged in the work of self-maintenance. They forget that they all spring from an identical source, from which they derive sustenance. This belief is due to *māyā* or delusion.<sup>20</sup>

The oneness of the Brahman and the world does not negate the reality of the world. What is negated is the 'imagination' of the objects of the world and the finite selves that they exist by themselves. This imagination is called 'identification' of the individual selves with the world and thinking they are infinite. With this identification attachment arises which seeks to add to the ego by possessing more resulting in ego crisis. If, on the contrary, we realize the infinite selves with the source the delusion disappears.

If we look upon the objects as separate and self-existent, we erect a screen which shuts us from the truth. The falsely imagined self-subsistence of finite objects clouds the glow of heaven. When we penetrate beneath the secondary causes to the essence of all things, the veils fall apart and we see that the principle underlying them is the same as that which dwells in us.<sup>21</sup>

The 'screen' between us and the truth can be called *māyā*. This is because of the *avidyā* (non-knowledge) and the result is the misidentification of the finite with the infinite. This is the cause of our attachment. The *jīvanmukta* (living-liberated) sees the truth going beyond the secondary causes. For such a person the phenomenal world is irrelevant. It does not mean that the world does not exist but exists in relation with the truth. With this understanding of the Advaita we shall see how we can proceed with the environmental sustenance.

#### V. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTENANCE

Reverence to nature (world) is not in the philosophy of Advaita. But Deutsch in his article "A Metaphysical Grounding for Natural Reverence: East-West,"<sup>22</sup> brings in that idea which is farfetched. Nelson, rightly, questions this conclusion. "He (Deutsch) allows that Advaita does present a 'radical discontinuity between reality and nature' in which the latter is utterly devalued. Despite this fact, he still argues that Advaita provides the 'surest foundation' for natural reverence. How is this possible?"<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I (London: Allen & Unwin, 1927), p. 186.

<sup>19</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, 1927, p. 186.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 192.

<sup>21</sup> S. Radhakrishnan (1927), 193.

<sup>22</sup> Deutsch (1989).

<sup>23</sup> Nelson (1998), p. 73.

We also have seen that the ‘irrelevance’ of nature (world) is only in relation with the truth (the Ultimate Reality). The relativity is explained with the terms *vyāvahārika* (proximate) and *pāramārthika* (ultimate) truth. It does not mean that there are two ‘truths.’ The distinction is brought for the sake of relativity.

There is apparent eco care in the earliest Upaniṣads. Aravind Sharma, in support of the ecological concern in the Upaniṣads citing *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.4.16) and giving the interpretation by Radhakrishnan and Hiriyanna which are done with Advaitic lens says, “...the attitude to nature reflected in the text is much more positive than it was destined to become in classical Advaita.”<sup>24</sup> Taking the above quoted text and the next verse Śāṅkara concludes, “The idea is this: Desire consists of the two hankerings after the ends and means, visible or invisible, which are the special sphere of an ignorant man. Hence the wise man should renounce them.”<sup>25</sup>

What we need to see here is not the denial of the world nor the opposition to the rituals but the motive behind the means and end. The motive is desire which blogs down a person to the attachment to the world. Of course the desire and attachment leads to the greed which results in ecological crisis.

Brahman is the sole reality does not mean the denial of the world. The *mahāvākyas* (the great sayings) proclaim the oneness of Brahman and the world. They are related; the relativity is well brought out by Hiriyanna:

The ultimate teaching of Advaita is the sole reality of Brahman. The unity taught here, no doubt, includes both man and nature; but as the first and foremost interest of man is man himself and not nature, the truth as embodied in “That thou art,” or the fundamental identity of the individual and the absolute, is given prominence in the teaching. The disciple has accordingly to concentrate his attention on this aspect of the doctrine, and look upon the other, relating to nature, as more or less secondary.<sup>26</sup>

The question of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ does not arise in the Advaitic philosophy. The relative reality is termed as ‘proximate’ and ‘ultimate.’ In the above quoted text the consideration of ‘more or less secondary’ is only an interpretation of the author and not to the spirit of Advaita.

Also the conclusion by Nelson that the attitude of Advaita ‘carry the potential to seriously undermine environmental concern’ (quoted above in this article) is not the result of Advaita metaphysics.

## VI. CONCLUSION

We come back from where we have started, i.e., White’s article. The cause of our ecological crisis, according to him, is because of Judo-Christian model of God as transcendence. The logical conclusion is that an ‘immanence’ idea of God will save the situation. So the Eastern spiritual and religious traditions can be taken as models. Advaita Vedānta is one such models where the Brahman and the world are taken as a unified reality. Advaita does not mean ‘one’ but ‘non-duality;’ the reality is one and many.<sup>27</sup> It is compared with sea and waves (*samudra taraṅga nyāya*); they are neither one nor two. Explaining this S. Radhakrishnan quotes:

Each little leaf on a tree may very naturally have sufficient consciousness to believe that it is an entirely separate being, maintaining itself in the sunlight and the air, withering away and dying when the winter comes on—and there is an end of it. It probably does not realise that all the time it is being supported by the sap which flows from the trunk of the tree, and that in its turn it is feeding the tree too—that its self is the self of the whole tree. If the leaf could really understand itself, it would see that its self was deeply, intimately connected, practically one with the life of the whole tree.<sup>28</sup>

We can neither give ‘reverence to nature’ as proposed by Deutsch nor consider nature as ‘irrelevant’ proposed by Nelson. The world is a unified reality where one affects the other and one depends on the other. If this understanding sinks in the destruction does not take place. The attitude of *jīvanmukta* as indifferent person leads to the sustenance of the world.

<sup>24</sup> Aravind Sharma, “The Attitudes to Nature in the Early Upaniṣads,” in Lance E. Nelson (ed.) *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> Swāmi Mādhavānanda (trns.), *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya* (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1950), p. 194

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Sharma, p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> Godabarisha Mishra, *Vedānta Without Māyā?: A Debate on Saptavidha-Anupapatti* (Delhi: ICPR and Motilal Banarsidass, 1915), p. 360.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in S. Radhakrishnan, 1927, pp. 192-193.

However, we need to take note that the Advaita does not address the problem of 'eco crises that we face today. It will be a mistake to seek for the exact answers for today's ecological problem from people who lived in lush forests centuries ago. What we are looking for is the attitudes in order to have an outlook towards the world. The attitude of the Advaita, as we have seen, helps in the sustenance of the world.

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