

Immanent Monism

Shamik Dasgupta
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1. You are everything

I would like to develop a kind of metaphysical monism that has been largely overlooked in the analytic tradition. Broadly speaking, monism is the view that “reality is one” in some sense of the phrase. Two senses are typically distinguished. According to existence monism, everything is numerically identical to a single being; while according to priority monism, everything is grounded in a single being. Both kinds of monism therefore posit a distinguished being, something that either *is* or *is the source of* everything there is.

What exactly is this distinguished being? One candidate is the entire material cosmos. Jonathan Schaffer has developed this idea as priority monism, arguing that any proper part of the cosmos, such as a tree or a flower, is grounded in the whole cosmos; while Terence Horgan and Matjaž Potrč have developed it as existence monism, arguing that (strictly speaking) there are no such things as trees or flowers, there is just the entire material cosmos.¹ Other monists have maintained that the distinguished being is immaterial, something “outside” the material cosmos, such as the Abrahamic God or what Neoplatonists like Plotinus called The One. This idea is normally developed as a kind of priority monism on which trees and flowers and everything around us are grounded in a single immaterial source.

What all these views have in common is that the distinguished being is *not something around here*. It is not the tree in front of me or the flower beneath it. It is not something I can hug, or hold. According to Schaffer’s priority monism, for example, the distinguished being is the entire cosmos, something that grounds the tree but is not the tree itself. When I hug the tree, I do not hug the source of all reality. Likewise for Plotinus: on his view the flower is grounded in The One, but when I hold the flower I am not holding The One itself. The source of all reality is not *right here* in my hands. And of course for Horgan and Potrč there is strictly speaking nothing in my hands in the first place (nor any hands, for that matter). I therefore classify all these monisms as “transcendent” insofar as their distinguished being is not something around here.

According to what I call “immanent” monism, by contrast, the distinguished being is *right here amongst us*. It is the tree, it is the flower, it is ground we walk on and the air we breathe. Thus in hugging the tree I embrace *all being!* When I hold the flower, I hold all of reality *right here in my hands!* By this I do not just mean that the distinguished being is “within” the flower in some metaphysical sense—that way lies priority monism, on which the flower is numerically

¹ The canonical statement of Schaffer’s priority monism is (Schaffer 2010a); see also (Schaffer 2007, 2009, 2010b, 2010c, and 2013). I have slurred over many aspects of his view, not least the fact that his monism is restricted to concreta, but the gist is good enough for now. For Horgan and Potrč’s existence monism, see (Horgan and Potrč 2000, 2006, and 2012). I should say that Horgan and Potrč allow that, loosely speaking, sentences like ‘there are trees’ can be “correctly affirmed”, to use their terminology, in virtue of “indirectly corresponding” to a property of the cosmos. But that’s just loose talk, on their view: strictly speaking, when doing metaphysics in the ontology room, there are no trees.

distinct from the distinguished being “within” it, and it is then not so clear that in holding the flower I hold all of reality.² No, I have in mind an existence monism on which there is just one being; and this being *is* the tree and *is* the flower and indeed *is* me and *is* you! All these are numerically one, and each one is all of reality, and any appearance to contrary is a massive illusion.

This is the kind of picture one finds in Advaita (or ‘nondual’) Vedānta, a school of Hindu philosophy generally traced back to the 8th Century Keralan scholar Adi Shankara. According to this school, there is one and only one being, Brahman, and everything we see around us is nothing other than Brahman cloaked in illusion. This kind of monism has been largely overlooked in Anglophone philosophy, but I believe it has deep and distinctive consequences regarding the nature of the self, the limits of thought, and even a non-theistic foundation for spiritual practice, which are well worth examining. My aim here is to develop an immanent monism along Vedāntic lines and examine these consequences. I don’t claim that this is the only (or best) variety of immanent monism, but I offer it here as one example and invite readers to explore others.

I should stress that while the view I’ll develop is inspired by Advaita Vedānta, I will not do any serious scholarship to show that it is an accurate rendition of Vedāntic texts such as the Upanishads or Shankara’s commentaries. This is Vedāntic monism, not necessarily a representation of Advaita Vedānta proper. I will as an acknowledgement (and with due apologies) use “Brahman” to name the distinguished being, but I will not assume that it has any theistic attributes sometimes associated with it in Hindu contexts. I will not, for example, assume that it has (or is) a mind or will or consciousness, nor that it has any evaluative attributes like goodness or benevolence or bliss.³ It will function simply as a blank ontological posit, much like the null set in set theory or regions of spacetime in physics—what follows is an exercise in pure analytic metaphysics, not theology. That the resulting view nonetheless has implications regarding spiritual practice, as I will argue, is therefore one of the more striking aspects of the view. It is almost as if the existence of the null set implied that one should say grace before dinner! As crazy as that would be, I will argue that Vedāntic monism implies something a bit like that.

I should also say that I will not try to offer any argument for the view here. This is because I do not know of any argument that could be offered—at least, not in an academic journal. For on what could the argument be based? Not common sense: the view patently contradicts our everyday conception of the world, so we cannot expect it to be made plausible by examining

² To see this, just imagine cashing out this metaphysical sense of ‘within’ as follows: x is within y iff x grounds y . Then we are back to the priority monisms of Schaffer and Plotinus, on which the distinguished being is numerically distinct from the flower in my hands. More promising, perhaps, is Aaron Segal’s ‘mereological monism’ (2014), which posits a ‘null individual’ that is a proper part of every concrete being. He says this counts as monism if we add that parts ground their wholes, in which case every concrete being is (partially?) grounded in a single being, the null individual. To that extent the null individual is a ‘distinguished being’. If we add further that the null individual is spatially coincident with anything it composes, then when the flower is in my hands the ‘distinguished being’ in his system is there too—to that extent his view counts as ‘immanent’. Still, we cannot say that his distinguished being *is* the flower and *is* the tree, and I am interested in views that count as ‘immanent’ in this stronger sense.

³ Albahari (2019) develops a monist metaphysics, inspired by Vedāntic texts, on which all of reality is grounded in a single cosmic consciousness. Albahari’s view may be more attractive to those who think that consciousness is a key component of Vedāntic metaphysics.

common sense belief. Shankara himself motivated his philosophy on the basis of Vedic scripture, but I don't consider that evidence for truth. More recently, Schaffer justified his priority monism as the ontology that fits best with modern physics, but I will make no such claim of Vedāntic monism.

Instead, I believe the primary route into this view would be via a kind of “mystical” experience. Reports of these experiences have been documented across a wide range of times and cultures, and typically exhibit a number of common features.⁴ One core feature is an obliteration of distinctions, including the distinction between self and world. Thus, mystics often report that “all things are one”; or that they became “one with reality” (or God); or that their sense of being a “separate self”, something that peers out at the world from some perspective inside their skin, had dissolved. A second feature involves ineffability: that what was revealed to the mystic is somehow impossible to put into words—not just due to inadequacies of their particular language, but because of the very nature of what was revealed. I believe that Vedāntic monism verifies these kinds of experiences surprisingly well. By this I mean, roughly, that if Vedāntic monism were true then experiences such as these would be an accurate portrayal of reality. I also believe that Vedāntic monism is somewhat unique in this regard; in particular, the transcendental monist views described earlier do not verify these experiences.⁵ If that's right, then a justification for the view might consist of (i) an experience of this kind, together with (ii) a philosophical argument why such an experience can reasonably be treated as veridical rather than delusional (at least, for those who have enjoyed such an experience). Component (ii) would very much belong in an academic journal, and I hope to explore it in other work. But component (i) obviously does not. I cannot suppose that my reader will have had such an experience, so an argument consisting of (i) and (ii) would by its nature rely on one's own private inner life—contrary to the nature of academic discussion.

So, I will not try to offer any support for the view here. Instead, I will just articulate the view (sections 2-5) and then explore its consequences about the nature of the self, the limits of thought, and the rationale for spiritual practice (sections 6-8). As you might suspect, it is because of these consequences that I believe the view does so well at verifying mystical experiences. But I won't even try to close that circle, for that would require a careful examination of reports of such experiences from a wide range of sources and there is no room to pursue that here.

2. Illusion without levels

Let me sketch Vedāntic monism in broad brush strokes before regimenting it more precisely. As I said, it maintains that there is one and only one being, Brahman—this is existence monism, not priority monism. Let us now add that Brahman is devoid of form or attribute or distinction. It has no shape, no extension, no parts, no nothing. There is just Brahman, and that's it. All else is illusion.

⁴ James (1903) contains a compendious collection of such reports; see also Stace (1960) and Yarden and Newberg (2022).

⁵ I said that Vedāntic monism is *somewhat* unique in this regard. In other work, I develop a metaphysics of emptiness, inspired by Madhyamakan Buddhism, which I argue also verifies mystical experiences surprisingly well. If so, then the argument gestured at in the text would at best establish that one or other of these views must be correct.

Does this mean that I am an illusion? Yes and no. According to Vedāntic monism, I exist—*therefore I am Brahman*. The tree in front of me also exists—*therefore it is Brahman too*. It follows that we are numerically identical; hence the Sanskrit aphorism “tat tvam asi”, typically translated as *that art thou*. This is one of the great sayings, or Mahāvākyas, of the Upanishads, and Vedāntic monism verifies it quite literally: the tree and I are *numerically* one and the same thing! The illusion is that we are distinct. And also that I have hands, that the tree is green, and so on: since Brahman is formless, colorless, etc., all that is illusion too.

Note that I am not just *part of* Brahman. It’s not that part of Brahman is me and a different part is the tree. That would not yield the identity just mentioned, and Brahman does not have parts anyway. It is rather that I am identical to Brahman *in its entirety*, the whole thing (insofar as “whole” can be meaningfully applied to Brahman). As William James put it:

“That art thou!”, says the Upanishads, and the Vedantists add: “Not a part, not a mode of That, but identically That”.⁶

It might then be tempting to say that Brahman is wholly present here, where I am, and also there, where the tree is. The idea would be that Brahman is multiply located in space in much the way that endurantists think a material object is multiply located in time. But this is not quite right either, for space is part of the illusion. To say that Brahman is located in space would be like saying that Brahman has hands, which it doesn’t. No, there is just Brahman, which *is* me and *is* the tree, and any apparent difference between us in color or shape or location is all an illusion.

This concept of illusion, or “māyā”, is central to Advaita Vedānta and will play a key role in the monism I’ll develop. But we must take care how to understand it in light of our commitment to existence monism. In Vedāntic literature it is often explained by analogy to dreams. Last night I dreamt I was talking with Henry Shukman about mindfulness. Our conversation seemed real. But then I woke up and realized it was just a dream. Advaita Vedānta, it is sometimes said, maintains that the world we ordinarily take to be real is also a dream of sorts, an illusion “simulated” or “projected” by Brahman. It stands to Brahman in something like the way that my dream stands to me.⁷

In *something* like that way, but the analogy is I think misleading in various respects. For one thing, my dream was produced by complex neural activity, but Brahman does not have neural activity. Brahman is perfectly simple, devoid of parts or form or attribute. But more importantly, the analogy suggests a picture on which there are three distinct “levels” of reality, each one constituted by the level below. At the top is the level of (what we ordinarily call) dream and illusion: e.g. my dream about Shukman, containing dream-Shukman and our dream-conversation. In the middle is the world we ordinarily take to be real, containing me and my brain that “simulated” the dream-conversation with dream-Shukman; and also Shukman himself,

⁶ James (1903, p. 310). The Vedantists’ addition is, to my knowledge, James’ own gloss and not a direct quote from Vedāntic literature.

⁷ I should say that in Vedāntic philosophy, “māyā” strictly speaking refers to Brahman’s *power* to produce illusion. This leads to thorny debates about whether this power is distinct from Brahman, e.g. an attribute of Brahman, thereby compromising the monism of Advaita Vedānta. But these issues will not concern us here, and in any case the term is also used colloquially to refer to the illusion itself.

a man who lives in Santa Fe. And at the bottom level is Brahman, which “simulates” the middle level containing me and Shukman.⁸

But this is *not* the picture I intend by Vedāntic monism—nor, says Jonardon Ganeri (2024), is it the right interpretation of Advaita Vedānta either. For on this picture, each level contains entities that are distinct from entities in other levels. Dream-Shukman, on this picture, may be simulated or constituted by my brain processes, but is not identical to me or my brain (or to Shukman himself, for that matter). According to David Chalmers (2022), this is the right way to think about virtual worlds simulated by computer systems: they contain entities that are constituted by (or grounded in) computer processes. It may also be the right way to think about dreams. But if so, Vedāntic monism is *not* like dream or computer simulation in this respect—if it were, it would be existence monism no longer. According to Vedāntic monism, it is not that trees and flowers and persons are *simulated* or *constituted* by Brahman. No: they *are* Brahman.

It is worth noting in this regard that “māyā” is also translated as *play*, or *game*, or *art*, rather than illusion. These may be a more accurate way to think about the view I have in mind. Rather than talking of Brahman “simulating an illusion”, which suggests the above picture I want to set aside, it is perhaps better to talk of Brahman “engaged in play”. On this way of talking, the ordinary world around us *is* Brahman—Brahman as it presents in play. It’s not that there are two things, Brahman and the illusion it simulates. There is just one thing, Brahman, differently presented: there is Brahman *as it really is*, one and perfectly simple; and there is Brahman *as it presents in play* (māyā), as a plurality of things with different forms. But regardless of whether we talk of illusion or play, it remains that māyā “hides” or “conceals” the true nature of things. Māyā involves a kind of “deceit”. An actor on stage presents in character, not as who they really are, and so it is with Brahman as it presents in māyā. So we can continue to talk of illusion, so long as we do not interpret this as a second level of reality distinct from Brahman.⁹

3. Reality and illusion

How are we to make sense of this? The core idea is that there is Brahman as it really is, one and perfectly simple; and there is Brahman as it presents in māyā, as me with hands and a tree that’s green. But it is not really true that I have hands or the tree is green, it’s just an illusion. So we need a way to model both these aspects, reality and illusion, which seemingly conflict. But how?

Well, this talk of illusion looks much like talk of fiction. It is true *in the fiction* of Sherlock Holmes that he lived on Baker Street, but it is not *true* that he lived there, it’s just a fiction. It is standard to model this with a sentential operator written

It is true in the fiction of Sherlock Holmes that p

⁸ In Vedāntic texts these “levels” are called pratibhasika, vyavaharika, and paramarthika, respectively. Though as I say, I will not be thinking of them as “levels” at all.

⁹ Footnote on myths from the *Yoga Vasistha* that support this kind of picture, i.e. myths of people encountering things in a dream / illusion and then finding *the very same things* in reality. Include the myth of Lavana and the myth of Narada, and maybe even the myth of the two Lilas.

or, equivalently,

In the fiction of Sherlock Holmes, p

where these operators are non-factive in the sense that the indented statements do not entail p. Thus we might introduce an operator “in the illusion, p” understood likewise to be non-factive and say:

In the illusion, the tree is green and I have hands. But it is not true that the tree is green or that I have hands. What’s true is that I am Brahman, the tree is Brahman, etc.

There is no inconsistency here precisely because the illusion operator is non-factive.

This is on the right track, but it needs two refinements. First, our illusion operator as stated leaves out that Brahman is performing it all. The core idea, remember, is that the illusion is *Brahman* presenting in play, much as an actor on stage presents in character. When we talk of “the illusion”, then, we are not talking about an illusion or fiction in the abstract; we are talking about *the one performed by Brahman*. We must therefore understand the illusion operator as reflecting Brahman’s performance, as it were, not an abstract fiction.

To illustrate the difference, consider Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*, in which Peter Sellers plays Lionel Mandrake, an officer from the Royal Air Force stationed with US General Jack D. Ripper. After Ripper orders a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union, Mandrake realizes that Ripper has gone insane and tries to find the recall code. Now, there are two kinds of claims we can make about this. The first are claims of “pure fiction”, such as

In the fiction of *Dr. Strangelove*, Mandrake searches for the recall code.

This is a claim about the fiction in the abstract, independent of any performance. But now imagine being on set as Kubrick filmed Peter Sellers in the role of Mandrake. Then we might say

Sellers is pretending to be Mandrake, searching for the recall code.

This is a “mixed claim” in that it involves something about reality and something about the fiction. It describes what it is in reality (Peter Sellers) that performs the fiction (of searching for the recall code). My point is that we must understand our claims about the illusion as mixed claims, not claims of pure fiction. Instead of saying

In the illusion, the tree is green.

we must say something more like

Brahman is pretending to be a tree that is green.

But—and this is the second refinement—we must take care how to understand this talk of “pretense”. When Peter Sellers pretends to be Mandrake searching for recall codes, he does so by

really doing certain things. He leafs through real notebooks on set, he shouts “Where is it?!”, and so on. Thus, the mixed claim

Sellers is pretending to be Mandrake, searching for the recall code.

is true in virtue of truths such as

Sellers leafs through notebooks.
Sellers shouts “Where is it?!”

These last two truths are claims of “pure reality”, as I’ll call them: they are (in and of themselves) nothing to do with the fiction, they are just ordinary truths about what Peter Sellers is actually doing. Thus, the mixed claim about what Peter Sellers is *pretending to be* is true in virtue of truths of pure reality about what Peter Sellers is *actually doing*. Indeed, it is in virtue of a wider range of truths of pure reality involving the set, the intentions of the director, and so on, that Sellers is engaged in *pretense* at all, as opposed to the ramblings of a madman. By contrast, when we say that Brahman is pretending to be a tree, this cannot be understood as holding in virtue of truths of pure reality about Brahman. Brahman is perfectly simple, remember, devoid of attribute; hence there cannot be any truths about Brahman in virtue of which it is engaged in pretense, much less the specific pretense of being a tree. This means, I think, that we must understand the locution “...is pretending to be...”, when applied to Brahman, as primitive. To say that Brahman is pretending to be F is *not* to say that Brahman is F, nor that Brahman has some other attribute in virtue of which it pretends to be F. It is, rather, its own primitive mode of predication.

This fits with the picture we started with. We said that there is Brahman *as it really is*, and then there is Brahman *as it presents in māyā*. What we have seen is that these must be understood as two independent modes of predication, neither of which holds in virtue of the other. Brahman is a coin with two sides, so to speak. Thus it would be more perspicuous to say that Brahman *is-in-reality* one way and *presents-in-māyā-as* another way, with the hyphens indicating that each is its own primitive mode of prediction.

To regiment this it will be convenient to use two sentential operators, one for reality and one for māyā. I will write the reality operator as

R(p),

which is to be read “Brahman *is-in-reality* such that p”, or “it is true of Brahman *as-it-is-in-reality* that p”—or, as an informal gloss, “*in reality*, p”. For example,

(1) R(only Brahman exists)

means that it is true of Brahman *as-it-is-in-reality* that it and only it exists—or more informally, that in reality only Brahman exists. And

(2) R(Brahman is perfectly simple)

means that Brahman is-in-reality such that it is perfectly simple—or more informally, that in reality Brahman is perfectly simple. I will assume that reality is factive:

Factive Reality: $R(p) \rightarrow p$

Thus from (1) it follows that

Only Brahman exists

period, not just in the scope of the reality operator. I will also assume that we can reason logically within the scope of the reality operator. This makes intuitive sense: if Brahman is-in-reality such that p , and Brahman is-in-reality such that q , then we ought to be able to infer that Brahman is-in-reality such that $(p \ \& \ q)$. More generally,

Logic In Reality: $[R(p_1) \ \& \ R(p_2) \ \& \dots \ \& \ R(p_n) \ \& \ (p_1, p_2, \dots p_n \ \text{imply} \ q)] \rightarrow R(q)$.¹⁰

So much for reality. As for *māyā*, I will use an operator written

$M_{x, y, \dots}(p)$

where p is of the form “ $\phi(x, y, \dots)$ ”. This is to be read “Brahman *presents-in-māyā-as* x, y, \dots such that $\phi(x, y, \dots)$ ”. Thus, to say that Brahman presents-in-*māyā-as* Shamik, who has hands, we write

(3) $M_{\text{Shamik}}(\text{Shamik has hands})$

The subscript is there to remind us that Brahman is pretending to be Shamik, but for ease of prose I will sometimes leave the subscript implicit. Indeed, we can gloss (3) informally as “Brahman presents an illusion in which Shamik has hands”, or even more informally as “in the

¹⁰ Here you can read “imply” according to your favored logic. If you ordinarily use classical logic, for example, let “imply” mean classical implication. My use of this principle later will not depend on what the “correct” logic is. Either way, you might wish to restrict this principle by requiring that all non-logical vocabulary in the conclusion is found in the premises. This restriction would allow us to infer from

$R(\text{Brahman exists})$
 $R(\text{Brahman is perfectly simple})$

to

$R(\text{Brahman exists and Brahman is perfectly simple})$

but not to

$R(\text{Brahman is a lawyer or Brahman is not a lawyer})$.

The motivation for this restriction would be that aspects of the illusion, such as being a lawyer, ought not apply to Brahman at all, not even in the form of logical tautologies. But whether we restrict the principle like this will not matter in what follows.

illusion, Shamik has hands”—so long as it is understood that the illusion is presented by Brahman, who plays the role of Shamik. Likewise,

- (4) $M_{\text{the tree}}(\text{the tree is green})$
- (5) $M_{\text{Shamik, the tree}}(\text{Shamik perceives the tree})$
- (6) $M_{\text{Shamik, the tree}}(\text{Shamik} \neq \text{the tree})$

represent formally what can be glossed as “Brahman presents an illusion in which the tree is green”, “in the illusion, Shamik perceives the tree”, and “in the illusion, Shamik is distinct from the tree”, respectively. But however we gloss it, I will assume that the illusion operator is *not* factive:

Non-Factive Illusion: $M_{x,y,\dots}(p) \not\rightarrow p$

Thus we can consistently say that Brahman presents an illusion in which Shamik is distinct from the tree, even though it’s not true that Shamik is distinct from the tree. Which is just as we want.¹¹ And just as we can reason logically within the scope of reality, let us assume the same for illusion:

Logic In Illusion: $[M(p_1) \ \& \ M(p_2) \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ M(p_n) \ \& \ (p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n \text{ imply } q)] \rightarrow M(q)$.

Notice that in (5) and (6) Brahman plays *two* roles at once, presenting-in-māyā as Shamik and as the tree. How is this possible? Well, there is nothing mysterious about an actor playing multiple roles. Indeed, Peter Sellers played *three* roles in Kubrick’s film: Mandrake, Dr. Strangelove, and US President Muffley. There is nothing mysterious about this because Sellers presumably shot different roles at different times. On Monday he pretended to be Mandrake by leafing through notebooks; on Tuesday he pretended to be Dr Strangelove by wrestling with his own arms; and on Wednesday he pretended to be President Muffley by declaring that there is no fighting in the war room. What *would* be mysterious is if he pretended to be all three characters *at once*—that is impossible because he *plays* each character in virtue of *actually doing* certain things, like leafing through notebooks or wrestling with his own arms, and what he needs to do to play Mandrake is incompatible with what he needs to do to play Dr Strangelove. But when Brahman presents-in-māyā-as a tree, remember, that is not in virtue of Brahman’s *actually doing* anything! We have already accepted that “presents-in-māyā-as” is a primitive form of predication. The fact that it is primitive may render it mysterious, for sure—I never said that Vedāntic monism was common-sensical! But once that is granted, there is no further mystery of how Brahman can at once present-in-māyā-as a tree *and* present-in-māyā-as a person (indeed, the phrase “at once” must be taken with a pinch of salt, insofar as time is part of the illusion).

With these two operators, then, we capture the core idea that Brahman is a coin with two sides. There is Brahman as it is-in-reality, one and perfectly simple; and there is Brahman as it presents-in-māyā, as a plurality of distinct things with different forms. The difference between

¹¹ Might we add that illusion is *anti*-factive, in the sense that $M_{x,y,\dots}(p) \rightarrow \text{not } p$? No. For in the illusion I am not a lawyer, so anti-factivity would allow us to conclude that I *am* a lawyer. Which is not what we want.

these two sides, we said, is that maya “hides” or “conceals” the true nature of things, and this is captured by our assumption that the reality is factive while māyā is not.¹²

Let us now add that Brahman has *only* two sides: there is Brahman as it is-in-reality, and there is Brahman as it presents-in-māyā, *and that's it*. The rough idea is that every truth must either be of the form R(p) or of the form M(p), but that's not quite the right way to put the point. For one thing, R(p) implies p by Factive Reality. And for another thing, we presumably want to allow for truth-functional constructions: if R(p) and M(q) are both true, then R(p) & M(p) is true just by the truth-table for conjunction. So the idea, more accurately, is that all truths must follow from truths of the form R(p) and M(p) by Factive Reality and logic. Thus,

Reality Or Illusion: Every truth is either (i) of the form R(p) or of the form M(p), or else (ii) is entailed by such truths by Factive Reality and logic.

Think of this as an inductive definition of the set of all truths. We start with a base of truths about Brahman as it is-in-reality and as it presents-in-māyā, and then the set of all truths is completed by applying Factive Reality and logic.

4. Independence and simplicity

One feature of this approach is that it sidesteps thorny questions of how illusion relates to reality. In the illusion, I have hands:

(3) M_{Shamik} (Shamik has hands).

But there is no question of how reality explains my having hands; of how Brahman makes it the case that I have hands. This is because *I don't have hands!* It is not true that I have hands, so there is nothing here to explain! Remember, this is not priority monism. It's not that me and my hands are “grounded in” Brahman, such that truths about me and my hands must hold in virtue of truths about Brahman. No, there is just Brahman; and since Brahman does not have hands, there are no hands—not even grounded ones—to explain.

Nor is (3) itself grounded in, or “made true by”, what's true in reality. One reason is that Brahman is-in-reality perfectly simple, so it is unclear how it could explain truths like (3). But another reason is that if (3) was grounded in some truth R(p) about Brahman as it is-in-reality, then by Reality Or Illusion the grounding claim itself, i.e.

(3) is grounded in R(p)

¹² My use of sentential operators to model the two forms of predication is a little awkward because it raises the question of whether we now have *three* primitive modes of predication: is-in-reality, presents-in-māyā-as, and the ordinary “is” used to form the sentences to which R and M apply, such as “the tree *is* green” and “Brahman *is* perfectly simple”. That is one way to see things. But another option is to read the ordinary “is” as not part of the metaphysics of Vedāntic monism proper. On this reading, we are using ordinary English, with its ordinary “is”, just to communicate the metaphysics (for how else are we to communicate?!). Real Factivity, on this reading, is then a principle that communicates *to us* that reality is more, well, *real* than māyā, without being an axiom of the actual theory.

would have to be true in reality (if true at all), which violates Brahman's simplicity. To be sure, there may be grounding explanations *in the illusion*, such as

M(Shamik has hands because Shamik has appendages with five fingers.)¹³

And so on, if you like, down to microphysical truths about the (illusory) matter composing me. All that may be true *in the illusion*. But the point is that nothing in reality explains why the illusion is like *that*. What *makes* it true in the illusion that there is matter so arranged as to make fingers and hands? Nothing. It *just is* that Brahman presents-in-māyā like so. That is a brute fact, according to Vedāntic monism. If you find this objectionable, note that it is no different from standard metaphysical views which accept a vast number of brute truths about, say, the distribution of matter across spacetime. Here we have the same, except they are truths about Brahman as it presents-in-māyā.

What about the status of (3): is *it* true in reality, or true in the illusion? We should not say that (3) itself is true in the illusion, for the illusion does not typically present *as* illusion. The illusion is *that I have hands*, not that my hands are an illusion. Brahman performs a play in which I have hands, but in the play it is not a play that I have hands. Brahman is not Charlie Kaufmann (I mean, Brahman *is* Charlie Kaufmann, but you get the point). But nor should we say that (3) itself is true in reality. Remember, the driving idea behind Vedāntic monism is that in reality there is just Brahman, one and perfectly simple. To say that (3) is true in reality would therefore impart a degree of complexity to Brahman that is not supposed to be there. It would imply that reality contains illusion, so to speak, which is not the intended view. Brahman is-in-reality perfectly simple and does not partake in illusion or performance or pretense.

The upshot is that illusion and reality are, on this approach, metaphysically independent aspects of Brahman. Truths of the form M(p) do not depend on, or follow from, truths of the form R(p); nor vice-versa. If there is a sense in which the illusion “depends on” Brahman, it is just that the illusion is *Brahman's* performance. (3) is a truth about Brahman, to the effect that *it* presents-in-māyā-as me with hands.

Does this mean that Brahman is not perfectly simple after all? If Brahman presents-in-māyā-as Shamik with hands, *per* (3), does it not follow that Brahman has the property of *presenting-in-māyā-as Shamik with hands*? This is a verbal issue, and we can say so if we like. The important point is that Brahman does not have this property *in reality*—remember, (3) is not itself true in reality. The claim that Brahman is perfectly simple is a claim about Brahman as it is-in-reality, and *in reality* Brahman does not present-in-māyā-as Shamik with hands!

A more pressing issue is whether it can be *true* that Brahman is-in-reality perfectly simple, i.e.

(2) R(Brahman is perfectly simple).

For does (2) not imply that Brahman has at least one property in reality, i.e. *the property of being perfectly simple*? If so, doesn't (2) contradict itself? The issue here has a rich history in certain

¹³ Here I omit for simplicity the subscripts for Shamik, hands, appendages, and fingers.

strands of Abrahamic theology and NeoPlatonism, where it is also maintained that God or The One is perfectly simple, devoid of form or attribute. For there is a well-known argument that nothing can be true of such a being—not even that it is perfectly simple! The idea is that if it *were* true that it is perfectly simple then it would have at least one property, i.e. the property of perfect simplicity, in which case it would be simple no longer. This leads these traditions to conclude that God (or The One) is *ineffable*: nothing can be truly *said* of it because there are no *truths* about it to express in the first place.

There is an enormous amount to say about whether the argument goes through, but I won't discuss it here. Let me just flag that *if* it goes through, the ineffability would be “alethic” in nature: God is ineffable because there are no truths about God to eff. In section 7, I will argue that Brahman is ineffable for a very different reason. To make clear the difference, let us assume for the sake of argument that Brahman is *not* ineffable in this alethic sense and that there are, therefore, truths that characterize Brahman as it is-in-reality such as (1) and (2). If you think that Brahman is therefore not *perfectly* simple, fine: let it be as simple as is possible given (1) and (2).

5. Pointing through

We need to add one more component to Vedāntic monism. The Vedāntic revelation, remember, is that everything is one and the same as Brahman:

Shamik = Brahman,
The tree = Brahman,

and therefore,

Shamik = the tree.

That art thou, as the great saying goes. But how are we to understand these identities? Are they true in reality, or in the illusion? They are obviously not true in the illusion, for the illusion is that I am *not* the tree! But it doesn't seem right to say that they are true in reality either. It can't be that Brahman is-in-reality identical to *a tree*, for Brahman is-in-reality devoid of form or attribute. Trees have extension, shape, and color, yet Brahman has none of these (in reality). You might reply that there is no tree *in reality*, it's just an illusion that there is a tree. That's right, of course, but then what are we doing talking about “the tree” outside of the illusion? The problem is that reality “knows nothing” of trees (to use an expression of Kit Fine's); hence truths that describe reality should make no mention of trees.¹⁴

You might think these identities are already captured by

- (3) M_{Shamik} (Shamik has hands).
- (4) $M_{\text{the tree}}$ (the tree is green).

For these entail that one and the same thing, Brahman, presents-in-māyā *as Shamik* (with hands) and *as the tree* (which is green). Does this not entail that Shamik = the tree? Not quite, for

¹⁴ I am very grateful to Miri Albahari for a discussion of this issue.

“presenting as” is not strict identity. When Peter Sellers performs as Mandrake, he is not *identical to* Mandrake; and when Sellers also performs as Dr. Strangelove, it does not follow that Mandrake = Dr. Strangelove. Moreover, the Vedāntic identities are supposed to reveal how things are *in reality*, not as they present-in-māyā; so they are captured by (3) and (4) only if we say that (3) and (4) are true in reality, which they are not (as we saw in the last section).

To better understand these identities, imagine again being on Kubrick’s set as they film Sellers pretending to be Mandrake, searching for the recall codes. You might point at the man in the scene and say

That’s Peter Sellers.

Here you are looking at a performance of a fictional scene and “pointing through” it, as it were, saying something about reality. Now, notice that you can pick out Sellers in various ways. Instead of the demonstrative “that”, you could use a description such as:

The man leafing through notebooks is Peter Sellers.

This is a true claim of “pure reality”. Peter Sellers *really is* leafing through a notebook (it’s not a pretend notebook), so this is a truth about reality, not the fiction. But you could also use a fictional description:

The guy searching for recall codes is Peter Sellers.

Understood descriptively, this is not a claim of pure reality—at least, not a true one. After all, Peter Sellers is not searching for recall codes! He is just pretending. Yet there is a perfectly reasonable use of the description on which it is understood referentially, not descriptively. One can use “the guy searching for recall codes” to refer directly to *the actor playing the role*, regardless of whether he satisfies the description in reality; and one is then saying that *he* is Peter Sellers. Here one uses a fictional description to “point through” to the actor and make a claim of pure reality—this time a true one. To indicate that an expression “e” is used in this pointing-through sense, I will write “[e]_{pt}”. Hence the above claim is more perspicuously written

(PS) [The guy searching for recall codes]_{pt} is Peter Sellers,

where the content of this is, in effect: *that’s Peter Sellers*.

I propose to understand the Vedāntic revelations likewise. “The tree is Brahman”—here we should understand “the tree” as pointing through the illusion and referring directly to *that which presents as a tree*, regardless of whether it *is* a tree in reality; and one is then saying that *it* is Brahman. So understood, the identities should be written

[Shamik]_{pt} = Brahman
[the tree]_{pt} = Brahman,

where the content of each is, in effect: *that's Brahman*. Just as (PS) uses a fictional description to “point through” to the actor performing the fiction, i.e. Sellars, here we use *illusory* vocabulary to “point through” to what performs the illusion, i.e. Brahman. Now, by substitution of identicals it follows that

$$[\text{Shamik}]_{\text{pt}} = [\text{the tree}]_{\text{pt}}$$

Thus we have the great saying *that art thou*: as I understand it here, it “points through” the illusion and identifies *that* (which presents as the tree) as one and the same thing as *this* (which presents as Shamik). And now we can say that these revelations are true in reality, as desired:

- (7) $R([\text{Shamik}]_{\text{pt}} = \text{Brahman})$
- (8) $R([\text{the tree}]_{\text{pt}} = \text{Brahman})$
- (9) $R([\text{Shamik}]_{\text{pt}} = [\text{the tree}]_{\text{pt}})$

For notice the effect of pointing through: the content of (8), for example, is not that Brahman is-in-reality identical to *a tree*—at least, not insofar as trees have extension and color and the like. It is true in the illusion that trees have extension and color, of course, but by pointing through we leave all that behind and refer directly to *that which presents as the tree*, saying (in effect): *that's Brahman*. In this way, (8) does not imply that Brahman is a tree with extension and color any more than (PS) implies that Sellars is searching for recall codes.¹⁵

To learn truths like (7)-(9), therefore, is to learn that the world one thought was real, a world of trees and persons, is in fact a grand illusion—a cosmic performance with Brahman playing every role. It is to learn, in particular, that *you yourself are just a fictional character in this cosmic play!* This is a striking revelation about the nature of the self, and is the first of the three implications of Vedāntic monism that I mentioned at the start. Let us explore it now (section 6), as it will lead us directly to the other two implications regarding the limits of thought (section 7) and the foundation of spiritual practice (section 8).

¹⁵ Likewise,

$$(9) \quad R([\text{Shamik}]_{\text{pt}} = [\text{the tree}]_{\text{pt}})$$

and

$$(3) \quad M_{\text{Shamik}}(\text{Shamik has hands})$$

do not imply

$$M_{\text{the tree}}(\text{the tree has hands}).$$

For (9) says, in effect, that *what performs as Shamik* is *what performs as the tree*; and (3) says that when it performs as Shamik it pretends to have hands; but it does not follow that when it performs as the tree it pretends to have hands. Compare again Kubrick's film: the actor who plays Mandrake is the actor who plays Dr. Strangelove; and when he plays Mandrake he pretends to search for recall codes; but when he plays Dr. Strangelove he does not pretend to search for recall codes. I am very grateful to Verónica Gómez-Sánchez and Ted Sider for helping me to think about this issue.

6. The self as an illusion

What am I? I have a body, I have a mind. But am I identical to either, or something else entirely? Am I real, or just an illusion? To understand what Vedāntic monism implies, let's start simple and ask the same question of the tree I am looking at. What is it? Is it an illusion? Yes and no. In reality, it exists:

$R([\text{the tree}]_{pt} \text{ exists}).$

For in reality, it is Brahman:

$R([\text{the tree}]_{pt} = \text{Brahman}).$

The illusion is that it is green and is distinct from me:

$M_{\text{the tree}}(\text{the tree is green}),$
 $M_{\text{the tree, Shamik}}(\text{the tree} \neq \text{Shamik}).$

But none of that is true in reality:

It is not the case that $R(\text{the tree is green}),$
It is not the case that $R(\text{the tree} \neq \text{Shamik}),$

not even if we point through:

It is not the case that $R([\text{the tree}]_{pt} \text{ is green}),$
It is not the case that $R([\text{the tree}]_{pt} \neq \text{Shamik}).$

For $[\text{the tree}]_{pt}$ is nothing other than Brahman, devoid of form or attribute or distinction. $[\text{The tree}]_{pt}$ exists, therefore, but it is not a tree.

The same goes for *myself*, but let's take care to absorb what this amounts to. Start with my body. In reality, my body exists; in reality, it is Brahman (here I drop the pointing-through brackets for readability, but I trust you know what I mean.) The illusion is that it has hands and is distinct from the tree, but none of that is true in reality. In reality, it is nothing other than Brahman—the very same formless being that presents-in-māyā-as the tree, presenting here as my body. $[\text{My body}]_{pt}$ exists, that is, but it is not a body.

Now take my mind *considered as an object*. By this I mean the sum total of mental events and states that pass through my brain, as it were—an array of sensations, thoughts, images, perceptions, emotions, desires, urges, and so on. Their status is no different from my body or the tree. In reality, they exist. In reality, each one is Brahman. The illusion is that they have content, that they are distinct from one another and from the tree, and so on. But none of that is true in reality. In reality, each mental state is identically Brahman—the very same thing that presents-in-māyā-as my body and as the tree, now presenting-in-māyā-as thoughts and sensations and so on.

Turn finally to my self *considered as subject*—the “subjective self”, as I’ll call it. By this I mean the *subject* of thought, perception, desire, and other mental states. It is that which thinks, that which perceives, that which desires; and more generally, that which has a *point of view* on the world, relating to it as subject to object. What is *this* “I”? Is it an illusion? Yes and no. In reality, I exist:

$R([I]_{pt} \text{ exist})$.

In reality, I too am Brahman:

$R([I]_{pt} = \text{Brahman})$.

The illusion is that I perceive and am distinct from what I perceive; that I desire and am distinct from the objects of my desires; that I think and am distinct from the objects of thought. When I perceive the tree, for example, that is true *in the illusion*:

$M(\text{I perceive the tree})$,

but not in reality:

It is not the case that $R(\text{I perceive the tree})$,

not even when we point through:

It is not the case that $R([I]_{pt} \text{ perceive the tree})$.

For $[I]_{pt}$ am nothing but Brahman, something that does not perceive or think or desire (Brahman is devoid of form and attribute). Indeed, $[I]_{pt}$ am the very same thing that presents-in-māyā-as the tree I perceive:

$R([I]_{pt} = [\text{the tree I perceive}]_{pt})$.

Thus the “perceiver” *is* the “perceived”, and, in reality, does not perceive at all.

It is worth distinguishing these two results. The first is that, in reality, there is no distinction between self and world, between subject and object. In reality there is just Brahman—something that presents-in-māyā *as* a perceiving subject but also *as* the perceived world; and again, *as* that which desires but also *as* that which is desired. The idea that the thinking subject is something distinct from its objects is just an illusion, for reality is devoid of distinctions. And the second implication is that, in reality, the “thinking” subject does not think or perceive or desire in the first place. The very idea of having a *point of view* on the world, with opinions on what it is like and how I would like it to be, is just an illusion. Thus $[\text{the subjective self}]_{pt}$ exists (it is Brahman), but it is not a subjective self. The self as we know it is an illusion.

It is because of these implications that I believe Vedāntic monism verifies what is known in the mystical tradition as the “dissolution of self”. As I said at the beginning, mystics often report

experiences in which the distinction between self and world collapses. They report becoming “one with reality” (or God); or that their sense of being a “separate self”, something that peers out at the world from some perspective inside their skin, had dissolved. Their sense of separateness is revealed to be an illusion, masking their fundamental “oneness” with all that they previously related to as subject to object. In its two implications above, Vedāntic monism verifies these experiences as more accurate than everyday experience. Therefore, if you underwent such an experience and took it to be veridical rather than delusional, Vedāntic monism would be a candidate answer to the question of what the experience revealed. But I mention this only in passing, for (as I said at the beginning) there is no room to delve into the literature on mystical experience here. Suffice it to say that Vedāntic monism rejects the reality of the self as we ordinarily conceive of it.

It is instructive to compare this with other views that, in some sense or another, deny the reality of the self. In the context of classical Indian philosophy, these “no self” views were reactions to the traditional Hindu conception of the self, or *ātman*. Following Jay Garfield (2022), it is helpful to characterize this conception of the self as having three core features. The first is *metaphysical independence* from body and mind. The self *has* a body and *has* a mind, but it is identical to neither; nor is it some sort of construction out of them. It is metaphysically independent of body and mind. The second feature involves a *subject-object duality*: the self is the subject of each mental state and distinct from their objects. It is that which thinks, that which perceives, and so on, and is distinct from the objects of thought and perception. And the third feature is its *unifying* role: it unifies mental states as states *of* the very same subject. This includes synchronic unity, explaining why my current states of perceiving a tree and hearing a bird are states of one and the same subject. And it includes diachronic unity, explaining why it is one and the same subject that now perceives a tree and yesterday smelt a rose.

One cluster of “no self” views deny the reality of the first and third features. On these views, there is no “self” independent of body and mind with which to unify mental states. These views do not necessarily deny the reality of the body or of individual mental states such as perceiving a tree and smelling a rose. What they deny is that there is something lying behind all that, the “possessor” of the body or the “subject” of those mental states, by which to unify those mental states as states of one and the same subject. We can of course collect together mental states that are connected in some way (perhaps causally) and call them states of the same “person”, but that is just a convention. Persons, on this view, are mere constructions. Views like this were advanced in classical India by various Buddhist schools, and in contemporary Anglophone philosophy by thinkers such as Derek Parfit (1984) and David Lewis (1976). It is a striking view, for sure, but notice how much it leaves intact. It leaves intact the reality of mental states such as perceiving a tree, and even that each individual mental state has a subject-object structure (with the subject distinct from its object). All that follows is that, strictly speaking, each state has a distinct subject and that any “identification” of subjects across states is a convention.

The “no self” view we find in Vedāntic monism is very different insofar as it retains the first feature while rejecting the second and third. It retains the first feature by maintaining that [I]_{pt} am Brahman—something that exists independently of body and mind. In this respect, it preserves more of the traditional Hindu conception of *ātman* than the “no self” views just mentioned. But in other respects, it preserves less. For Vedāntic monism does *not* leave intact the reality of the

body, or of mental states such as perceiving a tree and thinking of a rose. In reality, there are no thoughts or perceptions. Nor, therefore, does Vedāntic monism leave intact the subject-object dualism of each individual mental state. In reality, there is no subject distinct from its object—not even when we restrict attention to an individual mental state. The subject-object structure of each mental state is an illusion, just like the mental state itself. So, while Vedāntic monism preserves the reality of the self *qua* something independent of body and mind, it is not something that perceives or thinks. In reality, *nothing ever perceives or thinks!*

To be clear, we do of course perceive and think and believe and desire *in the illusion*. But *only* in the illusion. In reality, there is no thought, no belief, no desire, no perception, and no representation. Thus the very *enterprise* of being a thinking subject, something that believes and desires and represents and so on, rests on a false presupposition!

7. Subjectical ineffability

This leads to a distinctive kind of ineffability—the second implication of Vedāntic monism I want to explore. Here is the rough idea. Suppose that you are a metaphysician attempting to limn the structure of reality. One day it is revealed to you that reality is Vedāntic: only Brahman is real, one and perfectly simple, and all else is illusion. What then are you to think? You might continue to think that you have hands, that you are not a tree, etc. But that is not true in reality. It is only true in the illusion, and as a metaphysician you are not interested in illusion. You are interested in reality. So instead, you might think that [you]_{pt} are Brahman, that [the tree]_{pt} is Brahman, that everything is Brahman. That is true, and indeed true in reality. The trouble is, your *thinking* this presupposes something that is not true in reality, and so not true at all—it presupposes a subject that thinks and an object that is thought. In that sense *the very activity of thinking rests on a mistake*. And as a metaphysician, your aim was to avoid mistake. You wanted to limn reality *accurately*, not mistakenly; yet now it appears that *thinking anything at all* involves inaccuracy! In short, once you see that reality is Vedāntic you see that very enterprise of trying to *represent* reality in thought is a colossal mistake, an inherently confused enterprise. To avoid confusion and mistake, you must *stop representing*. You must stop *thinking*. You must stop *talking*. In this way the true nature of reality is unthinkable, ineffable.

This is not the “alethic” kind of ineffability we noted in section 4. There, the idea was that if ultimate reality (God, Brahman, The One) is perfectly simple, there can be no truths about it to eff. But I have assumed that Brahman is *not* ineffable in that sense: I have assumed that it’s true that [you]_{pt} are Brahman, for example, and indeed that this is true in reality. The trouble is, the very act of *asserting* or *believing* such truths is itself a failure to limn reality, presupposing as it does a subject that asserts or believes. So I’ll call this *subjectical* ineffability, for want of a better term: reality is ineffable due to its inherent lack of an effing subject.

That’s the rough idea. But the obvious worry is that it doesn’t matter if the activity of assertion or belief rests on a mistake. So long as the proposition asserted or believed is true in reality, you might think, one has succeeded in limning reality. So let me now try to make the argument more precise.

Start with the observation that assertion and belief are an illusion. It is only in the illusion that you assert or believe anything at all. When you believe that you are Brahman, for example, what we have is

M(You believe that [you]_{pt} are Brahman),

not

R(You believe that [you]_{pt} are Brahman).

Hence it is not *true* that you believe that you are Brahman (by Reality Or Illusion).¹⁶ However hard you try, however loudly you yell “I am Brahman! I *am* Brahman!”, you do not believe that you are Brahman. As a first pass, then, we might put the argument like this: You can’t believe what’s true in reality because you can’t believe anything at all.

But this is not quite the right way to put the argument. The objection will be that illusory belief is good enough. “In the illusion”, the objector will say, “I *do* believe that I am Brahman. And it is *true* that I am Brahman—indeed, it is *true in reality*. So what’s the problem? My illusory belief is true! All the argument shows is that I did not *in fact* believe that I am Brahman, but why does that matter? What’s wrong with illusory belief? Belief is that by which I navigate the world—the *world of illusion*, that is. Belief is *made* for the illusory world, so to speak. Illusory belief is all that belief was ever *supposed* to be.”

The objection is right, of course, but it has sown the seed of the reply. Belief is made for the illusion. Good. Then a *true* belief is one that corresponds to *truth in the illusion!* And in the illusion, *you are not Brahman!* So your illusory belief is false.

Let me unpack this carefully. Here it will help to focus on assertion rather than belief, though the argument goes though just the same in either case. It’s a platitude, I take it, that the truth of an assertion depends on what it means and how things are. Schematically,

An assertion of a sentence “S” is true iff (i) the assertion of “S” means that p, and (ii) p.

Here, the locution “means that” could be replaced with “has the content that”, or “has the truth-condition that”, or “expresses the proposition that”, or “is true in all and only those worlds in which”; it will make no difference. Either way, I claim that *all this is internal to māyā*. It is only in the illusion that assertions are made, and only in the illusion that they have meanings or truth-conditions. The platitude must therefore be understood within the scope of the illusion operator:

M(An assertion of a sentence “S” is true iff (i) the assertion of “S” means that p, and (ii) p.)

When you assert “I am Brahman”, then, your assertion has truth-conditions *in the illusion*:

¹⁶ Here and in what follows I drop the square brackets around ‘you’ for readability when commenting on the argument, reserving the brackets for indented claims on which the argument rests.

(I) M(Your assertion of “I am Brahman” is true iff (i) your assertion of “I am Brahman” means that [you]_{pt} are Brahman, and (ii) [you]_{pt} are Brahman.)

Now, let us grant that, in the illusion, condition (i) is satisfied:

(I.i) M(Your assertion of “I am Brahman” means that [you]_{pt} are Brahman.)

The trouble is that condition (ii) is not satisfied, for in the illusion you are *not* Brahman:

M([You]_{pt} are not Brahman)

So, by Logic In Illusion, we have

M(Your assertion of “I am Brahman” is not true.)

In the illusion, your assertion is not true. Thus, you cannot *truly assert* (believe, think) that you are Brahman—not even in the illusion!

The objector might complain that I misinterpreted you. Perhaps you did not intend to make an assertion with truth-conditions in the illusion. Perhaps you intended to make an assertion with truth-conditions in reality. But what could this mean? One suggestion would be this:

M(Your assertion of “I am Brahman” is true iff (i) your assertion of “I am Brahman” means that R([you]_{pt} are Brahman) and (ii) R([you]_{pt} are Brahman).)

But this is no help, for condition (ii) is still not satisfied: *in the illusion*, it is not true in reality that you are Brahman! The problem is that condition (ii) still lies within the scope of the illusion operator, just like it did in my original principle (I), so we still get the result that your illusory assertion is not true.

What the objector must have in mind, rather, is that the truth-condition lies outside the scope of illusion:

(IR) M(Your assertion of “I am Brahman” is true) iff (i) your assertion of “I am Brahman” means that [you]_{pt} are Brahman, and (ii) [you]_{pt} are Brahman.

Now condition (ii) obtains: in reality, [you]_{pt} *are* Brahman; hence by Factive Reality it follows that [you]_{pt} are Brahman (period). So in the illusion, the objection goes, your assertion is true! Thus the objector will claim that your illusory assertion corresponds to what’s true in reality.

But the problem now lies in condition (i). Since it lies outside the scope of the illusion operator, the principle Reality Or Illusion implies that it must be true in reality:

R(Your assertion of “I am Brahman” means that [you]_{pt} are Brahman).

And this is obviously not so. In reality, there is just Brahman, perfectly simple. In reality, there are no such things as sentences or assertions or meanings or what have you—all that is just illusion!

The point here is perhaps most perspicuous if one understands meaning in terms of notions like *reference* or *representation*. For on that view, condition (i)—that your assertion of “I am Brahman” means that you are Brahman—would follow from truths such as

“Brahman” refers to, or represents, Brahman.

What the objector must say, we’ve seen, is that this is true in reality:

(*) R(“Brahman” refers to, or represents, Brahman).

And this violates the core tenet of Vedāntic monism, namely that *in reality there is only Brahman, devoid of form and distinction*. It violates Brahman’s oneness and simplicity. Right here is the crux of the argument. The driving idea, remember, was that since reality is *one* there can be no distinction between subject and object—not in reality, at least. In reality, there can be no such thing as the *representation* of an object by a subject. Here is where that driving idea shows up, for in (*) the objector is smuggling this relation of representation back into reality. But the point generalizes to whatever your favored conception of meaning is. If you join so-called “deflationists” like Hartry Field (1994) in thinking that meaning-attributions like condition (i) are to be understood in terms of inter-personal translation, fine; then the point is that *in reality there is no such thing as inter-personal translation!*

The problem is clear. It is only in the illusion that you can assert that you are Brahman. But in the illusion, a true assertion is one that corresponds to truth *in the illusion*, and in the illusion you are not Brahman! To make an assertion that corresponds to truth *in reality*, you would have to assert it in reality. But that is not possible because assertion is not real, it’s just an illusion. Thus the true nature of reality is ineffable.

To see the point, imagine that in the fiction of *Dr. Strangelove*, Mandrake asserts “I am Peter Sellers”. In the fiction, of course, Mandrake is *not* Peter Sellers; so in the fiction, his assertion is false. This is so, notice, even if it comes out of Sellers’ mouth! For Sellers is not *really* asserting it, he is just *pretending* to be a fictional character asserting it. And in the fiction this character isn’t Sellers, and isn’t played by Sellers—none of that is part of the fiction! So in the fiction, Mandrake cannot truly assert that he is Sellers. Now in this case, Sellers can of course break out of role and assert “I am Peter Sellers” in his own voice, so to speak, and his assertion would then be true. But this is precisely what is *not* possible in the case of Vedāntic monism. For the analogue would be breaking out of the illusion and asserting “I am Brahman” in reality, and that is impossible since assertion is just an illusion.

It is worth clarifying the kind of ineffability we have here. I assumed that in the illusion, you can assert the proposition that you are Brahman:

(I.i) M(Your assertion of “I am Brahman” means that [you]_{pt} are Brahman.)

This is not beyond question. After all, (I.i) requires that Brahman appears as a character in illusion, i.e. as the referent of “Brahman”. Nothing we’ve said so far rules this out, but you might think this conflicts with the spirit of Vedāntic monism. Brahman *performs* the illusion, you might think, but is not a character *in* the illusion. If you take this line then it is *not true*, after all, that in the illusion you can assert (believe) that you are Brahman. And in that case, the first pass of argument was right after all: no matter how hard you try, you cannot assert or believe or think that you are Brahman—not even in the illusion! The result would be that the true nature of reality is *inexpressible, ungraspable, unthinkable*. This is what I’ll call “conceptual ineffability”. Conceptual ineffability theses have a rich history in Abrahamic theology and NeoPlatonism, where it has been maintained that God or The One is ineffable due the impossibility of beings like us forming a concept of it.¹⁷ This is a line one might take here too, but I want to highlight a different kind of ineffability that follows from Vedāntic monism *even if* we assume that you can grasp the proposition that you are Brahman (grasp it in the illusion, that is). That is why I assumed (I.i) for the sake of argument.

I am also assuming that the proposition that you are Brahman is *true*, and indeed true in reality. Again, this is not beyond question. As we saw in section 4, one might think that if Brahman is perfectly simple then there cannot be any true propositions involving Brahman. This led to “alethic ineffability”, the idea that reality is ineffable because there are no truths about reality to eff. This is also a line one might take here, but—again—I want to highlight a different kind of ineffability that we find in Vedāntic monism *even if* we assume that there are propositions that are true in reality, such as that you are Brahman.

Given these assumptions, the situation is this. In the illusion, you can assert and believe the proposition that you are Brahman. And this proposition is true—indeed, it is true in reality. The problem is that *your assertion or belief* is not true. The reason is that assertions and beliefs have truth-conditions *in the illusion*, and in the illusion the proposition is not true! This is what I call “subjectical” ineffability: to *truly* eff that you are Brahman you would have to eff it *in reality*, but in reality there is no subject to do the effing.

Here the objector might push back again. Remember, your task as a metaphysician was to limn reality, and I am arguing that you cannot do this with *thought or belief or assertion*. But if you can believe (in the illusion) that you are Brahman, and if the proposition so believed is true in reality, why have you not succeeded in “representing reality”? Why does your illusory belief not “correspond to reality”? The short answer, of course, is that correspondence is just an illusion! It’s not *really* a thing, it’s just part of the illusion. So your belief can only “correspond” to something *in the illusion*; and in the illusion, what it corresponds to *is not true!*

But we can I think diagnose the object’s mistake. The problem is that she is too caught up in *māyā*; so steeped in illusion that she gives belief and assertion more credit than they deserve. She neglects that belief and assertion are make-believe. In reality, there is no such thing as belief, and hence no such thing as believing the truth either. The very *notion* of “believing the truth” is just *māyā*! The entire enterprise of forming beliefs and evaluating them as true or false is *all just an illusion*, a fictional game with no basis in reality. Believing something true is like a winning

¹⁷ Add references.

move in a fictional game. We must therefore give up the idea that such a belief “corresponds to” or “represents” reality. Imagine a game in which I pretend to be Peter Pan, you pretend to be a pirate, and I win if I get your pretend gold. Believing something true is like *that*. It “represents reality” no more than my getting the imaginary gold. Grant then that the proposition that you are Brahman is true in reality, and grant that you believe it (in the illusion). So what? *Belief, it turns out, is not the kind of thing that can correspond to reality!*

To illustrate the point, set aside Vedāntic monism for a moment and consider the attitude of *denial*. If you deny *p*, then even if *p* is true *your denial* does not correspond to reality. *You* have not “limned” or “represented” reality by denying *p*. Denial is the wrong kind of attitude with which to do that. Or consider pretense. If you *pretend* that *p*, then even if *p* happens to be true, *you* have not “represented reality” by your pretense. Again, pretense is the wrong kind of attitude (or activity) with which to do that. According to Vedāntic monism, belief and assertion are like *that*. They are just *māyā*, part of Brahman’s grand pretense, and hence not the kind of thing with which one can represent reality.

Note that the issue here only arises when doing metaphysics; or more specifically, when the task is to represent *reality*. There is no problem when it comes to everyday or scientific matters. It is true in the illusion that grass is green, for example, and that electrons have mass; so if you believe (in the illusion) “grass is green” or “electrons have mass”, your (illusory) belief is true. In this respect, then, Vedāntic monism does not conflict with everyday or scientific belief! To be sure, the *propositions* believed are not true in reality, and so not true at all. But they are true in the illusion, and that is enough to make our *beliefs* true. The problem arises only when one tries to represent *reality*. That project is incoherent, we have seen, because belief and representation and their cognates are internal to the illusion. The idea that a belief can “reach out” of the illusion and represent reality is hopelessly confused.

In sections 3-5 I described Vedāntic monism. I am now saying that if reality were Vedāntic, it cannot be truly described. Contradiction? No, for I have not assumed that reality *is* Vedāntic. In those earlier sections I described a possible world, and I am now saying that an organism living in such a world could not truly describe their world (not as it *really* is, at least). It is only if it dawned on you that *you* are such an organism that you must then... well, what? What is a metaphysician who finds herself in a Vedāntic world to do?

8. Metaphysics as meditation

Let’s think this through. As a metaphysician, you start off wanting to limn reality. To do this you try *thinking*. You reason, conjecture, argue, draw conclusions, form beliefs—that sort of thing. But on Vedāntic monism, to form a belief, or any attitude for that matter, you step out of reality (so to speak) and into illusion; and it is then impossible for the attitude so formed to “correspond to” or “represent” the reality you left. Reality does not contain the resources for that to be possible. So, by thinking you failed from get-go. You went wrong right out of the traps. Insofar as your aim is to limn reality, *thinking just gets in the way*.

What then are you to do? You must *stop thinking*. You must quieten the subjective self. You must let go of all belief, all desire, and any other state that involves relating as subject to object.

According to Vedāntic monism, this is what you must do to have any chance of limning reality. Of course, it doesn't (yet) follow that reality *can* be limned like this. Rather, the result (so far) is akin to Reichenbach on induction: *if* reality can be limned at all, it is only by letting go of the subjective self.¹⁸

This is the aim of certain meditative practices (though talk of “aim” might import too much of the subjective self). Here I don't just mean focusing on the breath and noting thoughts as they arise. True, this may help you relate to those thoughts *as objects*, not as their subject. You are no longer *thinking* them but *observing* them. But to observe them is to be the subject of another mental state: your state of *observing* them. So you must let all that go too. You must let go of your focus on the breath, let go of your attention to thoughts, let go of attention to anything. The result (so it is said) is a field of awareness in which various mental events may unfold but none of which are the object of attention. But insofar as the field of awareness has a “center”, there is still a subject—an inactive subject, perhaps, but a subject nonetheless. So you must let that go too. The result (so it is said) is a field of awareness with no center. Pure consciousness without a subject. Our Reichenbachian result is that if reality can be limned at all, it is only with a state of mind like *that*. The conclusion of metaphysical inquiry will not be a set of *true beliefs* or *claims* about reality, not even ones that count as knowledge. It will not be a “book of the world”, to use Ted Sider's phrase. According to Vedāntic monism, the conclusion of metaphysical inquiry (if it can be done at all) is not *thesis* but *meditation*.

Can we go further and say that a subject-less state of mind *would* limn reality? Perhaps. I won't try to establish this here, but the rough contours of an argument might look like this. Think of the kind of knowledge that you achieve through belief or other representational states as an attempt to “connect” with reality. This makes sense insofar as you are a subjective self (section 6), something distinct from the world you peer out at. For in that case the function of representational states can be seen as an attempt to bridge this gap between self and world. By forming representations that count as knowledge (or true, or justified; pick whatever honorific you like), the subjective self comes into a kind of “alignment” with a world it is separate from. But this connection is by its nature limited, because to know reality in this representational sense is to retain some distance from it, so to speak, namely the distance of subject to object. Now, Vedāntic monism implies that there is no real distinction between subject and object in the first place. There is no subjective self distinct from the rest of reality, so there is no gap for representational knowledge to bridge. But in that case representational knowledge is a solution to a problem that doesn't exist. Seen like this, a subject-less state of mind would count as “knowing reality” just insofar as it dissolves the problem that representational knowledge was there to solve. It is in that sense, the argument goes, that a subject-less state of mind would count as “limning reality”.¹⁹

¹⁸ Of course, there never was a subjective self in the first place. By “letting go” of it I mean: letting go of the illusion that you are a thinking subject.

¹⁹ Is a subject-less state of mind attainable? Some have argued not, on the grounds that consciousness essentially involves a subject—see (Coseru 2024) and references therein. On the other hand, see Albahari (2019, pp. 13-19) for an argument from conceivability that a subject-less state of mind is possible. But the point in the text does not hang on whether this state of mind is achievable. After all, the standard view that reality is to be limned with *belief* (or other representational states) does not presuppose that we can form the relevant beliefs, or that we can know them to be true were we to form them. Likewise, the Vedāntic view that reality is to be limned with a subject-less state of

To re-iterate, “limning” here does not mean “representing” or “copying”! The idea is *not* that pure consciousness without a subject would “represent Brahman” any more than would belief. It is rather that representation and its cognates are the wrong way to approach the enterprise of metaphysics. A subject-less state of mind would limn reality not by representing it from afar, so to speak, but by removing the illusion that there was any distance in the first place. Reality is to be limned, that is, not by *representations of it* but by *union with it*—a union that is achieved only by ceasing to relate to it as subject to object.

This all sounds a bit nuts, I know! But it appears to have been foreshadowed in the Upanishads. Here is verse 7 of the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, for example, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Fredrick Manchester (1947, p. 51):

The Fourth, say the wise... is not the knowledge of the senses, nor is it relative knowledge, nor yet inferential knowledge. Beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression, is the Fourth. It is pure unitary consciousness wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is the Supreme Good. It is One without a second. It is the Self. Know it alone!

Pure unitary consciousness is described a kind of knowledge—the fourth kind, or “*turīya*” in Sanskrit—but not an awareness *of* anything (knowledge without representation). S. Radhakrishnan (1953) even summarizes the verse as saying that this knowledge involves *union*:

In *turīya* there is a permanent union with *Brahman*. The metaphysical reality is cognized in *turīya*, if such an expression can be used for the transcendent state (p. 699).

This idea of knowledge by union returns in verse 12, here translated by Radhakrishnan (1953):

The fourth is that which has no elements, which cannot be spoken of, into which the world is resolved, benign, non-dual... He who knows it *enters the self with his self* (p. 701, final emphasis mine).

Radhakrishnan then summarizes this verse as follows:

In *turīya*, the mind is not simply withdrawn from the objects but becomes one with *Brahman* (p. 701).

Here again, this state of knowledge is characterized as a kind of unity, or oneness, with Brahman. This idea is even more explicit in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, verse 7, here again translated by Radhakrishnan:

The knowers of *Brahman* by knowing what is therein become merged in *Brahman* (p. 714).

mind does not presuppose that we can attain such a state. In both cases, the claim is about the aim, or end, of metaphysical inquiry, not about our capacity to achieve it.

And it recurs many centuries later in the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, where the state is said to follow from the cessation of thought:

If you give up all thoughts you will here and now attain to the realization of oneness with all”.²⁰

These are remarkable passages, to put it mildly! They may strike you as barely intelligible, easy to dismiss as mystical gibberish. Still, what I’ve tried to do is make sense of them by showing that they fall rather naturally out of the pretty straightforward monist metaphysics set out in sections 3-5.

Indeed, my route to these kinds of statements might explain why Vedāntic texts are sometimes said to present a panpsychist view on which reality is pure consciousness.²¹ That is one possibility, of course, but it’s no part of Vedāntic monism as I’ve developed it here. On the monism I’ve developed, it’s not that *reality* is pure consciousness; it’s that the only way to limn reality is with a state of pure consciousness without a subject.²²

Setting aside now the more speculative claim that reality *can* be limned with a subject-less state of mind, we still have our Reichenbachian result that reality *cannot* be limned otherwise. *If* reality can be limned at all, it is only by letting go of the subjective self. I mentioned meditation as one route into such a state, but other activities such as ritual chanting and an ascetic lifestyle have also been said to facilitate this kind of release. But whatever the method, it appears to require dedicated and sustained practice over a long period of time—months, years, perhaps even decades. Sustained practices of this kind are sometimes associated with religion, but they are not unique to religion. In the spirit of ecumenicism, then, I will use the term “spiritual practice” to refer to any sustained activity undertaken to facilitate a release of the subjective self.

The point I wish to conclude with is that Vedāntic monism yields a distinctive rationale for spiritual practice: namely, *it is how to do metaphysics!* This is very different from the rationales one finds in contemporary non-religious contexts. There, two rationales for meditation, in particular, are widespread. The first is that meditation increases *well-being*: like exercise, sleep, and a healthy diet, it is promoted as a key component of a healthy and happy life. And the second rationale is that meditation offers *empirical insight* into one’s inner life: it is an epistemic tool by which to learn about the nature of mind.²³

The rationale we get from Vedāntic monism is very different. If you are reading this, you must already have some interest in metaphysics, the project of limning the structure of reality.

²⁰ This quote is from Swami Venkatesananda’s translation (1993, p. 57).

²¹ Albahari (2019) defends a Vedāntic view along these lines.

²² This may be the interpretation of Advaita Vedānta that Eliot Deutsch had in mind when he wrote: “Brahman, for Advaita Vedānta, is a name for that fullness of being which is the “content” of non-dualistic spiritual experience: an experience in which all distinctions between subject and object are shattered and in which remains only a pure, unqualified “oneness”. The characterization of Brahman as *saccidānanda*—as infinite being (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*), and bliss (*ānanda*)—is intended not so much to ascribe attributes to Brahman as it is to describe the primary moments or features of the non-dualistic experience itself. Brahman is not *saccidānanda*, if by designating Brahman as *saccidānanda* one does intend to ascribe a positive character to Brahman” (Deutsch 1969, pp. 13-14).

²³ For critical discussion of these rationales, see Thompson (2020) chapters 1 and 4.

Until now, you probably thought that the way to limn reality is with *beliefs* that represent it, and so the task is to figure out which beliefs they are through reasoning and argument and so forth. But if reality is Vedāntic, the way to limn reality is with a subject-less state of mind, and so the task is to attain such a state by devoting yourself to spiritual practice. Thus, the rationale for spiritual practice is whatever you thought the rationale for doing metaphysics was in the first place. Once you are doing metaphysics, spiritual practice is the correct reaction to the fact (if it is a fact) of Vedāntic monism, just as believing physicalism would be the correct reaction to the fact (if it is a fact) of physicalism.

Notice how striking a result this is. Remember, we never said that Brahman has special attributes like omnibenevolence, in virtue of which it is worthy of praise through activities like worship. In Vedāntic monism, Brahman is a blank ontological posit much like the null set in set theory. That we can nonetheless derive from it a rationale for spiritual practice therefore has the air of pulling a rabbit out of a hat. It would be like deriving from set theory that one must say grace before dinner! Nonetheless, I have tried to show that Vedāntic monism delivers the rabbit.

This last point shows that the Vedāntic rationale also differs from a standard theological rationale for activities like worship and prayer. I have in mind a rationale that says “God exists and has certain praise-worthy attributes such as omnibenevolence; therefore you should praise God.” Brahman, of course, does not have such attributes to ground this sort of rationale. Still, you might think that the two rationales are similar insofar as they both maintain that a practice of some sort is the correct reaction to the nature of reality (the existence of an omnibenevolent God on the one hand, Vedāntic monism on the other). But in fact, the rationales are very different in structure. In the theological case, one first forms a *metaphysical belief* about the nature of reality, i.e. that a God with certain attributes exists, and one then proceeds via practical reasoning to the conclusion that one must engage in the practice. But in the case of Vedāntic monism, there is no parallel metaphysical belief from which practical reasoning might proceed. Instead, the practice *is* the metaphysics.

This point is easy to miss, for the Vedāntic rationale does of course involve reasoning and belief. After all, I have *argued* that if reality is Vedāntic then limning reality requires spiritual practice. That is something one can *believe*, and it is part of the Vedāntic justification for spiritual practice. But the belief is not metaphysical in the relevant sense—it does not itself limn reality. More explicitly, then, the difference is this. In the theological case, one first comes to believe that God exists and has attributes like omnibenevolence. This may be an article of faith, or it may be the result of reasoning from premises and experiences. In the latter case, we have

Premise / experience

Premise / experience

.

.

_____.

Therefore, God exists and has certain attributes (e.g. omnibenevolence).

At that point, you are done with the metaphysics. The conclusion, if true, limns reality. In believing it, *you* have limned reality. To get a rationale for worship, you add further reasoning—

practical reasoning—to the effect that you must worship such a God. But in the Vedāntic case, by contrast, there is no metaphysical conclusion from which practical reasoning proceeds. You might of course come to believe Vedāntic monism, whether by faith or by reasoning. But you know (from section 7) that your belief does not limn reality. The metaphysics is not yet done. You also know (from this section) that to limn reality you must let go of the subjective self through spiritual practice. Still the metaphysics is not yet done—you have not limned reality until you have attained the subject-less state of mind. So with Vedāntic monism, the route to a metaphysical conclusion looks like this:

Premise / experience
 Premise / experience
 .
 .
 .
 Therefore, Vedāntic monism
 .
 . (reasoning from section 7)
 .
 Therefore, my belief in Vedāntic monism does not limn reality.
 .
 . (reasoning from section 8)
 .
 Therefore, limning reality requires a subject-less state of mind achieved through spiritual practice.
 .
 . (years of practice)
 .
 .

 ॐ

Now you are done with metaphysics.

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