

The Foundations of *Adhyāsa*

Sections:

1. [Introduction to the study of *Adhyāsa*](#)
2. [Pūrva-pakṣa: The Self is the Body](#)
3. [Spurious Arguments: The Self is still the Body](#)
4. [Minor arguments against the *Pūrva-pakṣa*](#)
5. [The *Siddhānta*: The Self is not the Body](#)
6. [Vedānta Theory of Perception](#)
7. [Western Perspectives](#)
8. [The Three States](#)
9. [Sādhana towards Self-knowledge](#)

1. Introduction to the study of Adhyāsa

A significant portion of [Sankara's](#) Works (especially the famous Commentary, [Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya](#) or BSB) deals with “*Adhyāsa*” or Superimposition (of the Body on the Self). This article will discuss the various facets of *Adhyāsa*: what it is, how it is known or experienced, and why *Advaitins* lay stress on its removal. The Argument that the Self is not the Body (hereafter “**The Argument**”) is a central concept in [Advaita Vedānta](#) – indeed, all schools of [Vedānta](#) – and *Advaitins* everywhere ought to be aware of the reasons for the rejection of the Body as the Self.

Nowadays, scientists can explain so many phenomena, including bodily processes, using the framework of physical laws. Medical science routinely presents us with new insights into the workings of the material Body. It makes one wonder if these scientific advances disprove the existence of the Self as distinct from the Body; or at the very least, cast doubt on the view of *Advaita Vedānta* concerning the eternal [Ātman](#).

One can also ask the question: Is the entirety of *Advaita Vedānta* based on faith? If so, it is no different from religions like Christianity or Islam that rely upon their own revelations, whose veracity is altogether uncertain. This paper will take the query seriously, and explain in some detail as to how the fundamentals of *Advaita Vedānta* are rock-solid within logical reasoning, thus distinguishing it from other “religions” that lack any such firm philosophical basis.

Sankara and other *Advaitins* discard the possibility that Consciousness can be derived from or attributed to the Body, in a way that is acceptable to modern minds. Scientists now consider the Problem of Consciousness to be a serious obstacle to Science, and since this is also one of the problems that has taxed the greatest philosophers, the present article will (hopefully) shed some light on Sankara's genius in highlighting it as the key problem of *Advaita Vedānta*.

Thus, there are at least two reasons for the study of **The Argument**:

1) Practical reason: Many believe, “It is possible that the Body is the Self.”

But the reality is, “It is **impossible** for the Body to be the Self”!

This fact should be established and lodged deeply in the heart of the spiritual aspirant. As Sankara says in his BSB 3.3.54, “It is to drive in a peg” – i.e. to drive home the point to the disciple, that **The Argument** is studied.

2) Theoretical reason: It is all too common to find people discussing Science in the context of religion, and how the sum total of all *Advaita Vedānta* is accepted by “faith”. This is false. If Sankara agreed that the fact, “The Body is not the Self” is known only via faith, why does he not quote even a single scriptural statement in his BSB 3.3.54? He proves that the Body is not the Self using nothing but experience and reasoning, with no appeal to any scripture whatsoever.

Although Sanskrit is the language of Sankara, many do not speak it fluently, hence ***The Argument*** will be presented in plain English, with only occasional use of Sanskrit. ***The Argument*** may be contained in a multitude of *Advaita Vedānta* texts, but the one used here will be Sankara's BSB, specifically the passage 3.3.53-54. The translation of the BSB will closely follow the one by [George Thibaut](#).

2. Pūrva-pakṣa: The Self is the Body

Among everything that an ordinary person associates with the Self, the foremost is the (material or physical) Body. In familiar statements such as, “I am short/tall”, “I am fair/dark”, “I am thin/fat”, etc., the properties of the Body are tacitly assumed to belong to the Self:

I am = short/tall

I am = fair/dark

I am = thin/fat

...

The basis for all of the above is:

Self = (The whole, or a part, or a set of attributes of the) Body

Other examples include: when one uses the hands to perform work, the legs to walk, or the mouth to chew food, one says, “I picked up the pen”, “I ran to the store”, “I ate the fruit”, etc.

If it can be shown that the Self is not the Body, or that Consciousness cannot be derived from the Body, then all these common ideas become false, implying that:

The properties of the (unconscious) Body are Superimposed on the (conscious) Self.

This is called *Adhyāsa*, where certain attributes are Superimposed on an entity that does not possess the said attributes. An example is: mistaking a shiny shell ([nacre](#)) to be an object made of metallic silver.

Therefore, the important aspect of *Adhyāsa* in the context of *Advaita Vedānta* is to prove that the Self is not the Body. If this can be done, then the Body can be taken as a Superimposition on the Self. Sankara accomplishes precisely this in his great BSB.

The *Brahma Sūtra* first considers the [Pūrva-pakṣa](#) that the Self is non-different from the Body.

Brahma Sūtra 3.3.53:

Some maintain the non-existence of a separate Self, on account of its existence being dependent on a Body.

Sankara's Commentary:

Vedāntin: At present we will prove the existence of a Self different from the Body in order to establish thereby the qualification (of the Self) for bondage and release. For if there were no Self different from the Body, there would be no room for injunctions that have the other world for their result; nor could it be taught of anyone that [Brahman](#) is the Self.

Opponent: But in the first *pāda* of the [Pūrva Mīmāṃsā Sūtras](#), there has been declared the existence of a Self which is different from the Body and hence capable of enjoying the fruits taught by the Scripture.

Vedāntin: True, it has been declared there by the author of that *Bhāṣya*, but there is in that place no *Sūtra* about the existence of the Self. Here, on the other hand, the *Sūtrakāra* himself establishes the existence of the Self after having disposed of a preliminary objection. ***A discussion of the existence of the Self is introduced in order to show that the whole Scripture depends thereon, and the existence of a Self which is separate from the Body is affirmed.***

Note just how critical it is for Sankara to establish the existence of the Self as disparate from the Body: *the totality of Scripture depends upon it!* Without a Self being different from the Body, neither [Mīmāṃsā](#) (which believes in another world where [Karma](#) bears fruit) nor *Vedānta* (where the *Ātman* is held to be immutable) makes any sense, so the *Vedāntin* should be all ready and prepared to defend this basic thesis.

The Opponent comprehensively states the view of Materialism.

BSB 3.3.53 (continued):

Opponent: Some Materialists, who see the Self in the Body only, are of opinion that a Self separate from the Body does not exist. They assume that Consciousness ("*Caitanya*"), although not observed in the elements - either single or combined - may yet appear in them when they are transformed into the shape of a Body, so that Consciousness springs from it, analogous to the intoxication that arises out of a Body when liquor is consumed. There is thus no Self separate from the Body and capable of going to the heavenly world or obtaining release; the Body alone is the conscious Self. For this assertion they allege the reason stated, "On account of its existence where a Body is." Wherever something exists if another exists, and does not exist if that another does not exist, we determine the former to be a quality of the latter: e.g. light and heat are determined to be qualities of fire. As life, intelligence, memory and so on - which are considered qualities of the Self - are observed only within a Body and not outside, and as an abode of those qualities, different from the Body, cannot be proved, it follows that they must be qualities of the Body only. The Self therefore is not different from the Body.

There are many arguments given by the Opponent who regards the Self to be identified with or linked to the Body:

- (1) The existence of the Self is dependent on the Body: Everywhere, every time, one always observes a Body. Therefore, the Self is non-different from the Body. (The case of Deep Sleep, the Opponent may argue that there is no observation at all).
- (2) The Self “arises” out of the Body, like a Property emerges out of a material object: Just as “intoxication” is not observed in liquor, but is observed when liquor comes in contact with a person, the Self “springs up” from the bodily constituents. To give a modern analogy – there is no “liquidity” in either Hydrogen or Oxygen, but their combination has this property. Similarly with the Self and the Bodily elements.
- (3) The “closest attributes” of the Self are observed to be “within” the Body: All that one presumes as being “connected” to the Self – especially Memory and Intelligence – are perceived as “within” the Body, not outside it. If Memory and Intelligence are always attached to the Body, why not the Self too?

The Opponent’s arguments seem sound indeed – those who believe in the Self as either identical to or an attribute of the Body, will readily accept them as right.

Besides sophisticated “philosophical” arguments, ordinary people take the Self to be the Body. When one refers to “Devadatta” (in the English language, a place-holder name like “Tom”), the person is associated with a Body. Without the Body, no person, hence no Self!

3. Spurious Arguments: The Self is still the Body

Here are a few wrong arguments commonly given to show that the Self is not the Body. They appear fine on the surface, but are actually quite meaningless when one probes further.

1) *"It is 'obvious' that the Self is different from Body."*

Reply: If it were so obvious, why do several bright people among scientists and engineers strongly believe that there is nothing apart from the Body (with the concept of Self arising out of the physical Body)?

2) *"The knowledge of repeated knowing, of the form, 'I know that I know that I know...' in an infinite fashion shows that there is a Self different from the Body."*

Reply: It is merely a type of nonsense in an infinite regress, masquerading as an argument. (What does it mean to utter "know" infinite times? Nobody knows!)

3) *"The Three States of Waking, Dream and Deep Sleep reveal the Self to be different from the Body."*

Reply: Surprisingly, Sankara does not anywhere in his response to the Opponent's *Pūrva-pakṣa* utilize the experience of the Three States. *Adhyāsa* is more fundamental than the Three States!

4) *"Neurons 'create' the Self..."*

Reply: This is actually the Opponent's view that the Self is either identical with, or dependent on the Body. It doesn't prove that there is a Self independent of the neurons.

5) *"Quantum Mechanics demonstrates that the Self is different from the Body."*

Reply: The jury is out on what Quantum Physics is really saying about Consciousness. Besides, Sankara could not possibly have known about the developments in this area when he gave **The Argument**. There are many Physicists working in the field of Quantum Mechanics, who continue to admit that everything is material or physical, including Consciousness (as emanating from the Body).

6) *"Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem in Mathematics and Logic proves that the Self is not derivable from the Body."*

Reply: In spite of much discussion by Modern Philosophers, there is no conclusion as to what [Gödel's Theorem\(s\)](#), which is applicable to Number Theory, has to say about the conscious Self.

4. Minor arguments against the Pūrva-pakṣa

The *Brahma Sūtra* states the [Siddhānta](#), and Sankara begins with some slight disputations in opposition to the *Pūrva-pakṣa*.

Brahma Sūtra 3.3.54:

There is separation of the Self from the Body, because the existence of the Self does not depend on the existence of the Body, as in the case of Perception.

Sankara's Commentary:

Vedāntin: The assertion that the Self is not separate from the Body cannot be maintained. The Self must be something separate from the Body, "because the existence of the Self does not depend on the existence of the Body". For if from the circumstance that they are where the Body is, you conclude that the qualities of the Self are qualities of the Body, you also must conclude from the fact that they are not where the Body is that they are not qualities of the Body, because thereby they show themselves to be different in character from the qualities of the Body.

- Now the qualities of the Body, such as form and so on, may be viewed as existing as long as the Body exists; life, movement, etc., on the other hand, do not exist even when the Body exists, i.e. in the state of death.
- The qualities of the Body, again, such as form and so on, are perceived by others; not so the qualities of the Self, such as Consciousness, memory, and so on.
- Moreover, we can indeed ascertain the presence of those latter qualities as long as the Body exists in the state of life, but we cannot ascertain their non-existence when the Body does not exist; for it is possible that even after this Body has died the qualities of the Self should continue to exist by passing over into another Body. This may be a mere hypothesis, but is sufficient to preclude the opposite opinion.

Before commencing the major part of ***The Argument*** (covered in the next section), Sankara responds to the Opponent with a few initial points:

- (1) If the Body be identical with the Self, why is a dead Body not conscious? The very fact the word “dead” appears as a qualifier for the Body implies that there was something that existed in the Body before death (i.e. associated with life) that rendered it conscious.
- (2) The qualities of the Body such as its form (e.g. fat or tall) can be perceived by others, but the qualities that (the Opponent agrees) belong to the conscious Self, such as Memory and Intelligence cannot be perceived by others. If the Body is the Self, why is it that the former’s qualities (e.g. form) are perceived by others, but not the latter’s (e.g. Memory)?
- (3) Suppose we take up the last idea of the Opponent that the Self is an attribute of the Body. In the cases of objects possessing attributes, e.g. the form of a particular tree, we see that the form can exist even if the tree is destroyed – maybe in another tree which has the same form. Likewise, if the Self be an attribute of the Body, *perhaps* these attributes can exist even if the Body is destroyed (i.e. it dies), by transferring the said attributes – to another Body? Sankara agrees that this is somewhat “doubtful”, but it nevertheless provides food for thought – if the Body dies, who knows if the Self which is claimed (by the Opponent) to be the attributes of the Body has not become the attributes of (i.e. taken up) another Body?

These cogent arguments make a strong preliminary case for the Self being different from the Body, but they are not as powerful as ***The Argument*** that follows next.

5. The Siddhānta: The Self is not the Body

If the previous arguments were “minor”, then this is the **Major** one – **The Argument** – provided by Sankara. **The Argument** will first be stated as it appears in the BSB (plain translation), and then expanded with an interpretation.

BSB 3.3.54 (continued) :

Vedāntin: We further must question our opponent as to the nature of that Consciousness which he assumes to spring from the elements; for the Materialists do not admit the existence of anything but the four elements.

Opponent: Consciousness is the Perception of the elements and what springs from the elements.

Vedāntin: Then we remark that in that case the elements and their products are objects of Perception and hence the latter cannot be a quality of them, as it is contradictory that anything should act on itself (*i.e. the Self is the Subject of Perception, but the Body is the Object of Perception*). Fire is hot indeed but does not burn itself, and the acrobat, well-trained as he may be, cannot mount on his own shoulders. As little could Perception, if it were a mere quality of the elements and their products, render them objects of itself. For form and other qualities do not make their own color or the color of something else their objects; the elements and their products, on the other hand, whether external or belonging to the Self, are rendered objects by Perception. Hence in the same way, **as we admit the existence of that Perception which has the material elements and their products for its objects, we also must admit the separateness of that Perception from the elements.** Since Perception constitutes the character of the Self, the Self must be distinct from the Body. The Self recognizes judgments such as ‘I saw this,’ and from this fact, memory becomes possible. The argument that Consciousness is an attribute of the Body because it is where a Body is, has already been refuted.

The Argument is very simple, but exceedingly subtle, hence may require multiple attempts at understanding it. What follows is an interpretation of Sankara’s Commentary above.

Consider a perfectly healthy person standing across and looking at a building that is 100 feet tall, making the observation: “I see a partly unfocussed 100-foot tall building in front of me.”

To render it in the passive voice:

Observation #1: "A partly unfocussed 100-foot tall building is being seen (or perceived)."

The reason for including the phrase "partly unfocussed" is that no one sees a 100-foot tall building in complete focus – a part of the building is always unfocussed, even in persons with normal, undefective vision.

The question is: Can the above Observation #1 be completely explained only by appealing to material reality?

It will now be shown that Observation #1 cannot possibly be explained by physical entities alone, hence Materialism (i.e. Self is the Body) is false.

What are the physical entities that may explain Observation #1? The relevant ones are:

- (1) The 100-foot tall building.
- (2) Light.
- (3) Eyes.
- (4) Brain.

Let us now examine each of the individual entities and check if they are capable of Vision:

- (1) The building does not see itself (obvious – otherwise, the Vision of it would continue even upon closing the eyes).
- (2) Light does not see the building (obvious – there can be light with no Vision of the building).
- (3) The eye does not see the building. There are at least four reasons for this:
 - a. There are *two* eyes, each containing a 2-D image of the building on the retina. The Vision is that of *one* 3-D building. If either eye were to see the building, why is it that 3-D is perceived, not 2-D?
 - b. The size of the image in the eye is very small – measuring less than an inch, but the building seen is 100 feet tall! Why should an inch-size image result in the Vision of a 100-foot tall building?
 - c. The images in the eye are inverted, but the Vision is that of a building that is upright.
 - d. If the optic nerve that goes from the eye to the brain is damaged, Vision disappears. If the eye were the seat of Vision, why should it be dependent upon the optic nerve at all?
- (4) The brain does not see the building. (This is a bit subtle and hardest to explain.) The brain simply does not contain any images of any sort. It is only a collection of blood, nerve cells, tissue, and the like. But the image perceived is that of a 100-foot tall building. **Why should the Vision of such a building arise from the brain that does not have any images?**

Given that none of the above explains Vision, one is left with the conclusion that it cannot be sufficiently explained by material reality. Therefore, the Self which is the Subject of Vision, is different from the Body which is the Object of Vision.

If **The Argument** is still unclear, perhaps it can be better understood in terms of descriptions. Here is the full description of Observation #1 by a Materialist:

“Light strikes the 100-foot tall building, and it reaches the eye. The eye-lens focuses the light on the retina, where it gets converted to electrical signals. The optic nerve carries these signals to the brain, where they are processed.”

The problem with the above description is that nowhere is a “partly unfocussed 100-foot tall building” ever referred to. The Observation #1 specifies “a partly unfocussed 100-foot tall building” is seen, but the description never makes a mention of this “Seen (*partly unfocussed*) building”!

An analogy with modern technology may be useful. Consider a Computer with a Monitor connected to a Webcam, all housed within a 6-foot tall box (analogous to a Human Body), aimed at a 100-foot tall building. The analogy with a human being is:

Human Body → 6-Foot tall Box (housing the Computer, Monitor and Webcam)

Eye → Webcam (camera)

Nerves → Electronic wiring

Brain → Computer Processor

Vision of the **100-foot tall** building → Monitor **displaying a small (less than 6-foot) image** of building

Note the difference in the last part – the Monitor cannot possibly display a 100-foot tall building, but the *Human’s Vision sees one!*

The gist of *The Argument* is that the “Actually Perceived Object” is not fully or accurately described by merely dissecting the individual components that constitute material reality.

It may also be a good exercise to check if the following second observation can be explained by appealing to material entities alone, in the case of a person with defective vision:

Observation #2: “Two overlapping 100-foot tall buildings are being seen.”

(Note: there is still only one 100-foot tall building in front.)

This Observation #2 is evidently an apparition of sorts caused by imperfect vision. In any third-person description of the material reality, the first-person Vision of “Overlapping images of two 100-foot tall buildings” will never appear at all.

Hence **Perception** (e.g. Vision or Seeing) cannot be explained purely by considering material or physical entities only. If one has difficulty following **The Argument**, re-reading it or discussing with one who has understood it may help.

6. Vedānta Theory of Perception

It is a given fact that **Seeing Happens** (not accepting this is Nihilism, which is not the viewpoint of the Materialists anyway, who claim that material entities that exist independent of one's perception are now being perceived). How does it happen, according to *Advaita Vedānta*? The answer is given:

BSB 3.3.54 (continued) :

Vedāntin: Moreover, Perception takes place where there are certain auxiliaries such as lamps and the like, and does not take place where those are absent, without its following therefrom that Perception is an attribute of the lamp or the like. Analogously the fact that Perception takes place where there is a Body, and does not take place where there is none, does not imply that it is an attribute of the Body; for like lamps and so on the Body may be used (by the Self) as a mere auxiliary.

Sankara considers the material entities to be auxiliary conditions of Perception:

The Object's Form is an auxiliary condition of Perception, but the Object's Form does not "See".

Light is an auxiliary condition of Perception, but Light does not "See".

The Eye is an auxiliary condition of Perception, but the Eye does not "See".

The Brain is an auxiliary condition of Perception, but the Brain does not "See".

All material entities, including the various organs of the Body, have been exhausted, without fully explaining Perception. Since Perception is accepted as valid, one must necessarily acknowledge the existence of the end of the above sequence of auxiliary conditions, i.e. the **Ground of Perception**:

The SELF is the FINAL SEER!

The Nature of the Self as the Ground of Perception is accepted by [Sri Ramana Maharshi](#) ("[Who am I?](#)"):

"When the world which is what-is-seen has been removed, there will be Realization of the Self which is the Seer."

Although **The Argument** used the example of Seeing, any other form of Perception such as Hearing, Smelling, etc., can also be used with the same effect. [Ramana Bhagavan](#) presents "Tasting" as an instance where Consciousness is required ([Day by Day with Bhagavan](#), 5-3-46):

"The honey is something inert and unconscious, a Conscious Being is required to taste it and enjoy it. On the other hand, the Self is Consciousness and Bliss itself, and it is absurd to argue that when one becomes That, the Self, one will not be able to enjoy Bliss and that one must remain separate to enjoy it."

Sankara provides an instance where Perception does not involve the sense organs of the Body.

BSB 3.3.54 (continued) :

Vedāntin: Nor is it true that the Body is absolutely required as an auxiliary of Perception; for in dreams, we have manifold Perceptions while the Body lies motionless. The view of the Self being something separate from the Body is therefore free from all objections.

Suppose a person is lying asleep on the bed in a dark room, dreaming of a bright sunny day with flying birds. A scientist examines the sleeping person, and observes a body, a bed, a brain, blood, flesh, etc., but cannot “see” the flying birds on the bright sunny day that the sleeping person “sees”. Here again, a third-person description of the material reality does not include the first-person Perception.

This kind of “Dream Seeing” is another example of a Perception that is not clearly explained by Materialism.

7. Western Perspectives

An early Western philosopher who recognized that Perception cannot be explained by material entities was [Leibniz](#):

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz-mind/>

Most of Leibniz's arguments against materialism are directly aimed at the thesis that perception and Consciousness can be given mechanical (i.e. physical) explanations. His position is that perception and Consciousness cannot possibly be explained mechanically, and, hence, could not be physical processes. His most famous argument against the possibility of materialism is found in section 17 of the *Monadology* (1714):

“One is obliged to admit that perception and what depends upon it is inexplicable on mechanical principles, that is, by figures and motions. In imagining that there is a machine whose construction would enable it to think, to sense, and to have perception, one could conceive it enlarged while retaining the same proportions, so that one could enter into it, just like into a windmill. Supposing this, one should, when visiting within it, find only parts pushing one another, and never anything by which to explain a perception. Thus it is in the simple substance, and not in the composite or in the machine, that one must look for perception.

...

Furthermore, by means of the soul or form, there is a true unity which corresponds to what is called the I in us; such a thing could not occur in artificial machines, nor in the simple mass of matter, however organized it may be.”

Modern treatments of Consciousness include the term “[QUALIA](#)”, which refers to precisely the kind of sense-perceptions considered by Sankara and other *Advaitins*: the colors of a rainbow, the smell of coffee, etc.

A present-day philosopher working in this area is [David Chalmers](#), who has done much to highlight the [Hard Problem of Consciousness](#). His paper, “[Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness](#)” is a classic paper in this regard, which has stimulated increased interest in the topic. A collection of arguments, both for and against the position taken by Chalmers (he too postulates the existence of a new non-physical entity to account for sense-experience), can be found in the book, “[Explaining Consciousness: The Hard Problem](#)”.

Scientists are now engaged in determining “[Neural correlates of Consciousness](#)” – mapping exactly which neuron “fires” when one sees a red color, tastes sugar, and so on. Steven Weinberg, a Nobel laureate in Physics, has considered the Problem of Consciousness to be an important one in his book, “*Dreams of a Final Theory*” (pp. 44-45).

How about a futuristic Technology “creating” Perception in the laboratory, like within a Robot? Would this not disprove **The Argument** of Sankara? Here is an extract from an interview with eminent Robotist [Rodney Brooks](#), that appeared in the magazine [Technology Review](#) published by [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) (MIT), one of the world’s premier Engineering Universities:

<https://www.technologyreview.com/s/401409/lord-of-the-robots/>

Lord of the Robots, in **Technology Review** issue dated April 1, 2002

TR: But a robotic lawn mower still can’t be relied upon to cut the grass as well as a person. What are the major problems that still need solving?

BROOKS: *Perception is still difficult.* Indoors, cleaning robots can estimate where they are and which part of the floor they’re cleaning, but they still can’t do it as well as a person can do. Outdoors, where the ground isn’t flat and landmarks aren’t reliable, they can’t do it. Vision systems have gotten very good at detecting motion, tracking things and even picking out faces from other objects. *But there’s no artificial-vision system that can say, “Oh, that’s a cell phone, that’s a small clock and that’s a piece of sushi.” We still don’t have general “object recognition.” Not only don’t we have it solved – I don’t think anyone has a clue. I don’t think you can even get funding to work on that, because it is just so far off. It’s waiting for an Einstein – or three – to come along with a different way of thinking about the problem.* But meantime, there are a lot of robots that can do without it. The trick is finding places where robots can be useful, like oil wells, *without being able to do visual object recognition.*

It is amusing that the Director of MIT’s [Computer Science & Artificial Intelligence Laboratory](#) frankly admits that the field of Robotics is hoping and praying for “*an Einstein or three*” to arrive in order to solve the problem of Perception, thereby crowning it as perhaps the toughest problem in all of Science and Technology – the solution of which may be well-nigh impossible (using only physical entities)!

A recent article on Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning concurs with Brooks’ assessment:

<https://www.quantamagazine.org/machine-learning-confronts-the-elephant-in-the-room-20180920/>

Machine Learning Confronts the Elephant in the Room, by Kevin Hartnett, September 20, 2018

In a new study, computer scientists found that *artificial intelligence systems fail a vision test a child could accomplish with ease.* “It’s a clever and important study that reminds us that ‘deep learning’ isn’t really that deep,” said [Gary Marcus](#), a neuroscientist at New York University who was not affiliated with the work...*The new work accentuates the sophistication of human vision – and the challenge of building systems that mimic it...*The result takes place in the field of computer vision, where artificial intelligence systems attempt to detect and categorize objects...In the study, the researchers presented a computer vision system with a living room scene...It correctly identified a chair, a person, books on a shelf. Then the researchers introduced an anomalous object into the scene – an image of an elephant. The elephant’s mere presence caused the system to forget itself: Suddenly it started calling a chair a couch and the elephant a chair, while turning completely blind to other objects it had previously seen.

8. The Three States

As already established, *Adhyāsa* or Superimposition (in *Advaita Vedānta*) is confusing the unconscious Body that is an *instrument* of Perception, with the conscious Self that is the *Ground* of Perception. Three States of Consciousness are experienced by all: Waking, Dream and Deep Sleep. In the first two states (i.e. Waking and Dream), one perceives a Body, hence *Adhyāsa* occurs. In the third state of Deep Sleep, there is no Body (or for that matter, any “other”) perceived. What exactly does *Advaita Vedānta* say about the state of the Deep Sleep?

Sankara declares in his [Upadeśasāhasrī](#) 1.16.18:

*jāgratsvapnau tayobījaṃ suṣuptākhyāṃ tamomayam .
anyonyasminnasattvācca nāstītyetattrayaṃ tyajet ..*

“The seed of the Waking and Dream States is contained in the darkness of Deep Sleep. None of these Three States is real, as they (i.e. each of their experiences) mutually contradict one another. Hence all the Three States should be renounced.”

The “seed” of the Waking and Dream states is said to be within the Deep Sleep state. Sankara also covers the relationship between cause and effect (Ibid. 1.14.19):

*ātmā hyātmīya ityeṣa bhāvo'vidyāprakalpitaḥ .
ātmaikatve hyasau nāsti bījābhāve kutaḥ phalam ..*

“The thoughts such as ‘me’ and ‘mine’ are Superimposed on the Self owing to Ignorance. They cease to exist when the Self is known to be One. Without a seed, how can a fruit emerge? (i.e. How can an Effect be without a Cause?)”

As no fruit can emerge without a seed, there must be a “seed” in Deep Sleep that causes one to arise out of it, and into the Waking or Dream states. This is called “*Mūlāvidyā*” – the Seed Ignorance that covers the Self during Deep Sleep. *Mūlāvidyā* cannot be Existence (“*Bhāva*”, which only the Self is) or Non-existence (“*Abhāva*”, e.g. horns of a hare, which are never experienced), hence it falls under a third ontological category called *Existence-Like* (“*Bhāva-rūpa*”). An analogy may help explain this: imagine a parent trying to describe a zebra to a child who has never seen one. The parent being skilled in art, draws a zebra on a piece of paper. The child says it looks like a horse. The parent replies, “The zebra is different from a horse, but is a *horse-like* animal!” Similarly, *Mūlāvidyā* is neither Existence nor Non-existence, but *Existence-Like*.

Therefore, *Adhyāsa* in the Waking and Dream states, takes on the form of *Mūlāvidyā* in Deep Sleep. Sankara's exhortation is to renounce all Three States and rest in the Fourth State called [Turīya](#), the true nature of the Self.

9. Sādhana towards Self-knowledge

No article on *Adhyāsa* or *Avidyā* would be complete without a hint of a suggestion on its removal, which results in [Self-knowledge](#), the Goal of *Advaita Vedānta* as a “[Religion](#)”. This is possible only by Spiritual Practice, called [Sādhana](#).

There is hardly any doubt that the [Upaniṣads](#) accept the Self as the Ground of Perception (e.g. [Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.4.2](#)):

“It is not possible to see the Seer of Vision; or hear the Hearer of Hearing; or think the Thinker of Thought; or know the Knower of Knowledge. This is the Self within all.”

The following can be proven from *Pratyakṣa* (experience) and *Anumāna* (inference):

“The Self/Seer is different from the Body.”

What cannot be proven from experience or inference, but requires “*Śabda Pramāṇa*” or Verbal Cognition/Testimony, i.e. Scriptural Authority is:

“The Nature of the Self is Infinite Bliss.” ([Taittirīya Upaniṣad](#))

According to *Advaita Vedānta*, Perception and Reality eventually converge:

GROUND OF PERCEPTION (*Ātman*) = ULTIMATE REALITY (*Brahman*)

Ignorance of the Self that is of the form “I am this Body” is the cause of much misery, and can only be removed by a cognition that is opposed to it. For example, “The grass is green” is a cognition unopposed to the idea “I am this Body”, hence cannot remove Ignorance of the Self. However, the Scriptural passage, “[I am Brahman](#)” (from the [Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad](#)), does indeed counter this Ignorance, and is thus capable of eliminating it. The claim of *Advaita Vedānta* is that only such [Mahāvākyas](#) that contradict *Avidyā* can eradicate it, via the process of [Śravaṇa-Manana-Nididhyāsana](#), typically practiced only after taking up [Sannyāsa](#), under the tutelage of a [Traditional Guru](#).

As long as *Avidyā* lingers, the Body’s actions ought to be in line with the Moral Principles of [Dharma](#). If the same is performed without desire (*niṣkāma*), it is termed [Karma Yoga](#), and results in [Citta Śuddhi](#) or [Purity of the Mind](#), conferring the ability to grasp the *Mahāvākya*. *Karma Yoga*, [Bhakti Yoga](#), etc., are valid methods prescribed to the spiritual aspirant for Purification of the Mind. In both the *Karma* and *Bhakti* paths, [Faith](#) is an essential element of the *Sādhana* (vide [Gītā 17.28](#)). The peak of [Yoga](#) may itself be sufficient to attain the Supreme Knowledge of the Self, through the Grace of the Lord.

The progression of practice culminating in the Goal is:

Yoga → [Sādhana Catuṣṭaya](#) → *Sannyāsa* → *Śravaṇa-Manana-Nididhyāsana* → [Ātma-jñāna](#)
(= [Mokṣa](#) or Salvation)

[Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi](#) teaches the direct path to [Self-realization](#) called [Self-Enquiry](#). This article will end with a couple of quotes from his [Teachings](#) (both in the book "[Day by Day with Bhagavan](#)", 17-10-46 & 23-1-46), giving a brief overview of *Adhyāsa*, along with its disappearance:

“There is nothing wrong in seeing anything, this body or the world. The mistake lies in thinking you are the body. There is no harm in thinking the body is in you. The body, world, all must be in the Self; or rather, nothing can exist apart from the Self, as no pictures can be seen without the screen on which the shadows can be cast.”

“It is said the whole *Vedānta* can be compressed into the four words, *deham, nāham, ko'ham, so'ham*. This stanza says the same. In the first two lines, it is explained why *deham* is *nāham*, i.e., why the body is not ‘I’ or *na aham*. The next two lines say, ‘If one enquires *ko' aham*, i.e., Who am I, i.e., if one enquires whence this ‘I’ springs and realises it, then in the heart of such a one the Omnipresent God [Arunachala](#) will shine as ‘I’, as *sa' aham* or *so'ham*: i.e., he will know ‘That I am,’ i.e., ‘That is "I".’”

S. Jayanarayanan sjayana@yahoo.com kartik.jayan@gmail.com
--