

Dharma and Identity in Śaṅkara's Advaita

Śaṅkara'nın Advaita'sında Dharma ve Kimlik

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Śaṅkara'nın Advaita'sında Dharma ve Kimlik

Öz

Bu makalenin amacı Śaṅkara'nın (yaklaşık MS 750) bireysel kimliğe ilişkin yapısökümlerini, Vedik kimlik kategorilerine verdiği etik destekle ilişkilendirmektir. Śaṅkara, Advaita Vedānta'nın antik Veda kökenli (*āstika*) geleneğinin (*darśana*) en önemli savunucularından biri olarak kabul edilir. Bu gelenek, tüm bireylerin (*jīva*) en içteki benliğinin (*ātman*), değişmeyen ve niteliksiz (*nirguṇa*) varlık-bilinç (*brahman*) ile ilişkili olmadığını (*advaita*) savunur. Kişinin kendi bedenleşmesinin özellikleri de dahil olmak üzere algılanabilir tüm nitelikler, gerçek varlık hakkındaki katman katman (*adhyāsa*) olan derin bilgisizlikten (*avidyā*) kaynaklanır. Bu cehalet tüm acıların köküdür. Çünkü kişinin ruh göçü (*saṃsāra*) döngüleri içinde görünüşteki tuzağa düşmesini sürdüren bağlanma (*kāma*) ve eylem (*karma*) durumlarına yol açar. Buna göre Śaṅkara, bu acıyı sona erdirmenin tek yolunun tüm bağıllıkla beslenen eylemlerden vazgeçmek ve bunun yerine benliğin ikili olmayan doğasının ortaya çıktığı manevi kurtuluşun (*mokṣa*) en yüksek manevi hedefini (*parama-puruṣārtha*) aramak olduğunu savunur. Bu mokṣa halinde, kişinin söz konusu ıstırabının kaynağı olan bedenle özdeşleşmesi nihayet ortadan kalktıkça (*bādha*), dünyevi ıstırabın tüm biçimleri kalıcı olarak sona erer. Dolayısıyla Śaṅkara, bu cehalet döngüsünü sona erdirmenin tek yolunun, benliğin ikili olmayan doğasının ortaya çıktığı manevi kurtuluşu (*mokṣa*), yani en yüce ruhsal amacı (*parama-puruṣārtha*) aramak olduğunu savunur. Bu farkındalık durumunda, dünyevi acıların tüm biçimleri kalıcı bir sona ulaşır, çünkü bu acıların kaynağı, niteliksiz benlik ile farklılaşmış zihin-beden arasındaki (yanlış) özdeşleşmeden başka bir şey değildir. İlk bakışta, Śaṅkara'nın konumu, Veda kökenli dünya görüşleri bağlamında oldukça radikal olarak yorumlanabilir. Çünkü onun kimlik kategorilerinin yapısökümü, tüm insanların manevi eşit olduğunu ve sosyal-dinsel kast (*varṇa*), cinsiyet ayrımlarının olduğunu ima ediyor gibi görünür (*liṅga*) ve benzeri kişinin gerçek benliğiyle alakasızdır. Ancak göreceğimiz üzere, bu kimlik kategorilerinin ontolojik istikrarsızlığını vurgulamak, Śaṅkara'nın her bireyin sosyo-dinsel liyakati (dharma) ve yetki alanını (adhikāra) belirleyen hiyerarşik spektrum içindeki konumunu tanımlamak amacıyla yine de bu kategorilere başvurmamasını engellemektedir. Sonuç olarak, cehaletten kurtuluş (*mokṣa*) dini eylemlerden ve kimliklerden feragat etmeyi gerektirirken, Śaṅkara yine de yalnızca belirli kimliklerin bu nihai özgürlüğü arama hakkına sahip olduğunu kesin bir şekilde belirtir. Bazı yazarlar, sosyal-dini hiyerarşiye olan bu bağıllığın, Śaṅkara'nın benliğin ikili olmadığına ilişkin ana görüşüyle bağdaşmadığını ve bağnaz kavramlara bir tür bilinçsiz rıza olarak görülmesi gerektiğini aksi taktirde onun düalist olmayan metafizik kavramları tarafından derin bir sorgulamaya maruz kalacağını belirtirler. Buna karşılık, bu makalede Śaṅkara'nın metafizik ve etik taahhütlerinin aslında onun *advaita* perspektifinden nasıl uzlaştırılabilir olduğunu göstermeye çalışılmaktadır. Bunu yaparak, *Advaita Vedānta*'nın çeşitli sosyal-dinsel tabakalaşma biçimlerine olan inancını tarihsel olarak nasıl haklı çıkardığına açıklık getirmektedir. Bu katmanlaşmaların birçoğu bugün bile Hindu evrenlerinde varlığını sürdürdüğü için zorunludur. Bu nedenle, Vedik kimliklerin geçmişte nasıl yapılandırıldığını anlamak, direnmenin ve onların günümüzdeki davranışlarını tanımlamanın önemli bir yolu olabilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Felsefesi, Hinduizm, Öznellik, Sosyal eşitsizlik, Advaita Vedānta.

Dharma and Identity in Śaṅkara's Advaita

Abstract

The aim of this article is to put Śaṅkara's (c.750 BCE) deconstructions of individual identity in dialogue with his ethical support of Vedic identity categories. Śaṅkara is regarded as one of the most significant thinkers of the ancient Veda-rooted (*āstika*) tradition (*darśana*) of Advaita Vedānta. This tradition argues that the innermost self (*ātman*) of all individuals (*jīva*) is non-dual (*advaita*) with unchanging and unqualified (*nirguṇa*) being-consciousness (*brahman*). All perceivable attributes, including the particularities of one's own embodiment, are false superimpositions (*adhyāsa*) that arise due to deep-seated ignorance (*avidyā*) of true being. This ignorance is the root of all suffering, as it leads to states of attachment (*kāma*) and action (*karma*), which perpetuate one's seeming entrapment within cycles of transmigration (*saṃsāra*). Accordingly, Śaṅkara argues that the only way to end this suffering is to relinquish all attachment fuelled actions, and to instead seek the highest spiritual goal (*parama-puruṣārtha*) of liberation (*mokṣa*), where the non-dual nature of the self is revealed. In this

state of *mokṣa* all forms of worldly suffering come to a permanent end, as one's identification with embodiment — which was the source of this suffering — is finally sublated (*bādha*). Śaṅkara thus argues that all facets of personal identity are, in fact, false products of the (mis)identification between the unqualified self and the differentiated mind-body. Prima facie, this deconstruction of identity categories would seem to imply that all persons are spiritually equal, and that socio-religious distinctions of caste (*varṇa*), gender (*liṅga*), and so on are irrelevant to one's true self. However, as we will see, asserting the ontological instability of these identity categories nevertheless does not stop Śaṅkara from invoking them as properly determining each person's location on a hierarchical spectrum of socio-religious merit (*dharma*) and entitlement (*adhikāra*). Consequently, while liberation (*mokṣa*) from ignorance requires a renunciation of religious acts and identities, Śaṅkara nevertheless firmly states that only certain identities are entitled to seek this ultimate liberation. Some authors have argued that this commitment to socio-religious hierarchy is incompatible with Śaṅkara's broader view of the non-duality of the self and should therefore be regarded as a kind of unconscious acquiescence to bigoted notions which are otherwise deeply questioned by his non-dual metaphysics. In contrast, this paper attempts to show how Śaṅkara's metaphysical and ethical commitments are in fact reconcilable from his *advaita* perspective. By doing so, one can shed light on how Advaita Vedānta has historically justified its belief in various forms of socio-religious stratification. This is particularly imperative as many of these stratifications continue to exist within Hindu sociocultural universes even today. As such, understanding how these Vedic identities have been configured in the past can be a crucial way of resisting and identifying their operations in the present.

Keywords: Philosophy of Religion, Hinduism, Subjectivity, Social inequality, Advaita Vedānta.

Introduction

The Indic philosopher and theologian Śaṅkara flourished around 750 BCE and is regarded as one of the most significant thinkers of the ancient Veda-rooted worldview (*darśana*) of Advaita Vedānta. There are four sets of texts that constitute the Vedas, namely, the *Samhitās*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Āraṇyakas*, and the *Upaniṣads* (Dandekar, 2000, 1). For ancient orthodox (*āstika*) Indic traditions such as the above-mentioned Advaita Vedānta, these four sets of texts are regarded as having supreme scriptural authority, as they are viewed as being authorless (*apuruseya*); known only through the means of hearing (*śruti*) or revelation (Rambachan, 1991). While all ancient *āstika* traditions regarded these *śruti* texts as supremely authoritative, they nevertheless focussed their exegetical efforts towards different elements of this corpus. In this context, early Vedānta thinkers such as Śaṅkara believed that the *Upaniṣads*, which constitute the end (*anta*) of the Vedas, are the most significant Vedic scriptures, as these alone provide insight regarding the highest human end (*puruṣārtha*) of complete liberation (*mokṣa*) from the suffering (*duḥkha*) of worldly transmigration (*saṃsāra*). However, in contrast to numerous other Vedānta theologians, Śaṅkara additionally interprets the *Upaniṣads* as preaching the absolute characterlessness (*nirguṇa*) of ultimate reality (*brahman*), as well as the metaphysical non-duality (*advaita*) of the individual self (*ātman*) with this *brahman* (Betty, 2010). As will be demonstrated in the following pages, Śaṅkara argues that the suffering of transmigration is due to ignorance (*avidyā*), which conceals the truth of non-duality. Under the conditions of this *avidyā*, we mistakenly identify our embodied characteristics with our selfhood. This (mis)identification produces in us the sense that we are agents and enjoyers and leads us to constantly act towards (or away) from the various (false) objects of experience. Ultimately, these experiential objects are changeful and impermanent and therefore can never provide us with any kind of lasting joy. Consequently, the insatiability of our attachments (*rāga*) becomes a source of suffering, as we are forced to constantly act on them, and can never be at rest. In this context, Śaṅkara argues that the only way to relieve this suffering is to relinquish all actions, and to pursue the Upaniṣadic knowledge of non-duality. All actions are rooted in the false identification of the self with various features of embodiment.¹ In this context, Śaṅkara states that even the various scriptural rites enshrined in the Vedas are ultimately opposed to the knowledge of non-duality between *brahman* and the self.²

¹ *dehalingātmanā kāryā vāsanārūpiṇā kriyāḥ* / (US 2.11.14; Swami Jagadananda, 1949, 120).

² *tasmāt sasādhanaṃ karma parityaktavyaṃ mumukṣuṇā, paramātmā'bhedaadarśana virodhāt, ātmā ca para eveti pratipattavyo yathāśrutyuktalakṣaṇaḥ* (US 1.1.32; Swami Jagadananda, 1949, 21).

For Śaṅkara then, liberation (*mokṣa*) from the beginningless cycles of birth and death (*saṃsāra*) is the highest end of life (*parama-puruṣārtha*). However, not all ancient Vedic traditions (*darśana*) shared this view of the relative importance of *mokṣa* over and above the performance of ritual actions (*dharma*). For example, the notable Vedic tradition of Pūrva Mīmāṃsa argued that the pursuit of *dharma*, as prescribed by the injunctive portions of the Vedas, is the highest good of life (Holdrege, 2004, 219–222; Freschi, 2018). The word *dharma* has several meanings, but most often refers to certain good or dutiful acts, as well as the underlying cosmic logos (*rta*) that is purportedly upheld through their performance (Holdrege, 2004, 213–14). Closely linked to this idea of *dharma* is the broader Indic theory that all actions (*karma*) of individuals have consequences, which are viewed as adhering to agents across lifetimes (Tull, 2004, 309). In this context *dharma* refers to those actions which are scripturally prescribed and therefore have meritorious consequences for individuals, whereas *adharma* refers to actions that are scripturally prohibited, and whose performance leads to the accumulation of demerit for individuals.

This vision of *dharma* is also closely linked to another concept within Vedic universes, namely, the notion of *adhikāra*. This notion states that one has the scriptural entitlement (*adhikāra*) to pursue one's own *dharma*, which refers not only to the positive allowance to perform it but also to a negative entitlement, that is, a moral-religious imperative to not avoid the *dharma* that one has a scriptural allowance to perform (Bilimoria, 2007, 34–35). Each person's *dharma* is uniquely their own (*sva*), because their *dharma* in this life is nothing but the result of their own actions (*karma*) in previous ones. This is because the interimplication between *dharma* and *karma* within Indic contexts emphasises that no births are arbitrary from a cosmological perspective. Rather, the specific features of one's embodiment are the result of complicated interactions between the cosmic law (*dharma*) and the specific *karma* accumulated in past lives (Bilimoria, 2007, 27). On this view, one's identity features (as well as corresponding *adhikāra*) are seen as justly earned, as the "fruit" (*phala*) of past actions, rather than being regarded as a mere accident of birth. In the backdrop of this scriptural and cosmic significance of *dharma* acts within Vedic universes, Śaṅkara's claim that such acts should ultimately be renounced would appear to be quite radical. Such an anti-*dharma* stance is particularly promising given the fact that concepts of *svadharma* and *adhikāra* have been a crucial form of justification for the creation and entrenchment of various forms of inequality within Hindu religious universes. However, a closer examination of Śaṅkara's philosophical contributions, as discussed in the subsequent sections of this article, illuminates that, despite his metaphysical position on the ultimate nature of the self, he nevertheless clearly supports the applicability of identity-based *adhikāra* in determining who should be allowed to pursue the highest spiritual goal of liberation (Rambachan, 2006, 27–29). The aim of this article is thus to put Śaṅkara's deconstructions of individual identity in dialogue with his ethical support of Vedic identity categories, in the hopes of better understanding this apparent contradiction, or at least inconsistency, within his Advaita religious philosophy. The rest of this article will proceed as follows. First, I will discuss Śaṅkara's vision of how our false everyday experiences are produced and sustained. Then, I will discuss some Vedic notions of identity that are viewed as crucial to the attribution of each person's *svadharma*. Finally, I will highlight how Śaṅkara upholds the applicability of these socio-religious hierarchies and discuss how this ethical position might be reconciled with his broader metaphysical position regarding the ultimate non-duality of the Self.

Śaṅkara and Identity

Śaṅkara argues that all experience is conditioned by a dual aspect of (A) a cogniser who is self-consciously an "I" and (B) of various cognitive objects that are grasped by that cogniser as extrinsic to it (Ram-Prasad, 2002, 56). These cognitive objects (*viśaya*) are changeful; a pot (*ghaṭa*) is created, it weathers, becomes chipped, and ultimately is destroyed by becoming reduced to earth. This changefulness of the pot — and, indeed, of all finite objects — means that they constantly deviate from what they are and therefore cannot be regarded as having true being. Śaṅkara defines true or *pāramārthika* being as that which is "eternally unchanging".³ In this strictly defined sense, all spatiotemporal objects, in so far as they change, cannot be considered to have true being (Ram-Prasad, 2013, 4).

³ *idam [brahman] tu pāramārthikam, kūṭasthanityam* (BSB 1.1.4; Panoli, 2011, 36).

However, while changeful apprehensions of a pot do not have ultimate being, there is an unchanging substratum of these changeful apprehensions — the pot's bare *is*-ness — that persists unmodified alongside the deviating cognitions of the pot's changeful attributes.⁴ Thus, in all cases of cognition, there are two apprehensions, namely, of non-being (*asadbuddhi*, in this case, all transient particularities of “pot”) and of pure being (*sadbuddhi*, the non-deviating *is*-ness).⁵ Śaṅkara argues that this unequivocally generalised and unchanging *is*-ness is not an attribute of any specific object-cognition, say pot, because the foundational *is*-ness persists unchangingly through all object-directed cognitions (*paṭādaḥ api sadbuddhidarśanāt*), and so is not lost even after any specific object-cognition has ceased (BGB 2.16; Panoli, 2019, 58).

Within everyday life, where the *pāramārthika* reality of *brahman* is concealed due to ignorance (*avidyā*), being-in-itself (*ātman*, *brahman*) appears as phenomenally equivalent to changeful, particularised entities (*viśaya*). Śaṅkara thus argues that the seeming there-ness of experiential objects is the result of the mutual superimposition of particularity and being, wherein *being* appears as an attribute of these particulars, and particularity appears as an attribute of *being*. Thus, when we are conscious of objects in our surroundings, we mistakenly view the existence that is our consciousness as a feature of these various objects, thereby superimposing non-existent particulars onto existence, and existence onto these non-existent particulars. He calls this process superimposition (*adhyāsa*), and defines it as “a presentation, of the form of memory, of something previously seen in some other object/context”.⁶ A few important features of this process may be better explained with reference to a classic example within the advaita traditions, namely, the example of the rope-snake. On a dark road, a rope lying across my path may appear to me as a snake. In such an instance, this kind of error would not be possible if I had no previous knowledge of what a snake looks like, yet the rope-snake is not merely reducible to recalling a memory, because it has a certain there-ness that is strong enough to halt my journey for fear of being bitten. This apparent there-ness of the false snake is therefore due to the actual there-ness of the rope, yet so long as the illusion of the snake lasts the reality of the rope remains concealed. In this context, Śaṅkara argues that our cognitions of individual objects are a result of this error of superimposition, and due to our ignorance of the true nature of being.

Aside from producing objects as seemingly “real” in phenomenal experience, the error of superimposition (*adhyāsa*) is also responsible for the appearance of the *jīva*, or the individualised mind-body that undergoes and undergirds experience. The Sanskrit word *jīva* is defined by Śaṅkara as the conscious principle that presides over the body.⁷ This *jīva* superimposes the ultimately unreal duality of its experienced mind-body on its selfhood (*ātman*), thereby creating and presenting itself as an “I” — namely, an experiential subject that is seemingly distinct from the various objects that are extrinsic to it. This “I”-generation is somewhat counterintuitive — in the example of the rope-snake, there is a distinct subject who erroneously superimposes characteristics of one object (the snake) onto another (the rope). In the case of the superimposition of *I*-ness, however, the *jīva* who superimposes *I*-ness is, paradoxically, also the very “I” that results from this superimposition. In the context of subjectivity, then, *adhyāsa* is the process where *jīvas* mistake the constant *is*-ness of their self, which is *brahman*, with the contingent appearances of their mind-body. For Śaṅkara, the “I” is not an ontologically stable subject; rather, it is the erroneous projection of *brahman* as conditioned by specific self-cognitions, attachments, and aversions of the mind-body complex which take forms such as “I am this” or “this is mine”.⁸ In the opening paragraphs of the *Brahma-sūtra bhāṣya* (BSB), Śaṅkara describes this error of “I”-constitution in the following way:

[I]n accordance as one's wife, children, or other relatives are hale and hearty with all their limbs intact, or as they suffer from the loss of those limbs, one thinks, “I myself am hale and hearty” or “I myself am injured”; thus, one superimposes external characteristics on the Self. Similarly, one superimposes the characteristics of the body when one has such ideas as “I am fat”, “I am thin” ... So also one superimposes the attributes of the senses and organs when one thinks, “I am dumb”, “I have

⁴ *tayoḥ buddhayoḥ ghaṭādibuddhiḥ vyabhicarati, tathā ca darśitam / na tu sadbuddhiḥ* (BGB 2.16; Panoli, 2019, 58).

⁵ *sarvatra buddhidvayopalabdheḥ sadbuddhiḥ asadbuddhiḥ iti* (BGB 2.16; Panoli, 2019, 57).

⁶ *smṛtirūpaḥ paratra pūrvadr̥ṣṭāvabhāsaḥ* (BSB 1; Panoli, 2011, 3).

⁷ *jīvo hi nāma cetanaḥ śarīrādhyakṣaḥ* (BSB 1.1.6; Panoli, 2011, 74).

⁸ *mithyājñānanimittaḥ satyāñrte mithunīkrtya, ahamidaṁ mamedamiti naisargiko 'yaṁ lokavyavahāraḥ* (BSB 1; Panoli, 2011, 3).

lost one eye”, “I am [impotent]”... Similarly, one superimposes the attributes of the internal organ, such as desire, will, doubt, perseverance, etc. (BSB 1; Swami Gambhirananda, 1972, 6)

Thus, the *jīva* is constituted by its own superimposition of differentiated self-awareness — based on social relations, physical attributes, desires, aversions, etc., of mind-body (“I”) complexes — onto the unchanging shared reality that underlies its embodied sense of subject/object awareness.

This theme — that all differentiated aspects of one’s being-in-the-world are ultimately an illusion — is repeatedly enunciated in Śaṅkara’s writings. For example, in his text the *Upadeśasāhasrī* (US), Śaṅkara narrates that a spiritual teacher (*guru*) asks his student, “Who are you, my child?” and the student replies that he is a priest’s son belonging to a specific family, who has now become a wandering monk. Upon hearing this response, the teacher chides him for associating pure consciousness, which is intrinsically free from identity, family, and purificatory ritual, with these unreal socio-ritual attributes of empirical existence (US 1.9–15; Swami Jagadananda, 1949, 7–10).

This beginningless (*anādi*) superimposition of identity onto the self is the foundation of our suffering in *samsāra*, since it is the *jīva*’s belief in its ontic stability that deludes her into viewing herself as an agent and an enjoyer. Under these conditions of ignorance, the results of desirous actions cling to I-immersed persons in the form of karmic merit (*dharma*) or demerit (*adharma*), and this residue is what mediates or modulates their (re)connection with different bodies across the cycles of rebirth.⁹ Actions produce a seeming union between the self and the mind-body complex, and this union leads the *jīva* to mistakenly classify objects as either pleasurable or painful.¹⁰ Pleasurable objects become objects of desire (*rāga*), whereas painful objects conversely become objects of aversion (*dveṣa*).

These twin affective forces of desire and aversion lead the *jīva* to actions that either pursue or avoid specific results.¹¹ These results in turn adhere to the *jīva*, causing it to be reborn in a new body after death, and so the cycle of transmigratory suffering continues. As Sengaku Mayeda points out, this wheel of transmigratory existence, according to Śaṅkara, is experienced not only across lives but within the same life too, where one alternates continuously between doer-ship and enjoyer-ship, resting only in the state of deep sleep (*suṣupti*) where pure consciousness temporarily has no object (Mayeda, 1992, 70).

This cycle of action and enjoyment is said to be beginningless (*anādi*), constantly reproducing itself in the manner of seed and sprout.¹² However, while this cycle is beginningless it is not endless, because it is possible to exit this cycle of action and rebirth by ending one’s ignorance and realising the true nature of the self. In this liberated state individuals would no longer be beholden to bodily limitations, and therefore, would no longer be motivated to act.¹³ The self only acts in its seemingly limited form as the embodied *jīva*-subject, just as a carpenter is in a state of effort when he is working with his tools, but when he puts them down, is peacefully at rest (BSB 2.3.40; Panoli, 2011, 732).

While knowledge alone can ultimately lead to liberation, controlling one’s attachments is an imperative tool for realising this knowledge. This is because attachments are responsible for bringing about all our embodied actions, almost as a form of existential servitude, such that those beset by spirals of attachment often lamentingly report that they were forced to act because of it.¹⁴ Controlling these attachments is difficult as they often resist critical reflection and volitional regulation. For example, attachment to a family member can be so intense that when they are well, we feel well too, and when they are suffering, we suffer too.¹⁵ Anger can disturb or confuse one’s memory (BGB 2.63; Panoli 2019, 126), and make it impossible to distinguish right from wrong such that one who is angry will even insult one’s teacher, who otherwise deserves respect.¹⁶

⁹ *dharmādharmau tato jñāsyā dehayogastathā punaḥ* (US 2.1.4; Swami Jagadananda, 1949, 80).

¹⁰ *karmāṇi dehayogārtham dehayoge priyāpriye* (US 2.1.3; Swami Jagadananda, 1949, 80).

¹¹ *dhruve syātām tato rāgo dveṣaścaiva tataḥ kriyāḥ* (US 2.1.3; Swami Jagadananda, 1949, 80).

¹² Śaṅkara makes this argument in BSB 2.1.35–36 in the context of explaining the co-caused nature of actions and individuated embodiment. Thus, in BSB 2.1.35 (Panoli, 2011, 542) he states that *anāditvātsamsārasya ...anādaḥ tu samsāre bijāṅkuravaddhetumadbhāvena karmaṇaḥ sargavaiśamyasya ca pravṛtirnā virudhyate /*

¹³ *tasmadupādhidharma adhyāsenaiṣvātmanaḥ kartṛtvam na svābhāvikaḥ* (BSB 2.3.40; Panoli, 2011, 730).

¹⁴ *trṣṇayā hi ahaṃ kārīti itī duḥkhitānāṃ rajahkārye sevādaḥ pravṛttānāṃ pralāpaḥ śrūyate /* (BGB 3.37; Panoli, 2019, 188).

¹⁵ *tadyathā putrabhāryādiṣu vikaleṣu sakaleṣu vā ahameva vikalāḥ sakalo ...* (BSB 1; Panoli, 2011, 5).

¹⁶ *krodhād bhavati saṃmohaḥ avivekaḥ kāryākāryaviṣayaḥ / krudhho hi saṃmuḍhaḥ saṃ gurumapi api ākrośati //* (BGB 2.63; Panoli, 2019, 126).

This egocentric attachment operates not only in everyday contexts such as our attachments to family or sensory delights, but also in spiritual contexts, as when a person offers sacrifices to the gods, as these ritual acts are also performed transactionally because they are viewed as leading to certain pleasurable objects such as heaven, wealth, etc.¹⁷ Further, the performance of such *dharma* acts presumes an attachment to one's own (false) identity, as it is these features of identity that determine ones *adhikāra* for a particular *dharma* act. According to Śaṅkara, these mundane identity-distinctions of everyday (*vyāvahārika*) existence are not only ultimately useless for self-knowledge but are contradictory to it; the true self is beyond all such ritual distinctions.¹⁸

Consequently, if liberatory knowledge is regarded as the *summum bonum* in Śaṅkara's philosophical system, then its *summum malum* is the state of attachment-fuelled living that perpetuates the cycles of doer-ship and enjoyer-ship within the state of ignorance. This incontrovertible opposition between attachment and the quest for self-knowledge leads him to argue that those who are seeking liberatory knowledge must first renounce their attachments and aversions.¹⁹ Only a passionless man, who renounces all such attachments, can achieve liberation through the knowledge of *brahman* (AUB 1.1; Swami Gambhirananda, 1958, 18).

To sum up, Śaṅkara argues that the *jīva* is drawn to objects due to a mistaken belief in its own reality as a differentiated subject with various empirically abiding attributes. This gives rise to insatiable (*anala*) attachment, and one is trapped in a cycle of chronic unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*duḥkha*, *śoka*; see BGB 3.39; Panoli, 2019, 190). These attachments cause us to act either towards or away from objects, not realising that through such actions we are only prolonging our seeming entrapment in this cycle of suffering. He thus argues that the only way to be liberated is to renounce these attachments, together with all the secular and Vedic actions that they inevitably motivate.

Identity and Dharma

As we have seen, the conceptual leitmotif of Śaṅkara's commentarial texts is that the core immutable Self (*ātman*) in each animated mind-body complex (*jīva*) is non-dual (*a-dvaita*) with unqualified reality (*brahman*). This *brahman*, which alone is ultimately real (*pāramārthika*), is categorically devoid of phenomenal attributes or traits (*nirguṇa*, *nirviśeṣa*).²⁰ Thus, all attributes of personalised identity — be these height or weight, gender or family lineage — are false projections that must be ultimately relinquished so that the true non-dual nature of the self can be realised.

How does this vision of the unreality of personal identity interact with the notion of *svadharma* that was described earlier? As indicated, orthodox Indic worldviews generally regard “good” actions (*dharma*) as leading to advantageous forms of rebirth, and “bad” actions as leading to disadvantageous iterations of the same. As such, far from being viewed as unreal, features of identity are crucial in determining the distinctive good actions (*svadharma*) that individuals need to perform to acquire progressively higher forms of rebirth. Consequently, the question of how each person's *svadharma* could be codified and regulated is a central theme of Vedic literatures in the *dharmaśāstra* genre, as these practical delineations were viewed as mirroring the cosmic order on the social plane.

In this ancient Indic context, certain key axes of identity were viewed as determining one's duties in their present life, namely, features of *varṇa*, *āśrama*, and *liṅga*. The Sanskrit word *varṇa* is used within Vedic literature to refer to an idealized fourfold system of social classification which declares that any given community or caste-grouping (*jāti*) can be classified as belonging to one of four *varṇa* — namely, *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, or *śūdra* — each of which has its specific *dharma* (Chakravarty, 2003). Alongside abiding by the specific duties of their *varṇa*, all persons are viewed as having certain duties that stem from their gender/sex (*liṅga*). Within this category, a great deal of attention is paid towards articulating the *dharma* of “women” (*strī-dharma*) as well as their corresponding (lack of) entitlements (*adhikāra*) regarding Vedic rituals, property, marriage, and so on (Jamison, 2017, 137–150).

¹⁷ *abhyudayaphalaṃ dharmajñānaṃ taccānuṣṭhānāpekṣam / niḥśreyasaphalaṃ tu brahmavijñānaṃ na cānuṣṭhānāntarāpekṣam* / (BSB 1.1.1; Panoli, 2011, 11).

¹⁸ *tathāpi na vedāntavedyamānāyādyatītamapetabrahmakṣatrādibhedamasāṅsāryātmatattvamadhikāre'pekṣyate anupayogādadhikāravirodhacca* / (BSB 1; Panoli, 2011, 5).

¹⁹ *śāstrārthe pravṛttaḥ pūrvam eva rāga-dveṣayoḥ vaśam na āgacchet* / (BGB 3.34; Panoli, 2019, 184).

²⁰ *caitanya-mātraṃ vilakṣaṇarūpāntarāhitaṃ nirviśeṣam brahma* (BSB 3.2.16; Panoli, 2011, 894).

Finally, men of the *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, and *vaiśya varṇa* have certain duties stemming from the stage of life (*āśrama*) that they currently indwell (Perrett 1998, 51). This notion of *āśrama* declares that there are four such stages that men of the above-mentioned three *varṇas* must obligatorily and chronologically move through as part of an ethical life, and each stage comes with certain unique duties (Hiltebeitel, 2010, 65–66). Thus, younger men who are celibate students (*brahmacarya*) must perform certain duties for their teachers, and adult men who are married householders (*gṛhastha*) must perform certain duties for their families.

This complex scheme of identity-based *svadharma* has often been criticised on the grounds that the elaboration of the differing codes of *svadharma* is viewed as the socio-religious jurisdiction of *brāhmaṇa* men alone, as only they have the scriptural entitlement (*adhikāra*) to interpret the Vedas, and thereby, to interpret the laws of *dharma*. Thus the *Mānava Dharma-śāstra* (MD; c.200 CE) — one of the most authoritative scriptures of Brahmanical traditions in general and of *dharma* in particular — unambiguously states that the *brāhmaṇa* (Brahmin) is the lord (*prabhu*) of all the *varṇas*, and though *vaiśyas* and *kṣatriyas* may hear the Vedas, it is only the *brāhmaṇa* that should teach these scriptures (MD 10.1–3; Olivelle, 2005, 208). This socio-ritual exclusivism is most visibly directed at people classified as *śūdras*, women, and as outside of the fourfold *varṇa*-scheme altogether — these groups are not only not permitted to teach the Veda but also are considered unfit to even hear it. Relatedly, the *Mānava Dharma-śāstra* states that if a *śūdra* “arrogantly” attempts to instruct a *brāhmaṇa* about *dharma*, the king should as punishment pour hot oil into his mouth and ears (MD 8.272; Olivelle, 2005, 182).

Thus, *brāhmaṇa* men are considered divinely ordained arbiters of what counts as ethical conduct within this *dharma* framework, and “their *svadharma* is of the same nature as *dharma* in general” (Malamoud, 1982, 49). This unequivocal socio-ritual superiority of *brāhmaṇas* does not imply that all non-*brāhmaṇas* are spiritually equal. However, despite the very real-world gradations among them, the upper three *varṇas* are nevertheless conceived as having a joint higher socio-ritual status as compared to persons classified as *śūdras*, or as having no *varṇa* at all (*avarṇa*).

This is because these three *varṇas* are distinguished within Vedic traditions as twice-born (*dvija*), because of their shared right within to undergo the religious sacrament of *upanayana*, that acts as a second spiritual “birth” (Elder, 2006, 27). The *śūdras*, however, barred from even hearing the Vedas, cannot be part of such a religious sacrament which is hinged on the recitation of these sacred texts.

This (enforced) absence of a second spiritual birth for *śūdras* meant that members of the *śūdra jātis*, who had never been “purified” through the sacrament of *upanayana*, were viewed as the lowest-born within the four-*varṇa* system. Their *svadharma* is defined as consisting entirely of service to the higher three *varṇas*, and by observing this *svadharma* of servitude, they would have the chance of obtaining a higher birth in the future (MD 9.334–35; Olivelle, 2005, 207). However, due to this *dharma* of servitude to others, individuals projected as *śūdras* were allowed some measure of coexistence alongside twice-born persons and still occupied some measure of socio-religious rank over and above those *avarṇa* communities that are viewed as outside of the *varṇa* system altogether. Such persons were not only disallowed from the *dvija* rituals of initiation, but they were also configured as a constant source of ritual pollution for members of the four *varṇas* (*savarṇa*). These *avarṇa jātis* were barred from even approaching *savarṇa* people in public places, let alone directly engaging with them in social milieus (Ambedkar, 1936). In this connection, the *Mānava Dharma-śāstra* states that the *avarṇa* community of *caṇḍālas*, for example, should live outside the villages, and that those who obey the laws of *dharma* should have no dealings with them (MD 10.51–56; Olivelle, 2005, 210).

Of course, the degree to which these norms of Brahmanical *dharma* were accepted or enforced by premodern Indic societies is up for debate, and it is also not clear how much socio-political authority *brāhmaṇas* themselves enjoyed in this era. Indeed, many scholars have argued that the virulently restrictive tone of the *Mānava Dharma-śāstra* represents a desperate power grab from this priestly class that was losing its socio-ritual privileges due to the growing influence of Buddhism, best emblemised by the socio-political reforms ushered in by the Buddhist king Aśoka (Olivelle, 2005, 37–41). However, it is important to note that while *brāhmaṇa* privileges may indeed have been eroding in the centuries when key *dharma* texts such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Mānava Dharma-śāstra* were being composed, these circumstances of decline did not last long. After the decline of Aśoka’s empire, subsequent Indic

dynasties such as the Guptas (c.300–500 CE) strengthened the socio-political position of the *brāhmaṇa* class (Bronkhorst, 2016). This nexus between Brahmanical *dharma* and sociolegal-political organisation was further renewed during the colonial period, when some British colonial administrators and their upper-caste advisors or translators successfully elevated *dharma* texts such as the *Mānava Dharma-śāstra* as sociolegal blueprints for governing a newly imagined pan-Indic community of “the Hindoos” (Dwivedi et al. 2020). This centrality of *dharma* concepts has only continued in the post-colonial context, where many elements of Indian and Hindu society continue to be structured, formally and informally, by hierarchies of *varṇa* and *jāti*.

Dharma and Śaṅkara

With the above socio-religious background in place, Śaṅkara’s rejection of *dharma* categories does indeed appear as a challenge to Brahmanical authority. For example, as we have seen, he does explicitly remark that notions of *adhikāra* and *dharma* are contradictory to self-knowledge. Elsewhere, he also clearly states that all beings (not just persons, but *beings*) have the same transcendental self.²¹

However, as indicated, this vision of Śaṅkara as being “anti” *dharma* is complicated by the fact that, despite the above statements, he does indeed vociferously endorse the idea that certain communities do not have the *adhikāra* to pursue the goal of liberation. One oft-cited example of this endorsement of *dharma* categories can be found in Śaṅkara’s text called the *Brahma-sūtra bhāṣya*. Here, he directly addresses the view of a nameless interlocutor (*pūrvapakṣin*) who proposes that *śūdras* too have the *adhikāra* for the knowledge of *brahman*, as they too may have the capacity (*sāmarthyā*) and the desire (*arthitva*) for liberation.²² In the following discussion, Śaṅkara repeatedly states that they do not, in fact, have this fitness, on the grounds that the study of Vedic utterances (which contain this knowledge) is denied to them.²³

This is because one obtains the *adhikāra* for Vedic study through prior participation in the *upanayana*, and this ceremony only concerns the upper three *varṇas*.²⁴ The lack of fitness, therefore, is not to be understood in conventional terms of agential capacity such as curiosity or wealth, but rather, in terms of (Vedic) *adhikāra* alone.²⁵ Knowledge requires scriptural proficiency which presupposes Vedic study; so, with the denial of (the fitness for) scriptural study the fitness for Vedic knowledge is also denied.²⁶ On this matter, Śaṅkara is brutally clear, and he quotes several scriptural passages in support of his position:

As regards the restriction of hearing, there are also the passages, “If he hears the Veda his ears should be filled with molten lead and lac,” and “A *śūdra* is a cemetery endowed with feet. Hence the Veda should not be uttered in his vicinity” ... “[A] *śūdras* tongue should be slit if he utters the Veda; his body should be dismembered if he commits it to memory”. (BSB 1.3.38; Panoli, 2011, 344)

Thus, Śaṅkara’s denial of *varṇa* categories in the contexts of ritual performance does not stop him from endorsing the applicability of these categories with respect to who is entitled to pursue the liberatory knowledge of the Vedas.

Many scholars have attempted to make sense of this perceived gap between Śaṅkara’s metaphysical reflections on the unreality of personal identity and his ethical commitment to the exclusivity of Vedic knowledge. Michael Comans for example, has argued that such statements are merely reflective of historical attitudes of social discrimination or bigotry that should not be held up to post-Enlightenment standards regarding universal rights (Comans, 2000, 317). On this view, such statements can simply be bracketed out from Śaṅkara’s general philosophical reflections, which otherwise provide many

²¹ *ātmaikaḥ sarvabhūteṣu tāni tasmiṁśca khe yathā* / (US 2.15.9; Swami Jagadananda, 1949, 153).

²² *tatra śūdrasyāpyadhikāraḥ syāditi tāvatprāptam / arthitvasāmarthyayoḥ sambhavāt* / (BSB 1.3.34; Panoli, 2011, 337).

²³ *evam prāpte brūmaḥ — na sūdrasyādhikāraḥ, vedādhyayanābhāvāt* / (BSB 1.3.34; Panoli, 2011, 338). *vedapūrvakastu nāstyadhikāraḥ śūdrānāmīti sthitam* / (BSB 1.3.38; Panoli, 2011, 344). See BSB 1.3.34–38 (Panoli, 2011, 337–345).

²⁴ *naca śūdrasya vedādhyayanamasti, upanayanapūrvakatvādvēdādhyayanasya / upanayanasya ca varnatrayaviśayatvāt* / (BSB 1.3.34; Panoli, 2011, 338). The fact that Śaṅkara associates importance with the *upanayana* can also be seen in the fact that he addresses its absence even in the case of divine beings seeking liberation, albeit to justify why this condition does *not* apply to them. He remarks: *nacopanayanaśāstreṇaiśāmadhikāro nivartyeta, upanayanasya vedādhyayanārthatvāt* / (BSB 1.3.26; Panoli, 2011, 300).

²⁵ *sāmarthyamapi na laukikaḥ kevalamadhikārakāraṇaḥ bhavati* / (BSB 1.3.34; Panoli, 2011, 338–39).

²⁶ *śāstrīye ’rthe śāstrīyasya sāmarthyasyāpekṣitatvāt / śāstrīyasya ca sāmarthyasyādhyayanānirākaraṇena nirākṛtatvāt* / (BSB 1.3.34; Panoli, 2011, 339).

resources for egalitarian thinking. A similar point is made by Anantanand Rambachan who states that Śaṅkara's above-described position must be criticised from perspectives of caste and gender injustice, but moreover, that this position amounts to a kind of contradiction within Śaṅkara's works, given his otherwise strongly argued exposition of the "identity and sameness of self in all beings" (Rambachan, 2006, 28).

However, this view of Śaṅkara's discriminatory ethics — as (at worst) unrelated to and (at best) ultimately contradicted by his non-dualist ontology — runs the risk of obscuring some of the ways in which this ethics is, in fact, rationalised as part of his broader *advaita* metaphysics, as opposed to being incidental to it. Relatedly, I would argue that the perceived contradiction described above is resolvable from Śaṅkara's perspective, in the light of two distinct senses in which he understands the closely related concepts of *dharma* and *adhikāra*. In the first sense, Śaṅkara understands *dharma* as referring to the performance of ritual acts, in which case Śaṅkara fervently undermines its relevance for liberation. This is because, as described above, liberation is (ultimately) incompatible with actions and cannot be pursued in conjunction with them. For example, in the opening passages of the BSB, Śaṅkara remarks:

[T]he [*adhikāra*] to perform those rites does not depend upon the knowledge obtainable from the texts of Vedānta of the true nature of the Self as beyond hunger etc., unaffected by distinctions such as the *brāhmaṇa* and the *kṣatriya*, transcending relative existence.²⁷ For not only can self-knowledge not be used in the performance of rites, but also it is opposed to the latter... For the scriptural passages such as "a *brāhmaṇa* should sacrifice," are operative on the notion that on the self are superimposed such things as *varṇa*, *āśrama*, age, and different conditions.²⁸

In this passage, Śaṅkara clearly argues that ritual *adhikāra*, which is based on the embodied differences of *varṇa* etc., has no relation to self-knowledge. However, some important nuances should be highlighted regarding this position. As analysed in a previous section, the Sanskrit word *adhikāra* has both positive connotations, such as having a right (to *do* something), as well as negative connotations, such as having a duty or responsibility (to *not* refrain from doing something). In the light of this distinction, I argue that the *adhikāra* that is being questioned in the above passage is in the latter negative sense, that is, *adhikāra* as a source of duty or obligation (*kartavya*). On this interpretation, what Śaṅkara is rejecting is not the ritual *allowance* or *entitlement* of *brāhmaṇas* to perform Vedic rites, but their ritual *duty* or *obligation* to perform these rites even if the *brāhmaṇa* in question is pursuing liberation.

Thus, Śaṅkara's statements regarding the non-applicability of *varṇa* categories during the pursuit of liberation should not be confused as a denial of the positive entitlements associated with *brāhmaṇa* embodiment. Rather, they should be recognised as a denial of only the negative dimension of *adhikāra*, that is, *adhikāra* as generating an obligation towards the performance of *dharma* acts. For an *āstika* philosopher like Śaṅkara, if Vedic injunctions can in fact be demonstrated as generating an obligation to act, then to ignore this obligation is to ignore the import of the Vedas, which is hermeneutically untenable. Thus, the only option available to him is to argue that, in the case of those aspiring for liberation, Vedic *adhikāra* does not generate an obligation regarding the performance of ritual acts.

With this distinction in mind, Śaṅkara's position, which earlier may have seemed like an outright dismissal of all kinds of ritual, can now be understood to be a more qualified statement regarding the fact that categories of *varṇa* and so on, because they are incompatible with the self, cannot be a source of ritual *duties* in the above-described negative sense. This brings us to the second sense in which *dharma* is understood by Śaṅkara, which too has a close relationship with notions of *adhikāra*. In this second sense, Śaṅkara understands *dharma* as the cause of the balance of qualities that make up our (present) embodiment.²⁹ A crucial passage for understanding Śaṅkara's views in this regard can be found in his commentary on BSB 1.1.4, which states the following:

²⁷ ...tathāpi na vedāntavedyamaśanāyādyatītamapetabrahmakṣatrādibhedamasāryātmatattvamadhikāre 'pekṣyate anupayogādadhikāravirodhācca / (BSB 1; Panoli, 2011, 5).

²⁸ tathāhi — 'brāhmaṇo yajeta' ityādīni śāstrānyātmāni varṇāśramavayavasthādīviśeṣādhyāsamāśritya pravartante / (BSB 1; Panoli, 2011, 5).

²⁹ Śaṅkara is not alone in this understanding; the authors of several *Dharma-śāstra* texts make a connection between the observance of *dharma* and the particularities of the body (see Glucklich, 2017).

It is heard that beginning with men and ending with the kingdom of heaven, there is a difference in the degree of happiness of all embodied beings.³⁰ From that it follows that there is a difference in the cause which is *dharma*.³¹ The difference in the degree of *dharma* leads to the admission of difference in the degree of fitness of each in performing action [*adhikāritāratamya*].³² And it is also known that the difference in the degree of fitness is created by the desire for certain results, wealth and the like...³³ Thus it becomes well known from the *śruti*, *smṛti*, and reasoning that those belonging to the plane of ignorance become embodied according to the degree of difference in [their] *dharma* and *adharma*, and must embrace transitory transmigration consisting in happiness and suffering in differing degrees.³⁴

In this passage, *dharma* is not being discussed in the context of ritual action, instead, the focus herein is on *dharma* as the cause (*hetu*) of one's particular embodiment. While transmigratory existence in general is suffering (*duḥkha*), not all bodies are equally enmeshed in that suffering; some embodied beings experience more happiness than others. The subjectivity of embodied experience is therefore not universal, and it can lie anywhere along a spectrum of suffering which is determined by differences in *dharma*.³⁵ Notably, in this passage, the term *adhikāra* should be understood in its positive sense — as referring to ritual eligibility or fitness — rather than in the previously discussed negative sense of implying ritual obligations.

I would argue that this second sense of *dharma*, and its connection with positive dimensions of *adhikāra*, is what accounts for Śaṅkara's derogatory views on *śūdras*.

When discussing *dharma* in the first sense, his argument is that *adhikāra* based on classificatory features such as *varṇa* cannot be viewed as generating an obligation regarding the performance of ritual acts for a *brāhmaṇa* who is pursuing liberation. This argument does not apply to *śūdras*, who cannot take part in ritual activity anyway, and therefore the question of whether they may have the duty (*dharma*) to do so simply does not arise. In contrast, when Śaṅkara dismisses *śūdras* as not having the *adhikāra* for liberation in BSB 1.3.34–38, he is using the term *adhikāra* in its positive sense of eligibility or fitness. Maintaining this positive dimension of *adhikāra* is imperative because such hierarchies of positive *adhikāra* are not arbitrary; they are based on *dharma*-shaped embodiment in the second sense defined above.

Consequently, while Śaṅkara opposes negative notions of *adhikāra* as associated with an obligation to perform ritual acts (*dharma*), he supports and endorses a positive notion of *adhikāra*, as an accurate reflection of the ritual fitness of one's *dharma*-shaped embodiment. These two senses of *dharma* are of course interlinked for Śaṅkara, as he remarks that happiness (*sukha*) and suffering (*duḥkha*) are the tangible results arising from *dharma* and *adharma*, effected through “good” (*dharma*) and “evil” (*adharma*) acts, which are classified as such because they are indicated within Vedic injunctions (and prohibitions) regarding action.³⁶ Nevertheless, despite this undeniable interlinkage between these two senses of *dharma*, it is important to highlight the non-equivalence between them, as it allows us to connect the second sense of *dharma* with his views on attachment-fuelled embodiment.

As indicated in previous sections, Śaṅkara's pessimism regarding embodiment is due to its constitutive connection with actions performed due to attachment (*kāma*). Thus, attachment and/or desire constitutes the *summum malum* of his *advaita* system. In this connection, the above interpretations of Śaṅkara's writing allow us to effectively make the case that *dharma* — captured in a person's degree of (positive) *adhikāra* — is closely linked to the degree to which a person is enmeshed in *kāma*. As noted, Śaṅkara directly links this second sense of *dharma* to notions of attachment, by saying that these differences in *adhikāra* are caused by desire (*arthitva*) for results such as power and so on. The phrase

³⁰ *manuṣyatvādārabhya brahmānteṣu dehavatsu sukhātāratamya manuṣrīyate* / (BSB 1.1.4; Panoli, 2011, 34).

³¹ *etaśca taddhetordharmasya tāratamyaṃ gamyate* / (BSB 1.1.4; Panoli, 2011, 34).

³² *dharma tāratamya ādadhikāritāratamyaṃ* / (BSB 1.1.4; Panoli, 2011, 34).

³³ *prasiddhaṃ cārthitvasāmarthyādikṛtamadhikāritāratamyaṃ* / (BSB 1.1.4; Panoli, 2011, 34).

³⁴ *evamavidyādidoṣavatāṃ dharmādharma tāratamyanimittāṃ śarīropādānapūrvakam sukhaduḥkhatāratamyanityaṃ saṃsārarūpaṃ śrutismṛtinyāyaprasiddham* / (BSB 1.1.4; Panoli, 2011, 34).

³⁵ This idea that happiness is a naturalised consequence/reward of prior *dharma*, just as suffering is of *adharma*, is also reflected in the *Dharma-sūtras*, which are accepted and quoted by Śaṅkara as scripture. For example, see *Āpastamba-Dharma-sūtra* 2.2.2–7 (Olivelle, 1999, 44–45) and *Gautama-Dharmasūtra* 11.29–30 (Olivelle, 1999, 97).

³⁶ *tayoṣcodanālakṣaṇayorarthānarthayordharmādharma yoh phale pratyakṣe sukhaduḥkhe...* (BSB 1.1.4; Panoli, 2011, 34).

“so on” (*ādi*) can be interpreted as implying that not only the desire for capacity or power (*sāmarthya*) but the desire for all objects which are transmigratory (like power) that leads to differences in the positive Vedic allowances that are granted to persons with different identities.

I would thus argue that the notion of embodied beings having different degrees of happiness and suffering should be interpreted as reflecting and correlated to the differential degrees of their enmeshment in attachment. This experiential diversity would mean that those persons regarded as the “happiest” are implicitly coded as having bodies that are “naturally” less enmeshed in desire. The superiority of these bodies is reflected in their positive *adhikāra* to pursue liberation. Conversely, he regards “lower” embodied beings as those with the highest degree of suffering, because they are least suited to overcoming their attachments.³⁷ It is this highest degree of suffering that accounts for such persons’ lack of positive *adhikāra*.³⁸ Viewed in this way, Śaṅkara’s standpoints on *dharma* are interimplicated not only with his critique of actions (*karma*) but also with his critique of attachment (*kāma*) and emotional life.

To sum up, the discussion in BSB 1.3.34–38 regarding the lack of fitness of *śūdras* for liberation, based on their non-fulfillment of the requirements of Vedic study, *upanayana* and so on, should not be taken as a mere historically-bound acquiescence to socio-religious formalities. It is true that, insofar as *dharma* relates to ritual *duties*, Śaṅkara argues that *dharma* is irrelevant for liberation. But insofar as *dharma* relates to ritual *allowances*, it is not only relevant for liberation but is the most essential socio-ritual criterion for pursuing liberation. Consequently, those who are ignorant and do not yet have the positive *adhikāra* for liberation should simply perform those duties to which their bodies are currently entitled, without any attempt at pursuing the knowledge of *brahman* (*brahmajñāna*).³⁹ By continuously observing *dharma* in this way, one will eventually be (re)born in a body superimposed with the *varṇa* of a *brāhmaṇa* and masculine *liṅga*, which is the only mind-body complex that is entitled to pursue liberation from this cycle of rebirths altogether.

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, it is possible to say that Śaṅkara’s views on *śūdras* are not merely incidental or contradictory to his general *advaita* views. Rather, they reflect that he is far more comfortable with certain senses of *dharma* than some of his polemical statements might suggest. The excavation of these strands of *dharma*-related sympathy also serves as a reminder of how worldly (*vyāvahārika*) categories are by no means unconnected to the pursuit of the transcendent (*pāramārthika*) state of *mokṣa* in Śaṅkara’s commentarial writings. Indeed, the unwillingness to treat Śaṅkara’s visions of *vyāvahārika* with philosophical seriousness can have the effect of collaborating with various Orientalist imaginaries that have historically interpreted his philosophy as mystically body-denying.⁴⁰ Thus, just as a dream is identifiable as a dream only *after* the dreamer has woken up, equally, the categories of Vedic injunction and prohibition remain authoritative so long as *avidyā* lasts.⁴¹ While the body is indeed sublated (*bādha*) upon realising the *pāramārthika* liberated standpoint, the process for getting there, according to Śaṅkara, is not extricable from the various features of our embodiment. The features of any given person — their *varṇa*, *liṅga*, and so on — despite being less-than-real, do potentially pose an obstacle to liberation. Equally, certain bodies, on account of having the “right” features, are already deemed as suited to the pursuit of liberation even at birth, when spiritual training has yet to be acquired. So, while all beings do have the same transcendental self, they do not all have the same type of psycho-physically marked body, and the type of body they do have cannot be viewed as spiritually insignificant.

³⁷ This connection between the observance of *dharma* (both in this life and in previous ones) and normative notions of emotional “health” is upheld by several *dharma* related texts. Thus, the *Mānava Dharma-sāstra* states that at the start of creation women were assigned desire (*kāma*), anger (*krodha*), crookedness (*anārjaya*), a hostile disposition (*drohabhāva*), bad conduct (*kucaryā*), and an (attachment to) beds, couches, and jewellery (MD 9.17; Olivelle, 2005, 190). Similarly, in discussions regarding *śūdras*, “emotions are often conflated as vices: a *Śūdra* is envious (*astīya*), slanderous (*piśuna*), ungrateful (*kṛtaghna*), and bears grudges (*dīrgharoṣaka*)” (Heim 2017, 423).

³⁸ As indicated in the previous section on *dharma* and identity, the question of whether this is fair or equitable does not arise because our dispositions in this life are linked to actions in previous ones. Since transmigratory existence is beginningless, every birth has always been preceded by acts that are *dharma* or *adharma* (BSB 2.1.34–36; Panoli 2011, 540–44).

³⁹ *tasmād ajñena adhiḥkṛtena kartavyam eva karma iti prakaraṇārthaḥ* / (BGB 3.16; Panoli 2019, 169).

⁴⁰ Arvind Sharma (1990) makes a similar observation regarding the relationship between *advaita* philosophy and *karma*-shaped rebirth. He argues that, far from being a convenient fiction, theories of rebirth play a vital role in *advaita* thought. However, he does not address the specific role of *dharma* within this *vyāvahārika* context.

⁴¹ *dehādyaivairaviśeṣeṇa dehino grahaṇam nijam / prāṇinām tadavidyottham tāvatkarmavidhirbhavet* // (US 2.1.16; Swami Jagadananda 1949, 84).

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