

Advaita Vedānta and Environmental Ethics: Some Critical Observations

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I

After the publication of Lynn White's *The Religious Roots of our Ecological Crisis* in 1967, it has been widely accepted that there is a relationship between religious beliefs and attitudes towards nature/environment. White remarks: "What we do about ecology [that is, the natural environment] depends on ideas of the man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion or rethink our old one. The beatniks, who are the basic revolutionaries, show a sound instinct in their affinity for Zen Buddhism, which conceives man-nature relationship as very nearly the mirror image of the Christian view."¹ Lynn White and several environmental philosophers argue that the Western worldview and religious traditions which encourage dominance and control over nature bear the responsibility for the tragic state of our world resources and ecology today. If indeed Indian traditions have fundamentally eco-friendly philosophies and texts that encourage frugality, lack of possessions, and worldviews that include nature as continuous with human life, one may wonder why Indians have had a lamentable record in combating ecological disasters and rampant industrialization.

The answers are obviously complex. There are views on environmental philosophy which presuppose that there is a definite connection between worldviews and practice.

Recent academic opinion blames Western thoughts and Western practices for the devastation of land in Third World countries. J.B. Callicott suggested that Western intellectual colonization is responsible for the failures we see in Eastern and Southern Asia. This view is also

advocated by some eco-feminists, like Vandana Shiva, who focus almost entirely on the West, and the Third World's experience of colonial modernity as the root of environmental devastation. But this tends to ignore the pre-colonial aspects of the problem. For a long time, attempts have been made to praise the ecological potential of certain elements that potentially inspire environmental sensitivity in Indian philosophy and culture. These include concepts of Ultimate Reality, Humanity and Nature that are said to foster a more environmentally sensitive outlook.

One may be skeptical about whether or not religious ideas have actually influenced environmental practice. But there is no doubt that the philosophical-religious systems of the Indian civilization contain important strands that appear to avoid the pitfalls which Lynn White finds in the Judeo-Christian tradition. There are ways of thinking in the Indian civilization that seem to have great potential for inspiring environmental ethics and sensitivity. The central focus in this contribution is that of the Advaita Vedānta tradition in Hindu Philosophy which postulates as "All this [world], verily, is *Brahman* (the Absolute)" (*Chhāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14. 1). In this paper, I attempt to examine the relation between Advaita Vedānta and environmental ethics/ecological ethics, albeit only briefly. I have attempted to show that there are aspects of Advaitic spirituality that give us clues on rethinking possible resolutions to the ecological distress that now affects both the Indian subcontinent and the world in general.

Advaita Vedānta provides us the basis for an environmental awareness and ethics. The philosophy of *Brahman* provides essential ingredients of an environmentally sound ethics, namely, *Reverence for Nature* at par with Albert Schweitzer's *Reverence for Life*. Schweitzer mentioned that "life itself as such is sacred. Ethics consists in the necessity of practicing reverence for life towards all will-to-live, as towards our own. It is good

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to maintain and cherish life; it is evil to destroy and check life"². In Indian philosophy, animals, birds and different living entities are to be treated with respect because God, the Supreme Being Himself, was incarnated in the form of various species. The following may be some of the resources available in the Indian tradition for carrying out research on this issue. The *Upaniṣads* and *Bhagavad Gītā* provide vital essences concerning environmental sensitivity and ethics. The general ethical framework and some specific passages from the *Upaniṣads* and *Bhagavad Gītā* help us to reconstruct traditional views on certain issues like *ahimsā*, *dharma*, anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism, the question of value, etc. The *Narasimha Purāṇa* describes the concept of *Dasāvātāra* which states that the first incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu was a fish. The second was a tortoise, then a boar, then Vāmana – the dwarf incarnation of Vishnu and so on. The *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* suggests and supports vegetarianism. The *Śāntiparva* of *Mahābhārata* describes the fact that the life of a man and an animal is of equal value and impose the same punishment for the destruction of either forms of life.

One may say that religious precepts embedded in various religious scriptures seem to find their expression in the structured legal systems of various traditions and communities. The praxis-centred concepts influenced wide range of ethical thoughts in such a way that environmentalists support their principles and thought it significant to look more closely at these religious presuppositions. Environmental Ethics has been developed as a response to the apparent failure of ethical theories to deal with problems faced by mankind today in understanding human being's moral status vis-à-vis environment/nature. Thus, it is an acknowledged fact that religions have not only determined the way we perceive the world but also set roles for individuals to play in environment/nature. Consequently, neither religion nor environmental ethics can survive unless and until they are integrally tied up. It may be necessary that a moral science of environment and its underpinnings in theological doctrines have to be redefined and re-coordinated for a proper interdisciplinary articulation.

However, if by Vedānta we mean the Advaita or non-dualist school founded by Śāṅkara, its potential contribution to environmental philosophy has been vastly over estimated. Undoubtedly, Advaita Vedānta represents a profound spiritual foundation for fostering environmental sensitivity. In tune with environmental line of thought, it fosters values such as simplicity of life, frugality and non-violence. But there are opponents who claim that Advaita Vedānta also encourages attitudes of devaluation and neglect to the natural universe. Such attitudes are not directly responsible for environmental

degradation, but may carry the potentialities to undermine environmental concern. What Advaita Vedānta has to say about environmental concern and ecology, therefore, has been and continues to be important. Advaita Vedānta has long been known to deny the substantive reality of the world. However, there is a need to rethink this aspect of our tradition in light of the current literature on religion and environmental ethics debate.

Let us try to show that how Advaita contributes to the following three notions³ that are critical to a satisfactory environmental ethics:

1. The concept of *karma*, a pervasive theory within Hinduism and according to which humanity is interconnected with everything else in the cosmos.
2. The unity of all things is in *Brahman*. This implies that fundamentally all life is one, and that in essence, everything is Real. This way of thinking supports reverence for all living things in the cosmos.
3. A logical consequence of the Vedāntic 'emanationist' theory of creation, i.e. everything in nature has 'intrinsic spiritual worth'.

For Advaita Vedānta, there is no sharp duality between the body and spirit of man; each contributes to the whole and may express the full integrity of the whole.⁴ The goal of human life is not to escape from life but to escape from the self-centred view of life. Advaita Vedānta believes that *Ātman* or the true *Self* is one with *Brahman*, the idea that all beings are separate only apparently, but actually emanations of the one *Reality/Brahman*. This gives Advaita Vedānta a 'cosmic' outlook on life: The nature of the self includes all lesser forms of existence. The universe, though it appears to be merely-symbolic or *pratibhasika*, is actually *paramarthika* or Divine Consciousness itself. Thus, it can be said that Advaita Vedānta tradition has an ecological conscience as it proposes an essential unity of all existence in God which promotes a sense of identity and empathy with the natural world. But, there are some difficulties too which may be addressed thus:

- The claim that Advaita Vedānta finds spiritual value inherent in nature is quite difficult to accept.
- We cannot overlook the fact that Śāṅkara and his followers devalue the material world and that in the Advaitic liberation experience, the world is not revered but rather tolerated until all consciousness of the world passes away.

II

The questions whether nature has inherent value, and whether all value require an evaluator is generally raised in the traditional environmental ethics. These questions are basically raised between nature objectivists and

value subjectivists. The former presupposes that nature is inherently/intrinsically valuable, while the later holds that it takes an evaluator to ascribe value. Reconciling these two opposing views we could argue that human beings evaluate things and events only when they take an interest. That is why a value relationship comes to the picture where it did not exist before. This evaluation is though anthropogenic or generated by humans, but not solely centred on humans or human satisfaction/desire and, hence, not anthropocentric. Such process of evaluation requires some “properties” or “potentialities” in cosmos/nature which are objective properties. For instance, a plant can defend its own life, synthesize glucose by using photosynthesis. Animals have their own life, and can have their objective preferences. This reconciliation between the nature objectivists and value subjectivists requires *Reverence for Nature* and the concept of *Brahman* in Advaita Vedānta supplies essential ingredients for *Reverence for Nature*.

It is reasonable to believe that reverence implies values perhaps even extraordinary values in the object being revered. Thus, a question is raised: Does Advaita Vedānta lead us to see such extraordinary values in nature? Does it hold that there is an “inherent spiritual worth” in everything in natural world such that it should be cherished and protected? For an answer to this question one may turn to the well-known dialogue between Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyī in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* question.⁵ As Yājñavalkya was married to two wives, and showed greater affection towards Maitreyī, one may hope for some sense of relatedness to the things of mother earth (*Devi Vasundhara*) and in cosmos/nature. Yājñavalkya left the natural world and his wives to become a world renouncer. When his wife asked for a final word of wisdom before he departed, Yājñavalkya said: You have truly been dear to me; now you have increased your dearness. But my heart is truly elsewhere. He further proceeds to say that he was leaving not as the husband, but for the sake of the Self (*ātman*) in the husband. Not for the sake of the wife is the wife, but for the sake of the Self is the wife. He continues with the same formula, including sons, cattle, wealth, caste status, and even the *Vedas*. His analysis includes the Gods, living beings and the world. Finally, he declares, not for the sake of all is all, but for the sake of the Self is all.

From the above assertion of Yājñavalkya one may understand this as a statement that husband, wife, and so on have value as expressions of the Self. Thus, he sees his wife as an expression of God. But this is not actually what Yājñavalkya is saying. He actually expressed the renouncer’s devaluation of the natural world in favour of the supreme value of the Absolute. Śaṅkara describes that “with the intention of teaching non-attachment

which is actually the means to immortality, Yājñavalkya creates distaste for his wife, husband, sons, and so on, so they may be renounced.”⁶ Reverence for the things in life and mother earth, according to this view, is a misdirected reverence for the Self as it needs to be redirected towards the Self. Yājñavalkya tells Maitreyī that “it is the Self, not the husband that should be seen, heard, reflected upon, and meditated upon.”⁷ The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* claims “one should meditate on the Self alone”. According to Vidyāraṇya, “since the Self is the highest object of love, one becomes indifferent to all objects of experience and transfers one’s love to the Self. Objects of experience exist only for the sake of the experiencer, i.e. the Self”.⁸ Thus, value is located in the Self alone and far from being worthy of reverence, all that is other than the *Ātman*, including nature, is without value. The opinion of Sureśvara may be significant here. Sureśvara opines: “This supreme or *Brahman-Ātman* is said to be the savour or *rasa* of this world of effects which itself is devoid of the savour.”⁹

The second difficulty in the previous section is that Advaita Vedānta embraces negative evaluation of life in the cosmos/natural world. Far from encouraging reverence for nature, it inculcates fear of it. It is no accident that an Advaitin is required to be a renouncer. Śaṅkara and his disciples see the universe of birth and rebirth or *samsāra* as a “terrible ocean” that has to be crossed over. Individual selves are trapped in *samsāra* and going from birth to birth without attaining peace. They are like worms, caught in a river, being swept along from one *chakra* to another *chakra*. The sole purpose of an Advaitic *guru* is to overcome ignorance, together with its manifestation, the world. In this context, question is raised; what should be our attitude to participation in life? Śaṅkara answers: “One should despise, fear, have disgust for the existence in *samsāra*, thinking “Let there be no falling into this terrible, vast ocean of *samsāra*”.¹⁰ Śaṅkara describes that to study Vedānta, a student must have intense desire for liberation from this world (*mumuk. sutva*). In this state, the student cries, “When and how, Lord, shall I be released from the bondage of *samsāra*?”¹¹

We can find the mention of animal species in Advaita literature, where animals are not valued as fellow embodiments of spirit but as symbols of the sufferings experienced in *samsāra*. The universe is not a community, but a hierarchy, in which gods enjoy great happiness, human beings experience moderate happiness and pain, and animals suffer “extreme misery”¹². As a result of evil *karma*, souls are born as plants, which endure suffering when they are harvested, cooked, and eaten. Trees serve as bodies in which the results of sins may be experienced through reincarnation.¹³

Also, in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* we can find the birth of a human being as a dog or a pig whose conduct has been evil. Those who neglect both spiritual knowledge and ritual works will be reborn again and again in disgraceful births as *tuchha prāṇi*. Śaṅkara comments: They take birth as small creatures: mosquitoes and other insects — which are reborn again and again. Their continuity in a succession of births and deaths is said to be caused by the Lord. They spend their time in mere birth and death, having opportunity for neither ritual nor enjoyment. Such tiny creatures pass their lives in experiencing pain. They are “driven into terrible darkness from which it is difficult to escape, as if into a bottomless sea without any raft, without hope of crossing it.”¹⁴

III

In Śaṅkara’s Advaita metaphysics, the world of cosmos/nature, i.e. the world of change and multiplicity, undergoes a comprehensive objectification and radical ontological devaluation. This process includes human body and mind. Advaita bases itself on *viveka* (discrimination) between *Atman* and *Anātman*, a process that is dualistic. This idea is sometimes called *Dṛgdrśyaviveka*, i.e. the discrimination between the seer (*dṛk*) and the seen (*drśya*). This is not the familiar Western dualism of mind and body. We need to distinguish between spirit and matter, the pure subject and its objects. Mind along with emotion, memory, and all that constitutes personality is regarded as a subtle form of matter. It must be rejected, together with body and nature, in favour of the pure awareness of the Self. One may say that it is pointless and misleading to say that Advaita fully overcomes the Western duality of mind and body. The body, which is considered as a symbol of change, decay, and the bondage of spirit, is objectified as an object of mistrust. In the *Aparokṣānubhūti*, it is said, “I am not the body whose nature is unreal or *asadrūpa*”.¹⁵

The goal of Advaita is to realize that the Self is in fact other than matter, other than the body and that its embodiment is only apparent. The truth to be realized is that the Self is eternally liberated, eternally disembodied or *aśarīra*. One may ponder; can we speak of ‘matter’ in a system in which all is *Brahman* according to Advaita? The answer may be yes since along with the idea of objectivity or *drśyatva*, the notion of insentience or *jaḍatva* also comes. According to the objectivity, all that is other than the Self is insentient, unconscious, *jaḍa*, or *ajñāna*. Śaṅkara argues against Sāṅkhya that it is possible for *Brahman*, which is conscious, to be the cause of the world, which is unconscious. That the cause is conscious does not entail that the world must be. Although it exists, it does share in *Brahman*’s *sattā*, and the world itself, as phenomenal, is in fact unconscious or *acetana* and *aśuddha*. Padmapāda, a

disciple of Śaṅkara, mentions that ignorance, the source of the world-appearance, is an insentient power (*jaḍātmikā avidyāśakti*).¹⁶ Since *māyā* or the creative power of *Brahman* and all its products, including mind, are insentient, the universe as universe is unconscious and inert. Thus, in the context of Advaita, to say that the natural world is the supreme Consciousness itself is out of question.

In fact the goal of the Advaitins is to attain a state of complete independence (*nirālambatā*) in which spirit is no longer dependent on or limited by the body, the mind, or the world of nature.¹⁷ Having an objectified cosmos/nature and reduced it to insentience, the ascetic turns his attention away from it. To help him overcome his natural human identification and attachment to his false phenomenal support, the ascetic must practice “seeing the defects” in them, i.e. *doṣa-darśana*. The body for him is inert or *jaḍa* and endless impurities. Thus, he needs to cultivate positive disgust for it and for all other phenomena. The defects of the body, mind, and objects of experience are innumerable. The discriminating Self has also no more liking for them. This distaste needs to extend to include the entire cosmos/creation. The Advaitin contemplates it as illusory (*māyika*), transient (*āgamāpāyīn*), insignificant (*tuḥḥa*), painful (*duḥkharūpa*), and to be abandoned (*heya*). Ultimately, the ascetic must aim at a total ‘renunciation of the universe’ (*tyāgo prapañca-rūpasya*).

IV

Advaita Vedānta regards the world as an illusion and some thinkers have taken such ideas to encourage breaking away from all worldly bondages to attain ultimate liberation. This attempt negates and denies the world and, therefore, does not promise environmentalism, at least not in the sense as environmental philosophy is practiced today. Also, the theory of transmigration of soul encourages the connection of humans with other living beings, thus encouraging an awareness of interdependence and respect/reverence towards nature. Thus, environmental thinkers in Indian traditions have applied Vedāntic idea of omnipresence of divinity to give highest respect the natural/non-human entities such as rivers, mountains, animals and trees. It can be said that it is very tough to avoid the argument that Advaita is alienated from ecocentrism. It achieves its non-duality not inclusively but exclusively: the world of cosmos/nature is finally cast out of the Absolute, cast out of existence. We can find world alienation and Śaṅkara’s position denies the existence of cosmic world thus, he ultimately became monistic. From the *pāramārthika* perspective, the world is simply not there and has a dependent status. Advaita’s non-duality is, in fact, only provisional. From the *vyāvahārika*

perspective, the world is admitted as an inexplicable appearance, neither real nor unreal, neither different from nor identical with *Brahman*. But this is not a world affirming doctrine.

It is believed that there is always a world and there is always matter. The question remains: How do we escape from the dilemma of this contradiction? How do we expel the world from consciousness that disturbs the unlimited soul? Only by giving an arbitrary existence, we always float between existence and non-existence, and await its annihilation. Ultimately, this arbitrary existence must be transcended. The logic of Advaita Vedānta, and its longing for liberation from all form, moves it inevitably in the direction of an a-cosmic monism. Whether or not Advaita Vedānta encourages the kind of a-cosmic world is debatable. This may cause misunderstandings of the subtleties of the Advaita Vedānta position. It can be argued that Śaṅkara's denial of the value of empirical experience in *mukti*, his assertion that the world vanishes "like a dream, may be explained as his way of saying that non-dual perception is so radically different from ordinary perception as to be a kind of non-perception. There can be no doubt that Advaita Vedānta tradition as a whole promotes devaluation and disregard of the world, with important consequences for people's attitude towards cosmos/nature.

Let us cite an example of the sacred river *Gaṅgā*. Millions of gallons of raw sewage, hundreds of incompletely cremated corpses, and huge amounts of chemical waste are dumped daily in to this sacred *Gaṅgā*. The situation is very much critical and an ecological disaster is knocking at the door. Yet a person who worships *Gaṅgā mātā* still says the river *Gaṅgā* is a *Devi* and can't be polluted. It is true that this person is not a typical Advaitin but his claims are established consciously or unconsciously in consonance with the thought of the Vedānta tradition. He simply reiterates the argument of *Bhagavadgītā*¹⁸ and the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*¹⁹ that the destruction of the natural, material component of life does not affect the *Ātman*. The person who respects river *Gaṅgā* reaffirms his attitude what he has learned through his culture from the preceptors of Advaita, namely, that only God or *Brahman* is real, that the world of cosmos/nature is ultimately unimportant or *tuṅṅha*.

One may ponder: what attitudes towards cosmos/nature the person who respects river *Gaṅgā* might learn if he has a chance to study Advaita Vedānta. In *Aparokṣānubhūti* of Śaṅkara, it is said that "pure non-attachment is a disregard for all objects from God (*Brahman*) down to plants and minerals, like the indifference one has towards the excrement of a crow or *kāka-viṣṭhā*."²⁰ Can we claim that this *Aparokṣānubhūti* inspires the person who respects river *Gaṅgā* to respect the cosmos/nature as

spiritual? This attribution may be criticized by scholars as mistaken, but I am concerned here with the popular and commonsensical understanding.

While responding to the environmental disasters, an *Ethics of Responsibility* may be the appropriate perspective in the 21st century environmental crisis. This is because, we think that we are not bound to solve all the problems in the world; our duty is only to avoid creating problems. We must not be responsible for evil to others; we must not harm others; if we harm, we must repair the damage. This is called *Ethics of Responsibility* and the answer to the question what makes human beings valuable and why should we revere the cosmos/nature and lead a meaningful life.

Notes

1. White, Jr. L. 'The historical root of our ecological crisis' *Science* 155: 1203-1204, 1967.
2. Schweitzer, A. *Reverence for Life: Civilization and Ethics* trans. A. Naish, Blackwell: London, 1923.
3. Eliot Deutsch, 'Vedānta and Ecology,' *Indian Philosophical Annual*. Madras: The Center for Advanced Study in Philosophy, 7: 1970, pp. 81-83.
4. *Ibid*, pp. 81-83.
5. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2:4
6. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* with Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya*, 2.4.5
7. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.8.
8. *Pañcadaśī of Vidyāraṇya*, 12.32; 7. pp. 202-206.
9. Lance E. Nelson, "Reverence for Nature or the Irrelevance of Nature? Advaita Vedānta and Ecological Concern", *Journal of Dharma: Dharmaram Journal of Religions and Philosophies*, 16:3, July-September, 1991, pp. 282-301.
10. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* with Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya*, 5.10.8.
11. *Brahma Sūtra* with Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya* 1.1.1
12. *Brahma Sūtra* with Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya* 2.1.34
13. *Chhāndogya Upaniṣad*, 5.10.7-8
14. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* with Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya* 5.10.8.
15. *Aparokṣānubhūti* of Śaṅkara, 24-28
16. Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*. Delhi; Motilal Banarsidass; 1975, 2:105 and Sri Swami Satchidanandendra, *The Method of the Vedānta*. London: Kugnn Paul International, 1989, p. 388.
17. *Aparokṣānubhūti* of Śaṅkara, p. 123
18. In other words, how can one who knows the soul to be imperishable, eternal, unborn, and immutable kill anyone or cause anyone to kill? (*Bhagavadgītā*, 2:21)
19. The slayer who thinks of slaying this and the slain who thinks this slain, both these do not know. This slays not, nor is slain. Therefore, all *samsāra*, the fruit of virtue and vice, is only in the case of those who do not know the *ātman*, and not in the case of one who knows the *Brahman*; for in his case, virtue and vice are inappropriate both from the authority of the *Srutis* and from the cogency of reasoning. (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.2.19.)
20. *Aparokṣānubhūti* of Śaṅkara, Verse-4.

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