

Non-Dual Reality: A Metaphysical Analytic Study in Advaita Vedanta

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Abstract

In this paper I want to focus on Adi Shankaracharya's interpretation of a crucial section in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (2.4.5), this dissertation provides a thorough analytical analysis of the metaphysical explanation of love in Advaita Vedanta. Rather than being a psychological observation, the Upanishadic claim that objects are loved for the sake of the Self (Ātman) rather than for their own sake is interpreted as a philosophical argument concerning the foundation of value, subjectivity, and relationality. The article argues that Shankaracharya's view encompasses a kind of value-monism in which the Self alone is intrinsically worthy of love, while all other objects are loved derivatively due to their relationship to the Self. By distinguishing the transcendental Self from the empirical ego (ahaṅkāra), this position avoids the charge of reductive egoism. The research also situates this explanation within the framework of Advaita's non-dual ontology, in which the identity of Ātman and Brahman undermines the metaphysical possibility of real subject-object relations.

The main focus of the paper is on Maya's role in creating the impression of plurality, which in turn structures common types of love as possessive, deliberate, and discriminating. It is believed that these patterns are both phenomenologically authentic and ontologically contingent. Through a detailed examination of the epistemic transformation brought about by Knowledge (jñāna), the research demonstrates how love transforms from a bond between

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individuals into an ontological revelation of non-duality. The research concludes that love in Advaita Vedanta is not something that can be reduced to emotional states or exhausted by ethical categories, but rather an expression of the Self's self-revelation. This reinterpretation not only eliminates the boundary between lover and beloved, but it also reframes love as being comparable to the basic structure of reality—pure, undivided consciousness.

Key words: self- knowledge, love, non-duality, reality, ignorance

Introduction

Traditionally, ethical theory, moral psychology, or phenomenology have been used to contextualize philosophical studies of love. Love is frequently viewed as an intentional state including desire, caring, or valuation that is directed toward another person. But the Upanishadic tradition, especially as it is understood in Advaita Vedanta, calls for a dramatic reorientation: love is a hint to the fundamental character of reality itself rather than just are relationship between beings. At first look, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad's statement (2.4.5) that nothing is loved for its own sake but for the benefit of the Self seems to reduce love to a kind of self-interest. However, this interpretation is insufficient until the metaphysical character of the relevant "Self" is examined. This essay starts with the assumption that the Upanishadic claim is ontological rather than psychological, and that Shankaracharya's non-dual framework is the only place where its full implications become apparent. What must reality be like for the Upanishadic claim about love to be true? is the main issue that drives this investigation. A methodical examination of the ontological state of relationality, the structure of value, and the essence of the Self is necessary to provide an answer.

The Self as the Locus of Value

According to Advaita, Brahman—the limitless, joyful, non-dual consciousness—is the same as the Self (Atman). This perspective changes the emphasis from externalizing happiness—looking for it in things—to internalizing it—realizing that it comes from within. We mistakenly believe that things have value, which causes attachment. This ignorance is eliminated when the Self is acknowledged as the only source of value, resulting in liberation (Moksha). Adi Shankaracharya asserted in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad that all commonplace objects of love are appreciated instrumentally, that is, not for their own sake but rather for the purpose of something more. This initially raises the issue of an infinite regress of value by implying a global chain in which each attachment gets its value from another. However, the Self (Ātman), which is the sole thing that is svataḥ-priya—intrinsically beloved—ends this regress; all else is parataḥ-priya, dear only in connection to it. This is an important asymmetry: the Self is instantaneously and non-instrumentally

valued, requiring no additional explanation, in contrast to everything else whose worth is conditional and derivative. Since the Self is the fundamental awareness that underlies all experience rather than the particular ego, this does not equate to a crude egoism within the Advaita Vedanta paradigm. As a result, all love eventually reflects the supremacy of the Self as the only source of real worth. However, in order to fully comprehend this assertion, it is necessary to define the Self.

Shankaracharya is explicit that the Self in question is not the empirical ego or *ahaṁkāra*, which is contingent, variable, and itself an object of awareness. Instead, the unobjectifiable subject that underpins all thought and experience is the Self, which is pure consciousness. This distinction is important because, in the absence of the thesis, people fall into a primitive psychological egoism, which holds that people love others just for their own sake. Shankaracharya takes a more extreme stance, arguing that everything valuation requires a deeper, non-individual foundation rather than the empirical individual valuing everything in regard to itself. The concept is that your capacity to appreciate anything at all stems from this deeper, universal Self that is present in everyone, rather than your own likes and dislikes.

A crucial tension arises at this point. It is not reasonable to get from phenomenological observation—that individuals prefer to value things in reference to themselves—to metaphysical conclusion—that the Self is the only center of value. One may contend that rather than being an indication of ontological reality, the observable self-referentiality of love is just a characteristic of human psychology. Shankaracharya's solution is to completely reject the ultimate reality of the individual psyche, which is inherent in his larger dedication to Advaita Vedanta. Under Maya's influence, ignorance (*avidyā*) shapes the empirical self, which is a creation in and of itself. The deeper, non-dual Self must thus be taken into consideration when reinterpreting the apparent psychological structure of value. From this perspective, the idea of non-duality and the assertion that the Self is the only source of value are inextricably linked. The Self must be the only source of intrinsic value if it is the only genuine entity. Since there are ultimately no independently existent things, value cannot be attached to them. As a result, the thesis involves a kind of philosophical monism about value: all value is derived from a single, inherently valuable entity. However, this stance presents additional philosophical challenges. How can the Self be considered "dear" if it is impersonal, universal, and characterless? Generally speaking, the concept of dearness requires affectivity, preference, or evaluative judgment—qualities that don't appear to apply to a non-dual, contentless mind. Shankaracharya's approach is to redefine "dearness" as an indicator of ontological immediacy rather than as an emotion. The reason the Self is "dearest" is that it is the most personal and indisputable fact; it cannot be denied without assuming it. In this

way, self-revelation (svayam-prakāśatva) is linked to intrinsic value: the Self is valuable since it is the prerequisite for manifestation.

However, this step raises another important question: does the divide between axiology and epistemology become obsolete when value is equated with self-revelation? Value seems to be reducible to a characteristic of cognition rather than an independent normative concept if the Self is valued only because it is self-evident. One may contend that doing so runs the danger of depriving the idea of worth of its normative power. Shankaracharya would probably respond to this criticism by claiming that these distinctions are the result of ignorance in the non-dual framework. Similar to the distinction between subject and object, the distinction between knowing and valuing is ultimately illusory. The nature of love itself is another aspect of this idea. In a strict sense, all love is self-love if the Self alone is fundamentally worthwhile. However, this self-love does not imply egoism or exclusion because the Self is universal and the same in all creatures. Conversely, it underpins the potential for global compassion: to love another is, at its core, to love oneself—not as an individual, but as the one awareness that manifests in all. It overcomes the difficulty of explaining how value may attach to a universe of ephemeral and dependent elements by rooting value in the Self. But there is a price for this togetherness. The denial of genuine plurality and relationality challenges deeply held intuitions about the nature of love, which is ordinarily experienced as directed toward others as others. Moreover, the reduction of all value to a single metaphysical principle risks oversimplifying the diversity of evaluative experience.

However, the idea that the Self is the only source of worth continues to be controversial from a philosophical standpoint. It forces one to reevaluate whether worth is derived from the structure of awareness itself or from a universe of independent things. According to Shankaracharya, comprehending love eventually entails comprehending reality and realizing that the Self, which is the foundation of all experience, is what is most profoundly appreciated.

Non-Dual Ontology

One of the most profound metaphysical reconfigurations of our understanding of relations, difference, and ultimately love is the concept of "non-dual ontology and the collapse of relationality," which was created within Advaita Vedanta and expressed by Adi Shankaracharya. According to Shankaracharya, relational structures pertain to the empirical realm (vyāvahārika satya), where distinctions between subject and object, self and other, are pragmatically true but metaphysically temporary. This is notably evident in his reading of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Relationships like love, knowledge, and action are significant and functional in this realm. However, they are based on a basic misunderstanding: assuming that multiplicity is real.

Therefore, the "collapse" of relationality indicates that the ontological position of ties is compromised rather than that relations cease to exist. One realizes that the separation between relata was never truly existent until genuine knowledge (jnāna) emerges. This has particularly striking consequences for love, since it reinterprets what seemed to be a relationship between two beings as an expression of a single, undivided mind. Love is often paradigmatically relational, requiring both an object that is loved and a subject that is in love. However, this structure is ultimately unsustainable in the non-dual framework. The distinction between a lover and a beloved vanishes if all beings have the same Self. The concept of love as a directed relationship between two distinct centers of awareness is no longer valid.

Love needs to be rethought as an identity rather than a relationship. It is only self-recognition rather than one thing reaching out to another. The closeness, togetherness, and disintegration of boundaries that characterize love constitute its phenomenology. Therefore, these might be seen as an experienced manifestation of this more profound metaphysical reality. On a deeper level, the reveal of non-difference is what is typically seen as a movement across difference.

However, this viewpoint presents important philosophical issues. One may argue that the denial of actual relationships compromises the experience's ability to be understood. How can we explain the ordered, differentiated character of perception, cognition, and affect if all interactions are ultimately unreal? In answer, Shankaracharya presents a hierarchy of reality.

In response, he says that although relations are sublated at the ultimate level, they are genuine at the empirical level. By doing this, he is able to maintain relational discourse's functional validity without giving it ultimate ontological status.

The condition of intentionality, or the "aboutness" of mental states, is another source of conflict. In its everyday definition, love is fundamentally deliberate; it is always about someone or something. Does intentionality vanish if relationality does? Indeed, in the precise non-dual sense, since there is no "other" to direct attention toward, ultimate reality is non-intentional. However, intentionality continues to be a characteristic of ignorance-conditioned cognition in actual experience. Therefore, the collapse of relationality is a reinterpretation of experience's structure rather than its destruction. It shows that relationships between different things, which we consider basic, are actually derived from a deeper non-dual substrate. Accordingly, non-dual ontology changes the category of relation itself, not just how we define love. Love, knowledge, and action are now manifestations of a unified, self-luminous reality rather than exchanges between distinct entities. A paradoxical structure results from this: love seeks unity yet functions via diversity. The lover's yearning for intimacy, closeness, and even the disintegration of boundaries is

predicated on the very separateness they are trying to overcome. In this way, broken love is unstable on the inside. Because it aims to empirically resolve a split that is metaphysically unreal yet persuasive from an experiencing standpoint, its satisfactions are limited and transient. Shankaracharya's interpretation implies that what is adored in any object is not the item itself but rather the Self reflected through it, particularly in light of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. The beloved serves as a locus of projection, where the inherent worth of the Self is mistakenly ascribed to an external entity. This explains why love may be both passionate and unstable: the perceived worth of the object might decrease or vanish when the conditions supporting the projection change.

When analyzed critically, this narrative offers a potent explanation for the diversity and uniqueness of human love. It clarifies why love is selective (due to restricted identification), possessive (because to the false belief that the Self is limited), and susceptible to loss (due to dependence on other circumstances). But it also begs the question. One may wonder if the true otherness felt in relationships is adequately represented by this reduction of interpersonal love to misguided self-love. Does the Advaitic framework's absorption of the other beneath the Self run the risk of erasing its ethical significance?

Shankaracharya's underlying argument is that acknowledging non-duality reinterprets the other rather than negating it. At the ultimate level, the "other" is recognized as non-separate rather than rejected at the empirical level. In actuality, transcending avidyā results in a changed manner of interaction that is marked by non-possessive, global compassion rather than apathy. Thus, fragmented love is sublated rather than rejected: its foundation in misinterpreted difference is eliminated, but its underlying desire toward union is kept.

From a phenomenological perspective, this implies that an implicit understanding of non-duality is already present in everyday experiences of love. Deeply affectionate moments frequently entail a suspension of rigid self-other difference, a relaxing of ego-boundaries, or a sense of shared existence. According to Advaita, they are not aberrations but rather partial revelations of the actual nature of the Self, which Maya and avidyā veil but do not completely conceal.

Finally, Maya and avidyā's interaction offers a complex explanation of how non-dual reality manifests as a world of broken love. It demonstrates that the distinctions that shape human attachment are not final but rather result from a deeper misperception. Fragmented love, in this light, is both a distortion and a clue: a distortion, because it is grounded in ignorance; a clue, because its very striving for unity points beyond itself to the non-dual Self that is the true ground of all love.

Epistemic Transformation and the Reconstitution of Love

The shift from metaphysical mistake to ontological clarity is represented by the concept of epistemic transformation and the rebuilding of love in Advaita Vedanta, as expressed by Adi Shankaracharya. It involves a fundamental reorganization of the knower, the known, and the very circumstances in which experience—including love—occurs, rather than just a shift in what is known. Jñāna (liberating knowledge), which is instantaneous and non-dual perception of the identity of Ātman and Brahman rather than propositional or inferential in the conventional sense, lies at the core of this change. Before freeing knowledge is acknowledged, avidyā (ignorance) structures cognition by imposing a subject-object duality on experience.. Within this dualistic framework, love appears as a relation: a subject directs affect toward an object conceived as external, distinct, and independently real. This form of love is intentional, selective, and conditioned by limitation.

Epistemic transformation, in Shankaracharya's framework, does not consist in acquiring new information about the world, but in sublating a fundamental error (*adhyāsa*, superimposition). The person understands themselves as pure awareness and stops identifying with the limited body-mind complex. This change eliminates the erroneous attribution of uniqueness to the Self, making it subtractive rather than additive. The ever-present, self-luminous reality that was previously hidden is what's left, not a new creature. This has significant ramifications for how love is structured. The disintegration of that dualism necessitates a rebuilding of love at its core if the previous experience of love was dependent on the duality between lover and beloved. Since the epistemological foundation for such a distinction has been compromised, love can no longer be understood as a relationship between two beings. Rather, love has to be rethought as the Self's non-relational manifestation.

Analytically, this transformation can be understood as a shift from intentional love to ontological identity. In the former, love is focused and has a purpose. This aboutness disintegrates in the latter as there is no "other" to focus awareness on. The Self exists as the non-dual basis where no separation occurs; it does not love another. However, this does not mean that love is denied or eliminated. Instead, love is depersonalized and universalized; it is now a way of being rather than an act. This idea is supported by Shankaracharya's reading of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, which maintains that all earlier manifestations of love were, in fact, unconsciously focused on the Self. What was always implicit is made apparent through epistemic transformation. The apparent multiplicity of loved objects is recognized as a series of misattributions: the intrinsic dearness of the Self was projected onto external entities under conditions of ignorance.

The value structure itself is rearranged when this misattribution is fixed. Preference, attachment, and exclusion are no longer mediators of love. Since all

differences are sublated in the knowledge of non-duality, there is no foundation for favoring one thing over another. This leads to what may be called non-possessive universality, a state of being in which every creature is equally "loved," not as objects of affection but rather as being identical to the Self. At this juncture, a crucial question emerges: Does the breakdown of relational love result in a deprivation of emotional life? Does love lose the richness that defines the human experience if it is no longer directed, selected, or differentiated? This can appear to be the case from a traditional perspective. The drama of love—its longing, fulfillment, and loss—depends on the very distinctions that Advaita seeks to overcome. What is lost in epistemic transformation is not love itself, but its limitation and distortion. A deeper, unconditional fullness (ānanda) takes the place of the intensity of specific attachments. This is the inherent quality of the Self, not just one feeling among many. As a result, the reconstruction of love is both an extension and a purification: it is based in the essence of reality itself and liberated from reliance on outside circumstances. From a philosophical perspective, this calls into doubt the connection between emotion and epistemology. Emotion and knowledge are seen as separate spheres in most civilizations. Advaita, on the other hand, asserts a profound interdependence: a change in knowledge inevitably results in a change in emotional life. Love is fundamentally dictated by knowledge, not just informed by it. Knowledge results in global, non-dual love; ignorance causes fragmented, possessive love. The continuance of relational experience even after intellectual awareness might be questioned severely. Is it possible for knowledge to completely subdue the phenomenology of difference? In answer, Shankaracharya would probably make a distinction between true insight and merely intellectual comprehension. Only the latter is transformatively effective, eliminating existential identification as well as conceptual mistake. In conclusion, a radical rebuilding of love is required for epistemic change in Advaita Vedanta. It exposes love as non-relational, universal, and the same as the Self by dismantling the dualistic paradigm that underpins relational experience. At the metaphysical level, the revelation of reality as non-dual awareness is what manifests at the empirical level as a change in attitude or emotion. Love, in this reconstituted form, is no longer something one does, but what one is when ignorance is removed.

Conclusion

This essay has made the case that Shankaracharya's Advaitic explanation of love is a rigorous metaphysical viewpoint rather than just a spiritual or ethical realization. This framework dismantles the traditional concept of love as a relationship between different persons by placing it within a non-dual ontology and rooting it in the supremacy of the Self.

Rather, love appears as a manifestation of undivided awareness and a basic aspect of reality itself. The revelation of non-duality returns love to its actual nature as universal, non-possessive, and self-revealing, whereas the seeming multiplicity of loves in empirical reality represents the distortion produced by Maya.

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