



Figure 1. Dance of Brahman and Shiva. Generated by GPT 3.0 mini.

Phantasmagorical Reality

Superimpositions of the Cosmic Subject
in Pratyabhijña and Advaita Vedanta

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Introduction: Shared Structures in
Sanskrit Metaphysical Thought

Despite ontological disagreements about the nature of ultimate reality-in-itself and the mechanics of subject/object distinction, both Advaita Vedanta (AV) and Pratyabhijña (PB) propose unary models of universal macro-cognition, where consciousness is ultimately non-dual, illuminating, and self-identical. Advaita Vedanta refers to the discourses of non-dualism surrounding the interpretation of the Vedas, systematized by Gaudapada and Sankara in the 7th and 8th centuries. The name of the Pratyabhijña school, on the other hand, is defined as “recognition”, originating from proponents of Kashmiri Shaivism in the 8th and 9th centuries.

For these schools, psycho-spiritual liberation can only arise through the dissolution of false dualities and the identification of the self with the singular cosmic subject—Brahman in AV and Shiva in PB. The two schools posit a model of conscious manifestation, where a world-spirit or supra-empirical consciousness orders the point of view of particular

or empirical minds.¹ We can situate this substrate-oriented philosophy as responding to ongoing debates with their Vijñānavādin contemporaries, the opposing school to their own competing doctrines of idealism.² Both schools seek to rehabilitate the status of the self as the ultimate reality, by identifying the individual minds with the macro-conscious universal subject. Reflections by the universal subject thus provide the grounds for all experience, governing the ways in which consciousness manifests itself.

Though ontological commitments of the ultimate vary (pure contentless awareness in AV vs. self-reflective intentionality in PB), both traditions reject, to differing degrees, plurality and empirical distinctions as ultimately real. While Advaita Vedānta calls for total negation of empirical reality as a product of *avidyā* (ignorance) fueled by *māyā* (illusory projection), Pratyabhijñā affirms intentional awareness of objects, desire, and action as instruments inseparable from the reality of pure consciousness, producing a point of contention between the schools.

The Macro-Cognitive Unity of Consciousness

Advaita Vedānta and Pratyabhijñā both share a commitment to an originally undivided consciousness that constitutes and makes discernible the objects of empirical reality. Illumination of discernible objects is the function of the cosmo-psychic subject who grounds all experience, only

¹ E. A. Solomon, *Avidyā: A Problem of Truth and Reality*, 1st edition (Ahmedabad: Gujarat University, 1969), 215.

² K. Hedling, *Liberation and the World in Advaita Vedānta and Pratyabhijñā* (2020), 17, https://www.academia.edu/29150502/Liberation_and_the_World_in_Advaita_Vedānta_and_Pratyabhijñā. I. Ratie, "Otherness in Pratyabhijñā Philosophy," in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 35 (2007), 313-370, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-007-9017-5>.

falsely experienced as disparate minds.³ Only through this higher-order and dispersed luminous conduit can multiple consciousnesses arise or be grounded, as a precursor to gestalt theory. In both systems, self-realization is the soteriological end, where one transcends superimposed categories⁴ delimiting the perspective of the individual ego, to identify the Self with an all-pervading and supra-empirical consciousness principle: Brahman or Shiva.

The concept of Brahman or self-identity is expounded in Shankara's commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, as he interprets a famous episode between Yajñavalkya and Maitreyi, where the former explains how the self must be dissolved into pure consciousness to achieve knowledge of the ultimate:

That separate existence of yours, which has sprung from the delusion engendered by contact with the limiting adjuncts of the body and organs, [is dissolved in] its cause, the great Reality, the Supreme Self, which stands for the ocean, is undecaying, immortal, beyond fear, pure, homogeneous like a lump of salt, Pure Intelligence, infinite, boundless, without a break, and devoid of differences caused by the delusion brought on by ignorance. When that separate existence has entered and been merged in its cause, in other words, when the differences created by ignorance are gone, the universe becomes one without a second, 'the great Reality.'⁵

³ Ratie, "Otherness in Pratyabhijñā Philosophy," 315. Solomon, *Avidya: A Problem of Truth and Reality*, 217.

⁴ Solomon, 227.

⁵ Swami Madhavananda, trans., *The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, with the commentary of Shankaracarya*, third edition (Kolkata: Modern Art Press, 1950), 367.

This passage encapsulates Sankara's view of how the individual self arises as a particular form which initially appears as disparate from the ultimate undifferentiated consciousness, Brahman. Sankara argues that, by dissolving categorical superimpositions which divide the limited empirical self from the unlimited cosmic consciousness, we can achieve transcendence of ignorance ("delusion engendered by contact with the limiting adjuncts of the body and organs"), like a grain of salt returning to the ocean. For Sankara, differences which make up the elements of empirical reality are a product of *avidya*, nescience or ignorance, and thus he denies the reality of duality between subject and object⁶ and the diversity of forms as they appear, propounding a doctrine of absolute monism. Brahman is pure consciousness characterized by truth or existence, consciousness, and bliss (*satchitananda*), and devoid of imperfections affecting the material world of limited beings.

The Pratyabhijñā system, I suggest, engenders a parallel model of viewing cognition from a higher order unary perspective manifesting lower order limited experiences, with the caveat of affirming the material world's empirical categories as grounded in reality by a consciousness principle. Shiva grounds the capacity for knowledge through illumination (*prakasa*) and reflexive self-awareness (*vimarśa*),⁷ as a dynamic subject who manifests and recognizes himself as all things, but does not delude the subject of empirical experience to same degree:

... if there were no Maheshvara who contains within himself all the infinite forms, who is one, whose essence

⁶ Solomon, *Avidya: A Problem of Truth and Reality*, 39.

⁷ S. Timalisina, "Vimarśa: The Concept of Reflexivity in the Philosophy of Utpala and Abhinavagupta," in *Acta Orientalia* 80 (2021), 100, <https://doi.org/10.5617/ao.9395>.

is consciousness, possessing the powers of knowledge, memory and exclusion?

The mutual unification of all cognitions of things is [constituted by] the consciousness principle (*cittattvam*) whose form is all, since nothing distinct from it is admissible. The powers of knowledge etc. only pertain to this consciousness principle. It has been said: "From me derives memory, knowledge, exclusion."⁸

Although the dissolution of individual identity into the macro-cosmic subject is similarly expounded in this passage, the notable difference is the mention of exclusions here as grounded in (derived from) the ultimate reality of Mahesvara. A philosophy of pluralistic realism, PB's notion of pure consciousness, like Brahman, is considered to be *nirguna*, only to the extent that the ultimate reality is devoid of the three *gunas* affecting the material world (*prakriti*), *satva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, which are created by Mahesvara through active constitutive power.⁹ These *gunas* respectively correspond to enlightenment, passion for worldly experiences, and ignorance or inertia, which affect lower-level minds only. His act is creating the manifold of limited perspectives among individuals, using *maya* as "the material cause of the categories constituting the world".

The Illusory Division: Subject/Object Relations of Identity

The diversity manifested in the forms among multiple subjects for both Advaita Vedanta and Pratyabhijñā are products of adjunct or material conditions, which prevent the

⁸ Raffaele Torella, ed., *The Ishvarapratyabhijñākarika of Utpaladeva with the Author's Vṛtti*, Corrected Edition (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2002), 103, italics and square brackets in original.

⁹ Solomon, *Avidya: A Problem of Truth and Reality*, 343.

Self's identification with the macro-cosmic consciousness principle through the fractured experiences of individual *jivas* (living beings). Only by transcending (AV) or re-integrating (PB) these limits can the supremacy of the universal subject as self be ascertained to be the ultimate reality, dissolving the boundaries which dichotomize subjects and objects.

Sankara argues that the individual's experience of reality is by default obscured by the veil of ignorance (*avidya*) due to the projection of unreal appearances in the forms of *maya* which structures and divides objects forming the empirical perspective. Because the soul identifies itself with the qualities of the body, it is subject to desire, pain, and enslaved by the cycles of material causation as a construct of *maya*; it falsely conflates the self with non-self.¹⁰ This view is summarized succinctly as follows: "In the view of Sankara, the phenomenal world is unreal from the supra-empirical point of view. He posits *avidya* as an explanation for the world phenomena and the conditioning of Brahman. So *avidya* must be a cosmic principle, and a limiting principle or the principle of individuation. ... Thus *avidya* becomes a material causal potency, the stuff out of which world-phenomena emerge."¹¹

Conversely, the Pratyabhijñā system allows for multiplicity within non-duality—individual selves are real as projections of Shiva, not *other* than him. They also hold a realist view of empirical cognitions as ontologically grounded, as opposed to Sankara's absolute denial thereof.

Otherness (*paratva*) only comes from limiting conditions (*upadhi*) such as the body, and these [limiting conditions themselves], as soon as they are investigated, [turn out] not [to be] different [from the universal self];

¹⁰ Solomon, *Avidya: A Problem of Truth and Reality*, 236.

¹¹ Solomon, 242.

therefore the entire multiplicity of the subjects is in reality one single subject (*ekah pramata*), and this [subject] alone exists. This has been said [by Utpadeva]: "Only conscious light (*prakasa*) exists by itself, as oneself as well as the self of others." And therefore, from "'the Lord Sadashiva knows" to "even a worm knows," it is one single subject [who knows]."¹²

According to the Pratyabhijñā school, differences between subjects do not belong to the sphere of ultimate reality (*paramārtha*).¹³ However, such a view fails to account for practical considerations, and the metaphysical reduction of cosmo-psychicism doesn't yet explain why phenomenal selves appear as limited. The experience of diversity in PB is not written off as illusory, but rather these divisions find justification in the consciousness principle which constitutes them.

Such distinctions of empirical reality are not accessible independent of the macro-conscious subject, Shiva, who is the *a priori* basis of all knowledge, and thus the appearance of diversity is relatively and not absolutely unreal from the supra-empirical perspective. In this way, by asserting that reality has its origin in consciousness, the objective arising from the subjective, Pratyabhijñā's idealism affirms the empirical perspective of reality, where determinate cognition (*vimarsa*) is necessarily constitutive, non-illusory, and illuminated by the self (*prakasa*).¹⁴ Unlike their AV opponents, the categories delineating the material world are given justification through the relationship of identity with Shiva's essential being, and not negated.

¹² From the *Ishvarapratyabhijñākarika*, cited in and translated by Ratie, "Otherness in Pratyabhijñā Philosophy," 315. Square brackets and emphases in original.

¹³ Ratie, 315.

¹⁴ Ratie, 340. Torella, *The Ishvarapratyabhijñākarika of Utpaladeva with the Author's Vṛtti*, 102.

Liberation: Negation vs. Recognition of the Empirical Perspective

Due to their differing views on the ontological status of the empirical world of categories, informed by the diversity of forms in phenomenal experience, Advaita Vedanta and Pratyabhijñā hold significantly different views of the soteriological end of spiritual practice. While the former rejects the material world as imagined falsehood (*avidya*) superimposed on the truth, the latter school redeems action and the empirical perspective as grounded by the reality (recursive illumination) of the universal subject. *Adhyasa*, or superimpositions which represent false empirically appearing properties on a real substrate, are blamed by Sankara in his devaluation of the material world as mere illusion.¹⁵ Superimposition is described by Sankara as the wrongful presentation of the attributes of one thing in another thing, namely conflating the self with the non-self, with statements such as “I am x” (*ahamata*) or “X is mine” (*mamata*). Whatever is non-self is non-existent in an absolute sense, and must therefore be renounced to achieve liberation from the false belief in agency and the suffering brought about by action and desire. A similar element can be found in the *Ishvarapratyabhijñākarika*: “On the contrary, when absolute differentiation appears, and the void, the intellect or the body—which are other than the self—are considered as I, it is then that the power of *maya* displays itself.”¹⁶

Sankara, in his commentary on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, expresses this as follows: “We beholders of the Truth, who have attained this Self that is free from hunger etc. and is not to be modified by good or bad deeds,

¹⁵ Solomon, *Avidya: A Problem of Truth and Reality*, 224-226.

¹⁶ Torella, *The Ishvarapratyabhijñākarika of Utpaladeva with the Author's Vṛtti*, 194.

this world, this desired result. There are no means to be desired for realising this Self that is free from all such relative attributes as ends and means."¹⁷ The passage relates to his apophatic method of *neti neti*, where all superimpositions of categorical thinking are negated as unreal, in order to cease the cyclical torment of *samsara*, brought on by relentless striving for the fruit of action. Brahman is the undivided *prima materia*, and all other materials we apprehend are imperfect decaying copies: constructs of *maya* pretending to be reality, according to AV. Only by negating all that is not-self can identity with the contentless pure undifferentiated consciousness of Brahman be achieved by an individual *atman* in a world-denying moment of transcendental liberation.

Somananda, the founder of the Pratyabhijñā school, and the teacher of Utpaladeva,¹⁸ denies that liberation can be achieved in same sense as that espoused by the Advaitins, where the material world is not a falsity to be transcended, but a domain to be enjoyed:

Nor can one speak of cessation of the perception of the Self, since Shiva would then be insentient. His turning to creation ... springs out of his own joy; he plays at concealing himself and assumes the nature of *maya* down to the Earth. Thus it cannot be said that the universe is "imagined" as Shiva, or vice versa, because the one is directly the other. Just as gold is not "imagined" as such neither in the simple jewel of solid gold nor in the earring in which the work is so refined as to set aside, as it were, its nature of pure gold, so Shiva is "formed, arranged" as universe—in the sense that he has become such, or freely presents himself in this

¹⁷ Solomon, *Avidya: A Problem of Truth and Reality*, 229.

¹⁸ J. Nemec, "The Evidence for Somananda's Pantheism," in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 42, no. 1 (2013), 99–114, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-013-9212-5>.

form; *kalpana* is, on the contrary, imagining something where it is not. Therefore, the nature of Shiva is present in everything, whether we know it or not. Even differentiation has Shiva as its essence, hence there is not really a bond nor, consequently, liberation. Furthermore, it is the very belief in the actual existence of bond and liberation that constitutes the basic impurity. All the ritual prescriptions, *sastras* and teachers only serve the purposes of everyday life and are in any case a way in which Shiva manifests himself.¹⁹

Now, if we continue to understand Shiva as the grounding consciousness principle which provides the substrate on which individual cognitions are manifested, it is clear how this view is far more world affirming than AV's world denial. The "cessation of perception of the Self" as a limitation or bond is not the ultimate end of recognizing one's identity with the macro-cosmic subject, Shiva, present in everything including the Self. *Kalpana* here is a direct counterpart to *adhyasa*, as a malevolent misrecognition of falsity as truth; it is not, however, applicable to Shiva's projections, as the empirical perspective is a manifestation of the truth in material form.

This represents a markedly distinct departure from a shared launching point, in which PB confirms the ontological veridicality of diverse forms and categories and the pragmatic concerns of the material world. As the universe is enveloped in the consciousness of the cosmic subject, its individual constituent parts share in his reality, Shiva (*qua* self) is a comprehensive truth-bearing metaphysical structure, rather than a deceptive deity. Differentiation is affirmed, rather than negated, where the self is the grounds for the non-self and liberation is reimagined as recognition of the other as a reflection of the Self. Somananda seems

¹⁹ Torella, *The Ishvarapratyabhijñākarika of Utpaladeva with the Author's Vṛtti*, xvii.

to criticize the AV notion of liberation from the material world's bondage as a problematic view and rather affirms a pragmatic, action-oriented attitude.

Metaphors of Misrecognition and Recognition

The metaphors used respectively by Sankara and Utpaladeva can shed some further light on their attitudes for rehabilitating false belief in subject-object, self-universe dualism. Here I will discuss the snake-rope illusion (AV) and that of the mirror (PB).

For Sankara, the snake-rope illusion illustrates *adhyasa* and the unreality of the world: "Therefore, as we have also said, the cessation of ignorance alone is commonly called liberation, like the disappearance of the snake, for instance, from the rope when the erroneous notion about its existence has been dispelled."²⁰ The snake in this instance represents the phenomenal world and the ego which we, through *avidya*, superimpose falsely over the rope, representing Brahman, which remains mistakenly understood until we dispel the false systems of differentiation among what we mistake to be empirically given objects and individual agents. In this case there is no corresponding real diversity to which we can apply the term "reality" just as we cannot really identify the object as "snake." Only the rope, Brahman, is existent, and we must grasp this rope to be liberated, and pulled out of our delusional suffering.

Cosmo-psyche projection is conceived of in a more benign sense in Pratyabhijñā's idealist system with realist characteristics. Mirror reflections are used to signify projection and self-reflective recognition between the subject and object:

²⁰ Swami Madhavananda, trans., *The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, with the commentary of Shankaracarya*, third edition (Kolkata: Modern Art Press, 1950), 722.

The I ... is like a clear mirror serving as substratum for the manifestation of objective reality. Owing to its absolute transparency it remains unmodified by the apparition of these forms, which are in a sense different from it. It is this very purity that causes what is actually not separate from it to appear, instead, as separate.²¹

These metaphors reflect their differing attitudes toward the manifest world—illusory and to be negated in AV, real as Shiva's playful self-manifestation in PB. The tension between unity and multiplicity is less pronounced, and there is no contradiction between the two for Utpaladeva. Shiva, as the mirror onto which all projections of categorical forms are cast, serves as a grounding for objective reality to remain anchored, rather than truth-negating and other than what is perceived to be reality, as in the case of the snake-rope.

In a sense, the mirror represents the capacity for self-reflection that makes cognition and memory possible, and its transparency likened to how all experiences are necessarily experienced through the subject's perspective. These features also create a division between the superimposed reflection and the object-in-itself being reflected which are in fact identical and causally connected. Although they appear to be distinct individual entities, they are related by constitutive identity. Recognition comes from the idea that cognition is recursive and that objects are reliably constructed to mirror reality by the experiencing subject. The two are not, in fact, separate. Knowledge is, likewise, inseparable from action, which is why the empirical world as accurately reflected in cognition is an indispensable feature of the PB school.²²

²¹ Torella, *The Ishvarapratyabhijñākarika of Utpaladeva with the Author's Vṛtti*, 186; see editor's notes.

²² Torella, 157.

Objections to AV from Bivalent Intentionality and a Word of Caution

AV's central claim that all empirical distinctions—including the subject-object relation—are illusory presupposes a paradox. As Descartes argues, illusion implies a subject to be deluded, yet Sankara's theory posits that the individual subject, as an ego, is itself an illusion. If the *jiva* (living being) is a product of ignorance, who or what is being deceived? The Advaita Vedantins invoke a witnessing consciousness (*sakshin*) as the unaffected substratum, but this *sakshin* is said to be identical with Brahman, which is also beyond subject-object duality.²³

Thus, we face a dilemma: If Brahman is truly non-dual and devoid of all distinctions, it cannot be meaningfully said to "witness" anything, since witnessing implies intentionality and difference. If it does "witness," then we reintroduce a subtle duality—between the witnessing consciousness and what is witnessed—which undermines the radical non-duality that AV claims. AV denies the ontological status of the empirical knower while requiring its presence to explain the phenomenon of ignorance, suggesting a contradiction. The claim that *avidya* is beginningless but removable also leads to a metaphysical asymmetry that lacks explanatory parsimony.²⁴ Appealing to a cosmic principle of ignorance whose operation is never locally intelligible appears as a mythologized placeholder, not a satisfying explanation. *Pratyabhijñā*, in its affirmative emphasis on action, freedom, and agency seems to deny individual subjectivity in a less absolute and negative sense, and thus seems less susceptible to this Cartesian objection, as individual selves have their reality grounded in the universal self.

²³ Solomon, *Avidya: A Problem of Truth and Reality*, 223.

²⁴ Solomon, 191.

A critical reading must balance admiration with caution. The ambitious project to explain all of reality—empirical, subjective, and transcendental—via a single cosmic consciousness can lead to metaphysical inflation, undermining the very clarity and access to knowledge these systems seek to promote. When worldly phenomena is explained as the projection or play of an all-encompassing self, the explanatory net may be cast too widely, leaving little room for falsifiability, empirical dialogue, or pragmatism.

Conclusion: Complementarity and Contradiction

This reading of Advaita Vedanta and Pratyabhijñā has shown that, while both traditions are committed to a nondual metaphysics and share the conviction that liberation lies in identifying the Self with a unary consciousness principle, they chart distinct yet complementary paths toward that view. Advaita's rigorously apophatic method—advocating for the negation of all empirical and conceptual identifications (*neti neti*)—emphasizes the transcendent and absolutely non-relational nature of atman/Brahman. In contrast, Pratyabhijñā frames the same ultimate consciousness, Shiva, not as the negation of phenomena but as their expressive source—immanent and reality-grounding, whose presence must be recognized as the end of spiritual practice.

The central difference lies in how each school conceives the relationship between the absolute and empirical realities. For AV, the world is maya, ultimately illusory and epistemically misleading; liberation comes through a turn inward, away from the play of forms. PB, however, maintains that discerned categories are real as the free self-expression of consciousness—it is not to be negated but recognized as one's own nature. In this way, PB offers

a more affirmative account of the world and the body, emphasizing creative agency where AV stresses renunciation.

Both schools share in dismantling dualistic perception by positing that subject and object are not ultimately separate. Both regard ignorance as the veil obscuring self-recognition, and both place transformative cognition at the heart of liberation. Where Advaita emphasizes disidentification from the false, Pratyabhijñā highlights reidentification with the real—two gestures that might be seen not as contradictions, but as complementary movements in the dialectic of awakening. Taken together, Advaita Vedānta and Pratyabhijñā offer two powerful models of nonduality: the former via subtraction, the latter via expression. If AV reminds us that we are not what we take ourselves to be, PB affirms that we already are what we seek.