Śaṅkaran monism and the limits of thought

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Final version published in *The Monist*
https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onab024

Abstract

A growing movement in contemporary philosophy of mind is looking back on Indian thought to gain new insights into the problem of consciousness. This paper weighs the prospects of thinking about mentality through the lenses of Śaṅkaran Advaita Vedānta. To start, I outline micropsychist and cosmopsychist accounts of consciousness, introduce Śaṅkaran monism, and describe a potential reason of attraction of the framework over micropsychist and cosmopsychist alternatives. I then show that the eliminativist commitments of the view threaten to yield a self-defeating account of ordinary experience, and that Advaitins took the accommodation of the issue to be beyond the reach of rational inquiry. Finally, I discuss how the analytical debate over Śaṅkaran monism might proceed based on these premises.

1. Introduction

Most work in recent philosophy of mind revolves around one key question, and rests on one underlying assumption. The key question is how consciousness and subjectivity may exist in a physical world apparently so inhospitable to the emergence of mentality. The underlying assumption is that no matter the difficulty of the central question, the landscape of acceptable answers to it excludes views on which consciousness and subjectivity rank among the basic building blocks of reality.

Progress on the key question hasn't been stellar, despite decades of effort thrown at the problem. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, a growing industry in philosophy of mind has started to reconsider the underlying assumption. What if the insurmountable difficulties we have encountered in trying to make sense of consciousness and subjectivity are a figment of an unnecessary restriction of logical space? Repugnant as that might sound to our naturalist instincts, the thought goes, we should be dead serious about the hypothesis that consciousness and phenomenal properties are primitive, or at least inquire into whether reasoning through the lenses of such a conjecture stands a chance of bringing us closer to the holy grail of a working theory of consciousness.

Two of the most prominent children of this change of perspective are arguably contemporary micropsychism and cosmopsychism.[1] On the former, the correct way to tackle the emergence of macro-level (e.g., human) consciousness is to ascribe mental properties to the micro-constituents of reality (e.g., the fundamental entities of a complete physics). On the latter, spurred by the combination of panpsychism with priority monism (Schaffer 2010), the emergence of macro-level consciousness should be accounted for by ascribing mental properties to the basic concrete object token: the universe as a whole.

Present-day micropsychism and cosmopsychism have illustrious antecedents in the history of Western thought (Skrbina 2017), and suggest a host of intriguing comparisons with non-Western philosophical traditions. One such comparison has attracted particular attention: the parallel between cosmopsychism and the school of Indian philosophy known as Advaita Vedānta, for which reality reduces to an all-encompassing awareness identified by this tradition as Brahman.

The parallel seems to involve two dimensions: a "curatorial" one and an "interlocutory" one.[2] The curatorial dimension consists of the hypothesis that the claims of contemporary cosmopsychism match central aspects of the Advaitic worldview. See Shani (2015: 412) on the analogy between cosmopsychism and the Vedic notion of pure consciousness, and Shani & Keppler (2018) for a reference to Advaita Vedānta in conjunction with witness consciousness. The interlocutory dimension is the claim that by engaging with the arguments of the Advaitic canon and reasoning on their viability, we can learn precious lessons about the prospects of a theory of consciousness which shares a sufficient amount of commitments with those of this venerable philosophical tradition. See, most notably, Albahari (2019; 2020).

1 For reasons of space, and because nothing in the remainder of the paper rests on it, I won't go into the distinction between constitutive and non-constitutive varieties of the two views.

2 The distinction between a "magisterial", an "exoticist", and a "curatorial" approach to Indian philosophy is due to Sen (1997). Perrett (2016) picks up Sen's taxonomy and complements it with "interlocutory" approaches. In essence, the "curatorial" vs. "interlocutory" dichotomy captures the distinction between a reading of Indian sources intended to reconstruct "what they said" without explicit concerns of validity (the bread and butter of classical Indology), and a reading which is serious about Indian thinkers' concern for truth and inquires into whether their work can teach valuable philosophical lessons to the contemporary debate. On the methods and risks of comparative philosophy in general, see Connolly (2015).

Gasparri (2019) focuses on the curatorial parallel, and argues against it. Despite the semblance of similarity evoked by the shared sympathy for a worldview featuring an all-embracing "cosmic" consciousness, the two frameworks carry substantially different commitments. For example, as a theory type, cosmopsychism isn't committed to anti-realism about the manifest cosmos or ordinary objects. Indeed, most brands of cosmopsychism on the market allow for concreta, and either explicitly embrace existence pluralism or are agnostic about it (see, a.o., Shani 2015; Nagasawa & Wager 2016; Goff 2017). The cosmopsychist argument is simply that by flipping the micro-to-macro order of grounding of standard micropsychism, and by ascribing (proto)phenomenal properties to the universe as a whole, one paves the way for an attractive theory of macro-level mentality.

By contrast, Advaita philosophy isn't about grounding or orders of explanation, and isn't agnostic about existence pluralism: it explicitly asserts that only Brahman is real, and that ordinary phenomena, change, and plurality are a veil of illusory appearances that don't correspond to anything truly existing. Accordingly, Gasparri (2019) concludes that the Advaitic worldview is best classified as a brand of existence monism (Horgan & Potrč 2008) on which the unique object token is Brahman, and proposes to file the worldview emerging from the Advaitic canon under the conceptual rubric of Absolute Monopsychism: "monopsychism" because it claims that there is just one consciousness or awareness, and "absolute" because nothing else is accepted in the catalogue of what exists.[3]

Here's my goal in what follows. Having established the "curatorial" point that we can view Advaita philosophy as an instance of existence monism asserting that an awareness is the only existing thing, let's turn to "interlocutory" side of business. Does a theory of this sort stand a chance of delivering a viable account of macro-level mentality? How does it fare against micropsychist and cosmopsychist alternatives? What can we gather about this from armchair reflection and from the reading of Advaitic sources themselves?

3 See Vaidya (2020) for corroboration and further commentary. On the monism of Advaita Vedānta, see King's (1995) claim that Advaitins developed "to its ultimate extreme" the monistic tendencies of the Upaniṣads.

While Advaitins consistently subscribe to the view that Brahman alone is real, that the phenomenal world is an illusion, and that the true individual self is not different from Brahman, Advaita philosophy isn't just a collection of thinkers expressing over and over the exact same set of claims. Quite the contrary: right from its incipient stages, it's an extremely complex mosaic of writings and philosophical positions which, despite their core commonalities, cannot be treated as a monolithic front (for some background, see Comans 2000). So to strike a balance between tractability and historical integrity, we have to pick a specific point of comparison. In this paper, I will address the classical formulation of Advaita philosophy found in the writings of Śaṅkara and followers, i.e., the brand of Advaitic monism on which the solitary denizen of reality, Brahman, is *nirguṇa*, i.e., "attributeless" or "unqualified" awareness without (further) determinate properties. I will refer to this simply as Śaṅkaran monism. The choice pays an inevitable price of generality, but Śaṅkara's centrality to the development of the Advaita movement makes it a natural one to make in this context. Śaṅkara's writings systematized and consolidated the fundamental claims of the school, exercised massive influence on subsequent Indian thought, and continue to be a key reference for contemporary Advaitins. So while Advaita philosophy is by no means an undifferentiated continuum, there are good reasons to pick Śaṅkaran monism as the starting point for an inquiry into the interlocutory prospects of this philosophical tradition.

The plan is as follows. Section 2 does a brief survey of the issues encountered by micropsychist and cosmopsychist accounts of consciousness. Section 3 describes a potential advantage of Śaṅkaran monism over micropsychist and cosmopsychist alternatives, but shows that its hyper-austere ontology threatens to cascade into a self-defeating eliminativism. Section 4 observes that Advaitins were aware of the problem, and consistently maintained that the issue could not be dissipated by rational means. Section 5 sketches three ways the analytical debate over Advaitic philosophy might react to the situation. Section 6 concludes.

2. Combination and decombination

Micropsychism faces two basic challenges. For brevity, we can call them Phenomenal Combination and Subjective Combination.[4] Suppose you accept that the micro-constituents of reality instantiate phenomenal properties, protophenomenal properties, unexperienced qualities, or what have you. Suppose also you wish to argue that the phenomenal properties instantiated by macro-level creatures result from the combination of the properties of our micro-level parts. To do so, you should produce an account of the way micro-level phenomenal properties may fuse together to yield macro-level phenomenal properties. Hence, Phenomenal Combination.

But there's more. Suppose you accept that the micro-constituents of reality are subjects or instantiate a sense of subjectivity. Suppose also you wish to argue that the sense of subjectivity or "mineness" instantiated by macro-level creatures like us (i.e., the quality of being presented with a flux of occurrent experiential states which immediately appear to our awareness as "ours")[5] is somehow due to the properties of our micro-level parts. To do so, you should produce an account of the way the senses of subjectivity instantiated by our micro-level constituents may combine and yield macro-level mineness. Hence, Subjective Combination.

The predicament carries over to cosmopsychism, which faces two mirror challenges. Again for brevity, call them Phenomenal Decombination and Subjective Decombination. Suppose you accept that the basic object, the universe as a whole, instantiates phenomenal properties, protophenomenal properties, unexperienced qualities, or what have you. Then, suppose you wish to argue that the phenomenal properties instantiated by macro-level creatures are due to the properties of the basic object. To do so, you should produce an account of the way the phenomenal properties instantiated by the universe as a whole may manage to decombine into the phenomenal features of macro-level mentality. Hence, Phenomenal Decombination.

4 I'll group under the heading of Phenomenal Combination what Chalmers (2016) calls the Quality Combination Problem (how do micro-qualities combine to yield macro-qualities?) and the Structure Combination Problem (how do micro-experiential structures combine to yield macro-experiential structures?).

5 I use this coarse-grained formulation to remain agnostic, a.o., on whether or not mineness entails a persistent experiencer or can be accommodated even by "no self" views. On mineness in general, see Levine (2001), Zahavi (2006), or Kriegel (2009).

But again, there's more. Suppose you accept that the basic object, the universe as a whole, is a subjects or instantiates a sense of subjectivity. Suppose also you wish to argue that the sense of subjectivity or "mineness" instantiated by macro-level creatures like us is due to the properties of the basic object. To do so, you should produce an account of the way the sense of subjectivity instantiated by the universe as a whole may manage to decombine into macro-level mineness. Hence, Subjective Decombination.

According to several micropsychists and cosmopsychists, the challenges raised by Phenomenal Combination and Phenomenal Decombination are real, but don't put micropsychism and cosmopsychism in a dispiriting dialectical position. The reason is twofold: Phenomenal Combination and Phenomenal Decombination are probably not intractable, and they don't look special.

They're probably not intractable because we have at least a working sense of how micro-phenomenal or micro-qualitative properties may combine together to yield novel macro-phenomenal properties – and the other way around. Coleman (2014; 2016) draws an analogy with particles of paint in color mixtures, and mixtures in general (see, e.g., Massin & Hämmerli 2017) promise to offer a helpful benchmark for reasoning about "phenomenal chemistry" (Coleman 2012).

They don't look special because they point to questions about the nature of composition and constitution which surface in the analysis of other aspects of the mind,[6] and can claim to have structural analogues outside the phenomenal realm. Think of the principle that whenever a proper lampwise arrangement of fundamental particles with the right intrinsic properties is in place, there is a lamp. Naturally, even if Phenomenal Combination and Phenomenal Decombination were indeed incarnations of the battery of general problems arising whenever we have to account for the connection between ontological simples and complex entities, that wouldn't make them "easy", in Chalmers' (1996) sense. But the parallel would allow micropsychists and cosmopsychists to make a good company argument that these are issues everyone in the arena has to deal with.

6 See Mendelovici (2020) for more on the idea that (what I've called) Phenomenal Combination belongs to a cluster of issues about mental chemistry that are "problems for everyone", such as the problem of phenomenal unity and the problem of new quality spaces.

By contrast, Subjective Combination and Subjective Decombination do put micropsychists and cosmopsychists in an unpleasant predicament (e.g., Blamauer 2020; Roelofs 2020).

First, both challenges raise worries of tractability: we seem to have no working sense of how macro-subjectivity and macro-mineness might arise from the combination of micro-subjects and micro-minenesses (*mutatis mutandis* for cosmopsychism).[7] And while an optimistic diagnosis might take it that subject summing is a major challenge that micropsychist and cosmopsychists have yet to address, whether by solving it or explaining why it shouldn't bother us,[8] some have drawn the conclusion that subject summing is impossible, if not utterly inconceivable (Goff 2017).

Second, Subjective Combination and Subjective Decombination seem special, meaning they threaten exclusively those interested in theorizing about consciousness within a micropsychist or a cosmopsychist paradigm. Perhaps good-old physicalism *cum* priority pluralism isn't in fantastic shape when it comes to running the marathon of explaining consciousness; but these bumps are nowhere to be seen on its road. Which opens the door to a bad company objection that one cannot commit to micropsychist or cosmopsychist premises without raising new "hard" problems, and in turn that skepticism is the appropriate response to the current vogue of revisionary assumptions about the properties instantiated by micro-level stuff or by the universe as a whole.[9]

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7 To avoid confusion, the issue isn't that we struggle to make sense of subject summing *tout court*, since we can readily think of collections of subjects whose members "sum together" in an interesting sense of the expressions (e.g., orchestras, armies, baseball teams). The issue is that we struggle to make sense of the specific variety of "subject combination" that matters to the argument, i.e., the way some collection C of lower-level subjects might fuse into a new subject S whose phenomenal states are primitively presented to S as "owned" by S rather than as experiences of C, or as aggregates of C-experiences.

8 See, e.g., Strawson's (2006) argument from ignorance: there could be some aspect of consciousness we don't or can't have a grip on, but which is essential for understanding subject summing. Naturally, the issue is whether committing to an inscrutable explanans boils down to restating the question under the opportunistic dialectical guise of an answer to it. See Goff (2009) for an argument that hidden micro-properties undermine the motivations for micropsychism.

9 Note that although I'm packing Subjective Combination and Subjective Decombination into the same dialectical box, some have argued that Subjective Decombination is easier to deal with than Subjective Combination. See, e.g., Nagasawa & Wager (2016) on the claim that cosmopsychism helps deal with the grain problem (Lockwood 1993), Shani & Keppler (2018) on decombination in general, and Shani (this volume) for an argument that Subjective Combination and Subjective Decombination aren't symmetrical. I won't go further into the matter here, except to note that the remainder of this survey would work even under the weaker premise that

In sum, both micropsychists and cosmopsychists face serious problems when it comes to accounting for the emergence of macro-level subjective experience. Can Śaṅkaran monism help?

3. A paradox of elimination

We have seen that Śaṅkaran monism parallels cosmopsychism in the assumption of a unique all-embracing awareness, identified by Indian thinkers as Brahman, but couples this with a stark anti-realist stance on all denizens of our pretheoretical image of the world, including physical objects, change, and macro-level subjects themselves. The resulting view is probably going to sound like a nonstarter to many – and not just for ideological reasons, as we'll see in a moment. Still, one may wonder whether by subscribing to these additional commitments, Śaṅkaran Advaita is in any better position to address the issues of (de)combination we have recounted, and therefore can pay for a dialectical improvement in the coin of its ontological radicalism.

The move promises an initial perk. Since the monism of the framework eliminates macro-level subjects, and macro-level mineness isn't taken to track anything we should be serious about in our ontology, Subjective Decombination doesn't arise in the first place, or at least cannot be formulated in the same substantive sense that matters to the cosmopsychist proposal. It becomes, or would seem to become on a first-pass assessment, an epistemic issue, which shifts from the task of grounding a real phenomenon, macro-subjectivity, to the task of making sense of the emergence of its illusory manifestation. If only unqualified Brahmanic awareness exists, it follows that what cosmopsychists take to be the result of "subjective decombination" isn't real, so establishing how the decombining involved might operate is no longer a concern.

Yet, as you might have guessed, there's an alarming price tag on the advantage. The first, obvious issue is that Śaṅkaran monism is a species to the genus of existence monism, and therefore inherits the objections available against the latter. For example, if you believe that an account of what there is should give metaphysical substance to the perceived truth value of sentences about ordinary

Subjective Combination and Subjective Decombination are both serious problems (though perhaps not both "hard"), a premise which I take to be shared by all parties to the debate.

objects and pluralities thereof (think of mainstream semantic objections to presentism), doing that without existence pluralism is no easy task. If existence monism is at least *prima facie* semantically problematic, so has to be Śaṅkaran Advaita.

But there's a second, more insidious issue: by being an instance of existence monism committed exclusively to specific object token concerned by Śaṅkaran Advaita, i.e., *nirguṇa* Brahman, the account slips into an unstable relationship with the very given of ordinary appearances. Peel the onion: remove matter, change, plurality, reject qualified experiencers and mental states of any sort, deny that mineness and phenomenal concepts track anything allowed by your ontology. How is it possible, within a system of this sort, to get anything in the realm of appearances other than attributeless self-awareness itself? The problem is no longer the burden of subscribing to a view on which our ordinary experiential states systematically encompass intentional objects and properties which have no correspondence in one's ontology, as is the case with many objections against existence monism. This is a familiar cost for many brands of eliminativism. The problem is that the worldview we're considering seems to bar *the appearance itself* of the phenomenal world.

We face, so to speak, a "paradox of elimination". On one hand, the view pursues a metaphysical agenda aiming to explain the properties of ordinary experience through the assumption that reality reduces to an unqualified monistic awareness. On the other, razoring the ontology to a unique unqualified awareness threatens to render the emergence of any appearing of any sort impossible. Even musing about our ordinary experiences as oneiric affections of an idealistic Absolute that dreams reality and, with it, dreams of itself as a conditioned denizen of the world, would concede too much for someone committed to Śaṅkaran monism: the occurrence of the dream state itself, change, the distinction between different appearances of different ontological figments, all of which would entail a qualification of the unique object token. It's a lose-lose proposition. If you acknowledge that the phenomenal world appears, you antecedently grant that there is something (the appearance of the phenomenal world) other than unqualified awareness, which would entail either existence pluralism or a qualified version of monism on which the unique object instantiates some set of

properties or a structure that make the illusion of the phenomenal world possible. If, on the other hand, you you start off accepting the radical monistic claim of the framework, you jeopardize your ability to acknowledge the appearance of the phenomenal world, and therefore turn ordinary experience into a living Liar.[10]

In a way, the problem can be likened to the consequences of subscribing at once to two forms of eliminativism that are catastrophically difficult to stomach in tandem. The first is the form of eliminativism embraced by someone who would endorse realism about phenomenal properties and then eliminate subjects, thus facing the predicament of having to account for phenomenal properties when these are typically taken to characterize "what it's like" to be a subject (Chalmers 2016). The second is the kind that might suit someone who's serious about subjects but rejects that first-person phenomenal experience may ever be reality-tracking, and therefore runs counter the constraint that an adequate theory of consciousness must entail that at least some phenomenal concepts aren't empty (Goff 2017). On their own, these two strands of eliminativism entail (massive) costs, but do not raise immediate worries of self-defeat. Unleashed together, they threaten to turn the entire phenomenal world into a paradox. With all this in mind, let's turn to the following: what, if anything, did Advaitins have to say about the problem?

4. *Anirvacanīya*

Classical Advaitins appear to distinguish two complementary ways to reach what I've referred to as Śaṅkaran monism (Timalsina 2009).[11] Call them a Positive Path and a Negative Path.

The Positive Path consists of the affirmation of unqualified Brahmanic monism based on an analysis of appearances. Inquiry starts with the acknowledgment of first-person experience, and

10 Very roughly, suppose Śaṅkaran monism is the proposition that nothing in the dualistic realm of ordinary experience is reality-tracking. The assessment of the proposition that nothing in the dualistic realm of ordinary experience is reality-tracking, is a chapter of ordinary experience. Śaṅkaran monism is then false if true, and true if false?

11 For reasons of space, I won't be able to provide more than a hyper-compact primer of what classical Advaitins had to say about the points summarized in this section. With some exceptions, the references below are to works where the interested reader will find lengthier treatments of the matter under discussion, as well as comprehensive pointers to the relevant primary sources.

proceeds to look for what could possibly play the role of "immediate" intentional target of our conscious mental life, i.e., what's the most basic, self-supporting ontological conclusion we can draw based solely on the premise that we're having an occurrent experience. Through a series of arguments, Advaitins establish, first, that the only self-supporting conclusion conscious experience acquaints us in an "immediate" manner is the proposition that awareness exists. Second, that the awareness manifesting itself as the "immediate" ground of experience is attributeless and isn't presented to careful introspection as "owned" or "enacted" by any subject. And third, that what we pre-theoretically identify as our "self" must be identical to such an undifferentiated awareness.

The Negative Path follows the complementary route. It's driven by a battery of skeptical arguments aimed at showing that nothing other than undifferentiated awareness can be affirmed without either appealing to an unstable premise, or leading to a contradiction. Rather than by directly establishing singularity (*aikya*), the Negative Path zeroes in on non-duality (*advaita*) by progressively rejecting all possible motivations for existence pluralism and qualified monism. An example is the epistemological argument against the plurality of subjects in Vimuktātman's *Iṣṭa-siddhi* (Potter 2006). Awareness can be immediately apprehended by introspection, whereas the plurality of subjects cannot. Can it be established by inferential means? The job of an inference (*anumāna*) is to settle the truth of a target proposition (*sādhya*) on the basis of a corroborating factor (*hetu*). Corroborating factors lend support to a target proposition only if the asserted state of affairs and the corroborating factors are in concomitance (*sāhacarya*), which in turn requires the direct apprehension of the target state of affairs. To establish the plurality of subjects on the basis of observable facts (say, the behavioral envelope of pain and pleasure), we should have some immediate concomitant apprehension of other people's minds. That this is impossible, Vimuktātman argues, is a symptom of an underlying fallacy in the inference itself. Hence, the plurality of subjects should be rejected.[12]

12 As elsewhere, I'm simply reporting the argument. The doctrine of the "solitary subject" was dubbed *Ekajīva* in the Advaitic milieu, and wasn't universally accepted. Maṇḍana, Vācaspati, and other Advaitins subscribed to *Nānājīva*, the doctrine that *māyā* individuates a plurality of macro-level subjects.

Both paths lead to the same conclusion: only unqualified Brahman is truly real (*pāramārthika*), and abides solitary in the realm of existence (Sharma 1995; Ram-Prasad 2002). Matter, change, plurality, and all other posits that would introduce in the theory an element of duality or qualification must be rejected. Their manifestation in lay thinking and perceiving (*vyavahāra*) is an appearing to be (*ābhāsa*) that doesn't correspond to actual existence. They are all pieces of the great illusion of *māyā*, which we mistake for reality under the spell of ignorance (*avidyā*) (Oldmeadow 1992; Fost 1998; Kaplan 2007). For Śaṅkara, *avidyā* is *adhyāsa*, superimposition: a twofold power that conceals the actual features of an object (*āvaraṇaśakti*) and projects onto it properties that the object doesn't bear (*vikṣepaśakti*) (Mahadevan 1985). The former aspect of *avidyā* is the one responsible for the obscuration of the authentic nature of Brahman. The latter builds on the concealing function of *avidyā,* and singles out the processes whereby knowers are irresistibly led to ascribe, in thinking and perceiving alike, false properties to "concealed" Brahman.[13]

The problem is to establish how conceding this much doesn't entail a residue of "duality" or "qualification" that defeats the strict monistic backbone of the theory. The Śaṅkaran cannot truly accept the existence of a veil of appearances, since that would reinstate duality. Nor can she regard the phenomenal world as some "visible manifestation" of Brahmanic awareness, since this would qualify monism and compromise Brahman's pristine metaphysical pedigree. But certainly the spectacle concocted by *avidyā* does present itself. Irrespective of whether or not it tracks or represents anything existing, *māyā* occurs. Otherwise, we wouldn't need to move from ignorance to knowledge, from bondage to liberation (*mokṣa*), from the commerce of appearances that conjure the delusion of the manifest world and of our "private" mental life, to the pinnacle of metaphysical gnosis. But how could anything other than pure awareness present itself if only unqualified Brahman exists? How can *avidyā* be coherently ascribed the causal power of bringing about *māyā* without presupposing realism about something other than Brahman, or – in case one fancies reducing *avidyā* to a property of Brahman – violating the restriction of the ontology to an unqualified awareness?

13 Analogy: a subject is perceptually presented with a rope but cannot recognize its actual nature of rope vs. a subject is perceptually presented with a rope but mistakes it for a snake. On perception in Advaita Vedānta, see Gupta (1995).

Advaitins were, unsurprisingly, completely aware of the issue, and a central concern the Śaṅkaran doctrine had to address from its earliest stages was precisely the nature of *māyā* and *avidyā*: the problem of making sense of the appearance of the phenomenal world within a system fundamentally hostile to it (Timalsina 2009). The mainstream Advaitic response, however, isn't really the presentation of a solution to the problem, but rather the assertion of a particular instance of mysterianism about the realm of appearances: questions about the appearance of the phenomenal world are indeterminable (*anirvacanīya*), and conceptual inquiry is constitutively unfit to adjudicate the nature of *māyā* and *avidyā*.

The doctrine of *anirvacanīya* is metaphysical, not epistemic. It involves a substantive commitment to the impossibility of analysis – of rational description based on standard bivalence, one might say –, rather than a provisional admission of ignorance on which the inconsistency between the unqualified nature of Brahman and phenomenal data cannot be appeased on the basis of our current knowledge and reasoning capacities (Thrasher 1993). In other words, for the Śaṅkaran the conceptual inscrutability of appearances isn't an epistemic gap in theory one may reasonably hope to bridge, or a byproduct of our nature of non-omnipotent knowers: it's a consequence of the paradoxical nature of reality itself. Except in negative terms (*neti neti*), there is nothing one could ever rationally say about the way *nirguṇa* Brahman can be reconciled with the appearance of the manifest world and of the observable attributes of our first-person experience (Ram-Prasad 2011), including the character of mineness and the sense of subjectivity associated to our conscious mental life. Inquiry into the status of *avidyā* and about the veil of our "conditioned" phenomenology can only lead us from one instance of ignorance to another, along a path none of whose possible bifurcations can lead to actual epistemic progress.[14]

Knowledge of Brahman (*brahmavidyā*) cannot be stated or acquired by conceptual means. In the Advaitic tradition, Śaṅkaran monism isn't discarded in face of this impasse because of the fur-

14 As Nisargadatta Maharaj once put it: "*Questioner*: There are so many theories about the nature of man and universe. The creation theory, the illusion theory, the dream theory [...]. Which is true? *Maharaj*: All are true, all are false. You can pick up whichever you like best. *Q*: You seem to favour the dream theory. *M*: These are all ways of putting words together. Some favour one way, some favour another. Theories are neither right nor wrong. They are attempts at explaining the inexplicable" (Nisargadatta 2012, 118).

ther proviso, supported by the Vedic scriptures and by the testimony of a lineage of spiritual masters, that the truth of the monistic core of the theory can be accessed by an ineffable experiential awakening, a particular kind of objectless awareness (*turīya*) that transcends the three ordinary modes of consciousness (the waking state, the dreaming state, and dreamless sleep), and can be attained only by giving up (*tyāga*) through contemplative training the regular workings of the mind (Dalal 2009). Philosophical reasoning is just one cog in the great machinery of metaphysical gnosis. Its chief purpose is to remove lay beliefs and prepare the practitioner to the direct experience (*anubhava*) of non-duality, so it's no surprise that pursued on its own it ends up going around in circles. Brahman isn't any less real, any less singular, and any less unqualified just because *avidyā* and *māyā* are above the pay grade of rational thinking.

5. Going forward?

In sum, there's a case to be made that classical Advaitins were aware of the "paradox of elimination" entailed by Śaṅkaran monism, that they believed that its dissipation was beyond the reach of rational inquiry, and that they took unqualified Brahmanic monism to be supported by the availability of experiences of "direct insight" into non-duality. Let's now return to contemporary philosophy: what can the present-day debate on consciousness do with a theory like Śaṅkaran monism?

I suppose we can distinguish three main reactions to the situation. First, withdraw from Śaṅkaran monism and redirect the interlocutory effort towards other frameworks of Indian philosophy. Second, try to repair the account. Third, renegotiate the evidential standards of the discussion. The list isn't even remotely exhaustive, but hopefully not simplistic, and should help gather into an intelligible taxonomy the main kinds of moves one might consider making at this stage. As I've done in introducing micropsychism, cosmopsychism, their problems, and their prospects, I'll try to give an impartial description of the main features of these reactions and highlight their proximal implications, without giving anything close to an endorsement or a verdict on any of them. A modest exercise, but one that I nonetheless hope will be of some use in mapping the terrain.

The first reaction is perhaps the most natural. Whatever advantages one might have thought Śaṅkaran monism could boast over micropsychism and cosmopsychism, they pale in comparison to the dysfunctions it exhibits in accounting for the datum of ordinary experience. So we should put the view aside and look for inspiration from neighboring frameworks that share the Śaṅkaran sympathy for non-dualism (and therefore might replicate its motive of attraction) while bearing a more relaxed attitude to eliminativism.

There's no shortage of alternative venues, both inside and outside the Advaita tradition. The Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānujā, for example, developed precisely as a reaction to the whole-hog eliminativism entailed by the Śaṅkaran theory of *māyā* (Grimes 1990), and endorses a brand of attributive monism which appears better equipped to account for the appearance of the phenomenal world. In the pre-Śaṅkaran milieu, Bhartṛhari propounded a "dynamic" version of non-dualism with similar features (e.g., Chaturvedi 2009). Pratyabhijñā thinkers in Kashmir were aware of Bhartṛhari's thought, and developed in turn a non-dualistic system on which worldly phenomena are regarded as manifest presentations of the unitary principle – in their case, the consciousness of Śiva – and which, albeit subscribing to a version of the Advaitic doctrine that ordinary experience depends on an epistemic mistake, appears easier to reconcile with phenomenal appearances (Ferrante 2021). It's an open question whether these theories, besides relaxing the "paradox of elimination" and making principled room for the veil of *māyā*, can do so without reinstating a substantive version of Subjective Decombination, or a close counterpart thereof. A first-pass analysis would suggest that they cannot (see, e.g., Berger, Fritzman & Vance 2018 on the Pratyabhijñā), which would bring us back to the original impasse of micropsychism and cosmopsychism, and therefore cast an uncomfortable shadow on the rationale of pushing for an interlocutory approach with these philosophical currents. But the jury is still out.

The second approach would be to take up the challenge and bet on the hypothesis that while Śaṅkaran monism does lead to a seemingly self-defeating upshot, the self-defeat in question can be repaired using conceptual resources from contemporary inquiry which weren't available to the

thinkers that originally forged the doctrine of *anirvacanīya*. The question, predictably, is what conceptual resources. One possibility would be to offload the costs of the paradox onto a framework that accepts true contradictions or non-classical truth values, and reassess the prospects of the view without the constraints of bivalence. The argument that important currents of South Asian philosophy feature appeals to *dialetheias* isn't new (e.g., see Deguchi, Garfield and Priest (2008) on Nāgārjuna), appears consistent with classical surveys of argumentation in Indian philosophy (e.g., Smart 1964), and others have hinted at the idea that the Advaitic concept of *anirvacanīya* translates *de re* into the notion that no proposition about the phenomenal world can be classically true or false (see Maharaj 2018). Of course, the usefulness of the move would hinge on the broader issue of whether there's room for real contradictions and the like in the actual practice of analytic metaphysics, and on how the proposal would address, to echo Feferman's (1984, 95) complaint, the worry that "nothing like sustained ordinary reasoning" can be carried out outside bivalence.

Another possibility would be to keep the system "classical" and see whether we can use modern conceptual tools to state a coherent incarnation of Śaṅkaran monism that can climb out of the hole. For example, one could wonder whether unqualified monism would be easier to reconcile with the appearance of the phenomenal world under some version of ontological pluralism that associates Brahmanic awareness and manifest phenomena to different "ways of being" (Spencer 2012), though the account would have to clarify how introducing a commitment to a plurality of ways of being wouldn't reinstate the original tension. Other examples coming to mind are Kriegel's (2012) Kantian monism and the aspectual theory of Benovsky (2018), both of which, at least on paper, might lend themselves well to the operation, since they rely heavily on epistemic notions, and the problem for Śaṅkaran monism is to state a minimally promising theory of illusion. Again, it's unclear how one might feed the Śaṅkaran ontology with, say, aspects, without compromising the ban on qualification and transitioning to a theory which can no longer be filed under the rubric of the original view. But the matter might warrant scrutiny.

The third move would be to state a (moderately) revisionary epistemology for theories of what there is, and allow that such theories may be sensitive to factors extending beyond the received evidential boundaries of mainstream metaphysics. In weighing the merits and the shortcomings of accounts of the world, contemporary metaphysicians evaluate statements about reality against familiar standards of soundness, explanatory power, and compliance with publicly accessible evidence. Suppose that measured against these standards, Śaṅkaran monism is, in fact, classically self-defeating. One then could attempt to salvage the framework by intervening on the standards themselves and, following the Advaitic emphasis on the epistemic authority of meditative contemplation, allowing experiences of "direct insight" to provide justification for a worldview that under standard rational assessment exhibits such an unstable relationship with phenomenal evidence. Versions of this idea are found in Maharaj's (2018, ch. 6) defense of the epistemic value of mystical experience, and in Albahari's (2019, 26-34) take on the doctrine of *ajāta*.

An approach of this sort would certainly be right in one thing: analytical recuperations of Indian philosophy tend to overlook the fact that, as I have already hinted at, it interpreted metaphysical inquiry "as a theoretical framework supporting a body of spiritual discipline" and never as "merely abstract speculation" (Dyczkowski 1987, 33). In Indian philosophy, analytical and soteriological elements blend together in a continuum that almost never considers rational investigation alone capable of illuminating the nature of things. Due emphasis on this aspect would go a long way toward restoring the ecosystem of beliefs and practices in which Vedic monisms originally developed, and toward enabling a fully informed assessment of their philosophical standing.

Curatorial concerns aside, though, one might worry that the move can be pursued on condition that we commit to transitioning to a completely distinct approach to knowledge, instead of just putting on the theoretical table a previously unappreciated option of inquiry. For simplicity, there are two immediate versions of the "revisionist agenda" I'm hinting at. The first, and weaker one, would be to argue that knowledge claims based on "insight" and on the authority of spiritual masters have a heuristic function and can factor into the evaluation of the prospects of a worldview in

ceteris paribus scenarios. In other words, first-person experiences of insight and reports thereof may secure a hearing for the worldviews they purport to establish and suggest new conceptual instruments for their evaluation, but never take probative priority over the constraints of rational inquiry. For instance, the authority of the experience or report may break the tie in favor of a candidate worldview in cases where conceptual inquiry assigns equal plausibility to a competitor, but cannot restore as a live option something that has proven to entail a contradiction or to incur other major conceptual dysfunctions. The second, and stronger one, would be to argue that knowledge claims based on experiential insight and on the authority of spiritual masters may form an integral part of the evidence relative to which we should establish the plausibility of any given worldview, and indeed that alignment with (reports of) experiences of direct insight may, in some contexts, restore as a live option a view that rational assessment would just bar from logical space.

Śaṅkaran monism would need the stronger version of the revisionist agenda to regain plausibility, since it faces a verdict of instability. But unlike its weaker counterpart, which might appeal to a lot of philosophical palates, the stronger version raises obvious metaphilosophical questions. To be clear, the point isn't necessarily that experiences of "direct insight", and reports thereof, are unreliable because they are inconsistent across cultural contexts, theory laden, or that even when they display "perennial" regularities across traditions we can explain them away as byproducts of our shared cognitive circuitry (for a skeptical assessment, see Thompson 2020). The question is whether making experiential insight analytically spendable in the strong sense can be stated as an addition to the established principles of theory construction that run philosophical inquiry, or should be characterized as an invitation to abandon, rather than to complement, rational theory construction. Is the notion that we should allow unstable theories to be rescued by experiences of "direct insight" the proposition of a new move within the game of philosophical theorizing? Or does it boil down to the statement that if we are to ever grasp truth we should fall back on a completely distinct framework of knowledge where rational thought is ancillary to deeper forms of non-conceptual realization, as many Advaitins themselves would recommend? The former would probably require some defense

of the evidential usability in rational argumentation of mystical and "numinous" experience, and the matter is age-old and controversial, to say the least (Gellman 2019). In any case, there are deep questions of method looming on the horizon, and I don't think it would be overdramatic or prejudicial to suggest that the perplexed is going to want to hear more about these metaphilosophical matters before gauging the defense of any specific worldview that relies on such a stance.

6. Conclusion

The paper has proceeded as follows. I have reviewed the challenges encountered by micropsychist and cosmopsychist accounts of consciousness, and introduced Śaṅkaran monism. I have described an initial reason of attraction of the framework in comparison to micropsychist and cosmopsychist approaches: the neutralization of Subjective Decombination. I have shown that, notwithstanding this advantage, the eliminativist commitments of the Śaṅkaran threaten to render the view self-defeating. I have argued that Advaitins were aware of the implication, and consistently embraced the view that the accommodation of the issue was beyond the reach of rational inquiry. Finally, I have sketched three reactions to the situation: the rejection of Śaṅkaran monism, a repair strategy, and a reevaluation of the evidential standards of the debate.

I have, of course, my own ideas as to which of these developments is more promising, and I don't suppose I've been especially good at concealing my misgivings. In any case, thinking about these "interlocutory" matters and engaging more closely with classical Indian philosophy is likely to do analytic philosophers a service. If the non-skeptic is right, the exercise may indeed bring us closer to a working theory of consciousness. For those who instead think the exercise is hardly going to reveal the metaphysical foundations of mentality, the payoff could be different, but no less significant: an opportunity to revisit major problems outside the support structure of all too familiar assumptions, dive into an immensely rich philosophical tradition, and perhaps even "think twice" about why we do philosophy the way we do it.[15]

15 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Colloquium in Theoretical Philosophy of Freie Universität Berlin. Thanks to the organizers, Barbara Vetter and Richard Woodward, and to the audience for the feedback I received on that occasion. Thanks also

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