

Sankara's Rationale for Sruti as a Definitive Source of Knowledge of Brahman: A Refutation of Some Contemporary Views

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Sankara (788-820), the foremost representative and exponent of the system of Advaita Vedanta, is widely represented in contemporary studies as having only accorded a provisional validity to knowledge gained by inquiry into the words of the Vedas (*sruti*). According to these studies, Sankara did not see *sruti* as the unique and definitive source of our knowledge about the nature of ultimate reality (*brahman*). The general conclusions of current studies on Sankara suggest that he proposed a special experience (*anubhava*) as the ultimately valid source of knowledge of *brahman* (*brahmajnana*). The affirmations of *sruti*, it is argued, need to be verified and confirmed by the knowledge gained through this direct experience, and the authority of *sruti*, therefore, is only secondary. Radhakrishnan, for example, claims that it is difficult to find support in the writings of Sankara for the view that inquiry into the Vedas is the only means to the knowledge of *brahman*.¹ He is unambiguous in his conclusion about the relationship between *sruti* and *anubhava* in Sankara.

For him, integral experience or *anubhava* is the basal fact. It is the highest religious insight. It supplies the proof-if proof be the name for it-of man's awareness of a spiritual reality.²

Radhakrishnan sees *sruti* as a secondary and poor substitute for those who are incapable of the firsthand experience and self-certifying confirmation of *anubhava*.

Those who have had no direct insight into reality are obliged to take on trust the Vedic views which record the highest experiences of some of

¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 2 vols. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), vol. 2, p.617.

² *Ibid.*, p. 534. Writers who affirm the primacy of *anubhava* are generally vague on the actual nature of the experience which gives us immediate knowledge of *brahman*. *Anubhava*, in general, is equated by them with intuition and presented as a form of internal perception, comparable to external perception, on the basis that perception (internal or external) alone can give us direct knowledge of any existent reality. Most of the writers we have considered equate *anubhava* with the Yoga experience of *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the state in which the mind transcends its usual divisions of Knower, knowledge, and the process of knowing and becomes free from all mental content.

the greatest minds who have wrestled with this problem of apprehending reality.³

This view of the function of *sruti* is shared by S. K. Belvalkar, according to whom the advaitin found it necessary to appeal to the authority of *sruti* only because the experience upon which it was founded was beyond the reach of all. Whenever the scriptures are cited, Belvalkar claims, it is merely for the purpose of supporting a conclusion "which has been reached independently of the scriptures."⁴ Sankara's reliance on *sruti* is sometimes seen only as an attempt to show his agreement with orthodox authority.⁵

Radhakrishnan's conclusions about the respective roles of *sruti* and *anubhava* are shared by many other commentators. Prabhavananda also sees direct personal experience as the ultimate satisfactory proof in Sankara. *Sruti* is only a provisional pointer along the way.⁶ N. K. Devaraja acknowledges the importance given by Sankara to authoritative sources of knowledge (that is, *pramanas*), but interprets Sankara's insistence that *brahman* is to be known only through *sruti* merely as an expression of his "ultra-orthodox mood."⁷ *Sruti*, according to Devaraja, is by no means unique in bringing about the final intuition of brahman. It is merely a more direct and effective means.

All the *pramanas* play their part in bringing about that final intuition, and if Sankara is at moments inclined to assign a higher place to *sruti*, it is probably because he feels that the utterances of the *Upanisads*, being vital poetic records of spiritual experience, can induce that intuition earlier than the mere negative operations of the logical understanding. Or, if we are unkind critics, we may say that, occasionally, the orthodox in Sankara overwhelms the empiricist and rationalist in him.⁸

Ninian Smart endorses the opinion of the essentially mystical nature of knowledge in Sankara, and as a consequence of his stress on an experience, Smart argues for a basic similarity between Mahayana and Advaita. He ventures so far as to dismiss the

³ Ibid., p. 514.

⁴ S.K. Belvalkar, *Vedanta Philosophy* (Poona: Bilrakunja Publishing House, 1929), pp. 15-16.

⁵ See M. A. Buch, *The Philosophy of Sankara* (Baroda: A. G. Widgery, 1921), p. 274.

⁶ Swami Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1927; Unwin Paperbacks, 1980), pp. 293-294.

⁷ N. K. Devaraja, *An Introduction to Sankara's Theory of Knowledge*, 2d ed., rev. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972), p. 66.

⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

dependence of the latter on *sruti* as being of no consequence, since revelation, in his view, culminates in nondual experience.⁹ The pivotal role of the mystical experience considerably modifies, according to Smart, the intrinsic-validity concept of the scripture. This brings Sankara, in Smart's view, very close to the Yoga standpoint.

In other words, the scriptures are valid at the higher level in so far as they point towards a certain supreme experience. In the last resort therefore, their truth is pragmatic and provisional. What confirms them is direct experience, and by then they are useless. This clearly modifies considerably the concept of their being self authenticated. Here Sankara's view is not far from that of Yoga, namely that the scriptures originate from the supreme perception or intuition of yogis. Hence the issue about the validity of revelation is shifted to that of the trustworthiness of mystical-in particular yogic-experience.¹⁰

Smart reiterates this position in his later work, *The Yogi and the Devotee*, emphasizing the place of *dhyana* (meditation) and the Yoga parallel.¹¹

It seems, therefore, that there is a certain consensus in current opinion about the significance of the authority of *sruti* in Sankara. This consensus centers around the view that, for Sankara, *sruti* is by no means a unique source of knowledge about *brahman* (*brahmajnana*). The affirmations of *sruti* are presented as subject to and needing the confirmation of direct experience (*anubhava*), which is in the last resort the final criterion of truth and the ultimate satisfactory proof. Sankara's recourse to *sruti* is explained as being motivated by the desire to gain the support of an orthodox and prestigious authoritative tradition for his views.

It is the contention of this study that these views overlook the profound epistemological basis for Sankara's dependence on *sruti* as the authoritative source of *brahmajnana*. They also ignore indispensable elements of an argued and developed rationale. This study seeks, by an examination of aspects of Sankara's justification of the authority of *sruti*, to

⁹ N. Smart, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 104.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹¹ See N. Smart, *The Yogi and the Devotee* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968). R.C. Zaehner is another influential commentator who gives little attention to the significance of *sruti* as a source of knowledge about *brahman* in Sankara.

demonstrate that his recourse to *sruti* is not adventitious or dispensable.¹² It argues that Sankara's recourse to *sruti* cannot be explained by the argument that he merely wanted to demonstrate his agreement with orthodox authority. We shall focus and examine the arguments of Sankara for *sruti* as a valid source of knowledge about *brahman* under three headings: (1) *Sruti* as the logical source of *brahmajnana*, (2) *Sruti* as the adequate source of *brahmajnana*, and (3) *Sruti* as the fruitful source of *brahmajnana*. We shall then examine the often cited instance of (4) Sankara's use of the term *anubhava* in his commentary on *Brahma-sutra* 1.1.2. It must be emphasized, however, that Sankara's arguments for the logical nature, adequacy, and fruitfulness of *sruti* are closely related and employed simultaneously in his commentaries (*bhasyas*).

I. SRUTI AS THE LOGICAL SOURCE OF BRAHMAJNANA

The general justification of Sankara for a special means of knowledge like *sruti* is that it provides the knowledge of those things which cannot be known through any of the other sources of knowledge.¹³ More specifically, it informs us of the means of attaining good and avoiding evil, insofar as these cannot be known through perception (*pratyaksa*) and inference (*anumana*). *Sruti* is not concerned to provide information about these dual objectives to the extent that they are within the range of human experience. One imagines, for example, that a scripture is not necessary for instruction about road safety.

The two categories of knowledge, according to Sankara, inaccessible to all other *pramanas* and attainable exclusively through *sruti*, are *dharma* and *brahman*.¹⁴ We are

¹² A presentation of all the dimensions of Sankara's justification of *sruti* as a source of *brahmajnana* is beyond the scope of this study. For a more detailed analysis see A. Rambachan, "The Attainment of *Moksha* According to Sankara and Vivekananda with Special Reference to the Significance of Scripture (*Sruti*) and Experience (*Anubhava*)" (Ph.D. thesis, Leeds University, 1984). See chapters 1-6.

¹³ Advaita Vedanta accepts six authoritative sources of knowledge. There are as follows: (1) Perception (*pratyaksa*), (2) Inference (*anumana*), (3) Comparison (*upamana*), (4) Postulation (*arthapatti*), (5) Noncognition (*anupalabdhi*), and (6) Sabda (*sruti*).

¹⁴ See *The Brahmasutrabhasya of Sankaracarya*, 3d ed., trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1977), 2.1.6, p. 314; hereafter cited as *Brahmasutrabhasya*. Since Sankara's commentary on a particular *sutra* or verse could run into several pages, the page numbers in the translations used are given for easy reference. It is very important to note here the specific sense in which Sankara is using the concepts of *dharma* and *adharma*. They indicate merit (*punya*) and demerit (*papa*) accruing particularly from the performance and nonperformance of recommended ritual actions. Actions are understood as having a twofold result: seen (*drsta*) and unseen (*adrsta*). Sankara's argument is that the unique relation between any action and its unseen result can be known only from the Vedas. The *adrsta* result is conceived of as a subtle, persisting impression that has the potency of bearing good or evil in the course of time.

afforded a clear statement of Sankara's view on the knowledge of *dharma* in his commentary on *Brahma-sutra* 3.1.25.¹⁵ Here, he is responding to the objector's claim that the slaying of animals in sacrifice might be responsible for the soul's birth as a plant. He answers that the knowledge of merit (*dharma*) and demerit (*adharmā*) is derived solely from the scriptures. From the Vedas alone we can know which acts are virtuous and which are not. The reason is that these are supersensuous realities, beyond the capacity of the senses. In addition to this, *dharma* and *adharmā* vary with time and place. An act that may be sanctioned at a certain time and place and under some circumstances may not be approved with a change of these factors. It is impossible, therefore, argues Sankara, to learn of *dharma* from any other source.

The revelation of *dharma*, however, does not exhaust the authoritative subject matter of the Vedas. The knowledge of *dharma* is derived from the first sections of the Vedas, which deal with ritual action (that is, the *karmakānda*). The final sections of the Vedas (referred to variously *jñanakānda*, *Upanisads*, or *Vedānta-vākyas*), according to Sankara, have an entirely independent purpose in the revelation of the knowledge of *brahman*. The cornerstone of Sankara's case for *sruti* as the only valid means of knowing *brahman* is that because of the very nature of *brahman*, *sruti*, as a source of knowledge (*pramāna*) in the form of words (*śabda*), is the only logical means. While his contention for *sruti* as the only *pramāna* of *brahmajñana* is not divorced from his wider views about its authoritativeness, in this case the argument is as much centered on the logic of words (*śabda*) as the only conceivable means through which this knowledge could be imparted and attained. What gives Sankara's argument its force is the logical interdependence which he demonstrates between the appropriateness of the *pramāna* and the nature of the entity to be known. The relationship here is between *brahman* as the entity to be known and *śabda* as the means of knowledge.

The case for *śabda* or the word as the only appropriate vehicle of *brahmajñana* consists of showing why this knowledge cannot be attained through the other ways of knowing, and this Sankara seeks to do at every available opportunity in his commentaries. He is emphatic on the absolute inapplicability of all *pramānas* except *sruti* to the knowledge of

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.1.25, pp. 585-586.

brahman. Sankara is tireless in explaining the incompetence of sense perception in apprehending *brahman*. Each sense organ is naturally capable of grasping and revealing a quality which is appropriate to its own nature. Sound, sensation, form, taste, and scent are their respective spheres of functioning. *Brahman*, however, remains unapproachable through any of them because of its uniqueness.¹⁶ *Brahman* has neither sound, touch, form, taste, or smell. It is without qualities (*nirguna*) and is therefore outside the domain of the sense organs. *Brahman* is limitless, and to be an object of sense knowledge is to be finite and delimited, to be one object among many objects. A *brahman* that is sense-apprehended is therefore, in the view of Sankara, a contradiction. However perfect or magnified the capacity of a sense organ is imagined to be, it will function only in a limited sphere of activity. Sankara refutes the allegation that there is any contradiction in the *Bhagavadgita's* denial of *brahman* as both *sat* (existent) and *asat* (nonexistent) by interpreting these terms with reference to the nonavailability of *brahman* as an object of sense knowledge.

Objection: Every state of consciousness involves either the consciousness of existence or that of non-existence. Such being the case, the Knowable should be comprehended either by a state of consciousness accompanied with the consciousness of existence, or by a state of consciousness accompanied with the consciousness of non-existence.

Answer. No; for being beyond the reach of the senses, It is not an object of consciousness accompanied with the idea of either (existence or non-existence). That thing, indeed, which can be perceived by the senses, such as a pot, can be an object of consciousness accompanied with the idea of existence or an object of consciousness accompanied with the idea of non-existence. Since, on the other hand, the Knowable is beyond the reach of the senses and as such can be known solely through that instrument of knowledge which is called *Sabda*...and is therefore not said to be "*sat*" or "*asat*."¹⁷

In addition to the inherent limitations of the sense organs and the absence in *brahman* of any quality that can be apprehended by any one of them, there is the impossibility of objectifying *brahman*. The process of empirical knowledge involves a distinction

¹⁶ Ibid., 1.1.2, p. 17; 1.1.4, p. 22.

¹⁷ *The Bhagavad Gita: with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*, trans. A. Mahadeva Sastry (Madras: Samata Books, 1977), 13: 12, pp. 345-346. Also 2: 25, p. 51; hereafter cited as *Bhagavadgitabhasya*.

between subject and object, the knower and the known. We know things by making them the objects of our awareness, and in this way they are available for our scrutiny and analysis. Knowledge of an object presupposes the subject, the knower. *Brahman*, however, is the eternal subject. As awareness, It illumines everything, and the entire universe, including mind, body, and sense organs, is Its object. It is impossible for the unchanging knower to be made an object of knowledge, like a pot or a thought. It is absurd to conceive of the subject as an object, for in its absence there is no subject to know the subject as an object. Brahman is the light even of lights.¹⁸

Even in the state of ignorance, when one sees something, through what instrument should one know that owing to which all this is known? For the instrument of knowledge itself falls under the category of objects. The Knower may desire to know, not about itself, but about objects. As fire does not bum itself, so the self does not know itself, and the Knower can have no knowledge of a thing that is not its object. Therefore through what instrument should one know the Knower owing to which this universe is known and who else should know it?¹⁹

It is not possible to circumvent this difficulty by positing that the *brahman* (or *atman*) can be both subject and object. This might have been tenable if the subject and object were complementary and not opposed. By nature, however, the subject and object are absolutely opposed, the former being sentient and the latter inert, and such contradictory qualities cannot be posited of the same entity.²⁰ No division of any kind can be made in the case of *brahman*.²¹

If perception is unfitted for furnishing us with the knowledge of *brahman*, are any of the other four *pramanas* (inference, comparison, postulation, and non-cognition) more competent? The general view of Sankara is that these sources are more or less dependent on perception for their data, and can have no access to areas from which it is debarred.

¹⁸ *Bhagavadgita* 13: 17.

¹⁹ *The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad: with the Commentary of Sankaracarya*, 5th ed., trans. Swami Madhavananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975), 2.4.14, p. 261; hereafter cited as *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad-bhasya*.

²⁰ See *Brahmasutrabhasya*, introd., p.1.

²¹ See Sankara's commentary on *Aitareya Upanisad* 2.1, pp. 48-49, in *Eight Upanisads: with the Commentary of Sankaracarya*, 2d ed., trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965-66). *Isa, Kena, Katha, and Taittiriya* are in vol. 1, and *Aitareya, Mundaka, Mandukya and Karika, and Prasna* are in vol. 2. Where subsequent references are to Sankara's commentary, the term *bhasya* will be appended to the title of the *Upanisad*.

Inferential knowledge, for example, is derived from a knowledge of the invariable relation (*vyapti*) between a thing inferred (*sadhya*) and the ground from which the inference is made (*hetu*). Brahman, however, has no apprehensible or differentiating qualities with which It has an invariable relation and which can form the ground of an inference.²² It is impossible, therefore, to infer the existence of *brahman*.

There is no hint, however, of the skeptic in Sankara. He is unwavering in his position that *brahman* is knowable, and that *sruti* is the valid means. It is not possible, according to Sankara, even to guess about *brahman* without the assistance of *sruti*.²³ He leaves no room for any doubt about this conclusion. *Brahma-sutra* 1.1.2, for instance, reads, "That (is Brahman) from which (are derived) the birth, etc., of this (universe)." The following *sutra* (1.1.3) reads, "... because of being the source of the scriptures." Sankara sees another possibility in the Sanskrit compound of the latter and reads it also as, "...since the scriptures are its valid means." He justifies this reading on the ground that since *sutra* 1.1.2 made no explicit mention of the scriptures, one might construe that an inferential argument is being presented for establishing *brahman* as the source of the world. Any such doubt ought to be removed, and it must be made clear that *brahman* is known as the source of the universe from the scriptures alone. They are the only valid means of this knowledge.²⁴

One has to be extremely cautious in examining Sankara's exegesis of Upanisad verses treating the unknowability of *brahman*. He never accepts any of these passages literally, and there is no basis for concluding, as some have done, that in Sankara's view none of the *pramanas* can give us knowledge of brahma.²⁵ There are basically two ways in which Sankara interprets these statements. First of all, *brahman* is unknowable in the sense and manner of an object. The knowing process generally involves the knowledge of an object different from oneself. As the eternal knower, the witness of every cognition, *brahman*

²² See *Brahmasutrabhasya*, 2.1.6, p. 314. It must be noted that while Sankara dismisses reasoning independent of *sruti* as a valid means of knowing *brahman*, this does not imply that reason has absolutely no role in the process of gaining this knowledge. Reason has positive functions in understanding, clarifying, and defending the propositions of *sruti*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.1.11, p. 322.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.1.3, pp. 18-20.

²⁵ See, for example, S.K. Mukherjee, "Sankara on the limits of Empirical Knowledge," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 12 (1930-1931): 68.

can ever be known in this manner.²⁶ Secondly, *brahman* is unknown in the sense of being undisclosed through any other *pramana* but *sruti*. *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* 3.6. 1, for example, consists of a discussion between Gargi and Yajnavalkya. Beginning with earth and ending with the world of *Hiranyagarbha*, Gargi questions him about the successive pervasiveness of each factor. According to Sankara, the inference suggested here is that, "whatever is an effect, limited and gross, is respectively pervaded by that which is the cause, unlimited and subtle, as earth is pervaded by water,"²⁷ When Gargi, however, asks, "By what is the world of *Hiranyagarbha* pervaded?," Yajnavalkya refuses to proceed with the discussion.

"Do not, O Gargi, push your inquiry too far, lest your head should fall off. You are questioning about a deity that should not be reasoned about. Do not, O Gargi, push your inquiry too far." Thereupon Gargi, daughter of Vacaknu, kept silent.

It is important to note that Sankara does not construe Yajnavalkya's silence as an indication of the impossibility of any further knowledge. On the contrary, he charges Gargi with disregarding the proper method of inquiry. According to Sankara, Yajnavalkya terminates the discussion because of Gargi's attempt to establish *brahman* inferentially, whereas It is to be known only from *sruti*. The idea is that *brahman* is not unascertainable, but must be approached through the apposite *pramana* (that is. *sruti*).²⁸

II. *SRUTI* AS THE ADEQUATE SOURCE OF *BRAHMAJNANA*

The aspect of Sankara's rationale that has been highlighted above is that, given the nature of *brahman*, *sruti*, as a means of knowledge consisting of words, is the only logical and credible *pramana*. The other important and complementary dimension of this rationale is that, given the nature of *brahman* and the fact that the fundamental human spiritual problem is one of ignorance (*avidya*), the knowledge derived from the words of *sruti* is a fully adequate solution.

²⁶ See *Kena Upanisad-bhasya*, 2.1-4, pp. 59- 72.

²⁷ *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad-bhasya*, 3.6.1, p. 343.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 344. See also *Kena Upanisad-bhasya* 1.3, p. 49 and *Bhagavadgitabhasya* 18:50, p. 487.

The case for the adequacy of *sruti* is founded on the argument that the words of *sruti* are not required to produce *brahman* or to demonstrate Its existence. As Awareness, the content and basis of the 'I' or ego notion, *brahman* is selfrevealing and always manifest. There are several important and interesting discussions in Sankara's commentaries which are relevant to this issue. In his introduction to the *Brahma-sutra*, an objection is raised against the superimposition (*adhyasa*) argument.²⁹ The objector's view is that superimposition is possible only on something that is available for sense perception. In the mistaken apprehension of a rope for a snake, for example, at least the outline of the rope is seen. How can anything, however, be superimposed on *brahman* which is not an object of the senses? Sankara's reply is to suggest that even though *brahman*, as the Self (*atman*), is not an object of perception, It is not entirely unknown, and wrong attribution is possible.

The Self is not absolutely beyond apprehension, because it is apprehended as the content of the concept 'I', and because the Self, opposed to the non-Self, is well known in the world as an immediately perceived (i.e. self-revealing) entity.³⁰

Elsewhere, the objector asks whether *brahman* is known or unknown.³¹ The point of the query here is that if *brahman* is known, there is no need for a means of knowledge or an inquiry to ascertain Its nature. If, on the other hand, *brahman* is absolutely unknown (that is, not even the object of a desire to know), It cannot become the subject for any kind of inquiry (*jijnasa*). Sankara again denies that *brahman* is entirely unknown.

Besides, the existence of Brahman is well known from the fact of Its being the Self of all; for everyone feels that his Self exists, and he never feels, 'I do not exist'. Had there been no general recognition of the existence of Self, everyone would have felt, 'I do not exist'. And that Self is *brahman*.³²

²⁹ See *Brahmasutrabhasya*, introd., pp. 3-4. In Advaita, the term *adhyasa* is used to describe the erroneous identification of *brahman* with the qualities of the body and mind.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.1.1, p. 11.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 12 Also 2.3.7, p. 45, and *Bhagavadgitabhasya* 18: 50, p. 488.

If *brahman* as the *atman* is thus known, one may ask, is not inquiry into the words of *sruti* redundant? Sankara's response is to suggest that the knowledge which we possess is only of a general nature, and the true or distinctive nature of the *atman* remains unknown. This lack of distinctive knowledge is the cause, according to Sankara, of different and conflicting views about the nature of the *atman*.³³

In fact, wrong attribution or superimposition occurs only where knowledge is of a general nature and lacks specificity. In the rope-snake analogy, an object is perceived as existing, but its particular (*visesa*) nature is incorrectly ascertained. The qualities of the snake are then attributed to the rope. In the case of the *atman*, that 'I exist' and 'I know' are self-revelatory. Upon this existence (*sat*) and awareness (*cit*), the limited qualities of the body, sense organs, and mind are wrongly attributed, and the *atman* is taken to be mortal and finite. In other words, the qualities of the non-self are, through ignorance, erroneously identified with the self.³⁴

It is clear, therefore, that from Sankara's standpoint the problem does not involve the knowledge of an entirely unknown, unrevealed, or remote *atman*. It is one of incomplete or erroneous knowledge of an ever available and selfmanifesting *atman*. The task of *sruti*, therefore, is not the revelation or production of an unknown entity, but the imparting of correct knowledge about a Self which is misunderstood. This is all that is required. The reason for emphasizing the immediate availability of the *atman* and clarifying the nature of the ignorance (*avidya*) pertaining to It is that this establishes the possibility of an adequate knowledge being derived from the words of *sruti*. This dimension of Sankara's rationale has been overlooked by many modern commentators. The crucial point here is that knowledge derived from inquiry into the meaning of *sruti* can be an adequate solution if the problem involved is merely one of ignorance. It is unnecessary to use any other means, even as it is to use a stick for protecting oneself against the snake falsely perceived in place of the rope.

³³ See *Brahmasutrabhasya*. 1.1.2, pp. 12-13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

The case for the adequacy of *sruti* in Sankara is also supported by an examination of his refutation of action (*karman*) as a direct means to spiritual freedom (*moksa*). If one admits, Sankara contends, that *moksa* is to be effected through *karman* (action), then the action necessary, whether physical or mental, should be any one of four kinds.³⁵ These are creation, modification, attainment, and purification. If, however, *moksa* is regarded as the product of an act of creation or modification, it becomes finite and non-eternal. The result of any action is conditioned by the nature of the act, and action is always finite and limited. In any event, *brahman* is an already existing entity and beyond all change. In other words, according to Sankara, *brahman* cannot become the object of an act of creation or modification. Can we consider *moksa* to be the result of an act of attainment or reaching? *Brahman*, however, being the very nature of the Self (*atman*), there is no question of Its accomplishment through an act of reaching or any movement.

Even if Brahman be different from oneself, there can be no acquisition, for Brahman being all-pervasive like space, It remains ever attained by everybody.³⁶

Is it possible to view *moksa* as the result of an act of purification? The latter, Sankara points out, can be effected either by the addition of some excellence to what is to be purified or by the removal of some blemish. *Moksa*, however, is of the nature of *brahman* to which no excellence can be added.³⁷ *Brahman* is, by definition, eternally pure and there is no question of the removal of any blemish from It.

For Sankara, action (*karman*) is a right and appropriate solution where the problem involved is the accomplishment of something unaccomplished. Knowledge (*jnana*), on the other hand, is adequate for the accomplishment of the already accomplished, and it is clear from Sankara's metaphysics that he conceives the attainment of *brahman* to be of this kind. No actions are necessary for the attainment of one's own Self, and the problem is only an incorrect apprehension of Its nature. Like the connection between *brahman* and

³⁵ Ibid., 1.1.4, pp. 32-34. It should be noted here that, for Sankara, *moksa* is identical with the attainment of the knowledge of *brahman*.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁷ Ibid. The idea here is that *brahman* is free from all qualities and unconnected with anything.

the means through which It can be known, there is also a logical interrelationship in Sankara between *avidya* as the problem and knowledge (*jnana*) derived from the words of *sruti* as the solution. This all-important connection seems to have been entirely missed in current studies of the role of *sruti* in Sankara. Sankara clearly accepts that the knowledge derived through words (*sabda*) is not an end in itself if the object about which we are informed is not yet in existence or not immediately available. If the object is available but misapprehended, correct knowledge through the words of a valid source (*pramana*) is adequate.

III. SRUTI AS THE FRUITFUL SOURCE OF BRAHMAJNANA

Sankara's argument about the adequacy of knowledge derived from the sentences of *sruti* revealing *brahman* is underlined by his emphasis on the fruitfulness of these sentences. These arguments were most forcefully expressed in his responses to the claims of the *Purva-Mimamsa* school of Vedic exegesis. It is necessary, therefore, briefly to outline the position of this system, insofar as it is relevant to our discussion.³⁸

The *Mimamsa* exegesis contends that the Vedas have their purport only in the inculcation of *dharma*.³⁹ The latter is defined by Jaimini as "that which, being desirable, is indicated by Vedic injunction."⁴⁰ On the basis of this view, *PurvaMimamsa* argues that only injunctions (*vidhi*) inculcating the performance of acceptable acts, and prohibitions (*nisedha*) instituting restraint from acts opposed to *dharma* are direct and independent in authority.⁴¹ The authority of all other texts is indirect and dependent for their

³⁸ The word *Mimamsa* means inquiry, and this system undertakes a systematic analysis of the first (*purva*) parts of the Vedas, the *mantras* (hymns in praise of various deities), the *Brahmanas* (guide books for the performance of sacrifices), and the *Aranyakas* (philosophic interpretations of the scriptures). Vedanta is referred to as *Uttara-Mimamsa* because its concern is with the analysis of the last (*uttara*) section or the Vedas (that is, the Upanisads). The *sutras* of *Jaimini* (ca. 200 B.C.) are the earliest work of this system and form its basis. There are over two thousand five hundred *sutras*, discussing one thousand topics. *Jaimini's* work was commented on by the *Sabara Svamin* (ca. 400 A.D.), and his work was further commented on by *Prabhakara* and *Kumarila Bhatta*, who differ from each other in certain important respects and form the two principal schools of *Mimamsa* named after them.

³⁹ The word *dharma*, in this context, indicates any action, ritualistic or otherwise, which results in the production of merit (*punya*) and leads to enjoyment in this or other worlds.

⁴⁰ The *Purva-Mimamsa-Sutras* of *Jaimini*, trans. Ganganatha Jha (Varanasi: Bharatiya Publishing House, 1979), 1.1.2, p.3; hereafter cited as *Mimamsa-sutras*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.2.1, p.22.

meaningfulness on a connection with the injunctions. They are not viewed as having any independent end in themselves. Many *sruti* texts, for example, including Vedanta sentences (*Vedanta-vakyas*) are seen as having their purposefulness only in praising what has been enjoined in the injunctions.⁴² *Purva-Mimamsa* argues that if such sentences are taken by themselves, they are absolutely meaningless because they either impel us to activity or restrain us from a prohibited action. Their view is that the sentences of *sruti* discussing *brahman* (that is, the *Vedanta-vakyas*) are merely an appendage to the main body of injunctive statements. Their utility lies only in praising the prescribed action or in providing some useful information such as knowledge of the deity or agent for the performance of a particular ritual. If they are statements about already accomplished and existing entities, then they are without fruit, for they prompt neither the performance of *dharma* nor the avoidance of *adharma*. In any case, contends *Purva-Mimamsa*, knowledge of already accomplished things is obtainable from other *pramanas*. The knowledge of *dharma* and *adharma*, however, is not otherwise obtainable.⁴³

This *Mimamsa* exegesis is obviously incompatible with Sankara's view that *sruti* is also a valid source for the knowledge of *brahman*. He seeks, therefore, from various standpoints, to refute the *Mimamsa* thesis and to establish that the sentences of the Upanisads (*Vedanta-vakyas*) have an independent purpose and authority in the revelation of *brahman*. Sankara does not accept that scriptural sentences cannot have a factual reference or significance.⁴⁴ He points out that even though a sentence might have its ultimate purpose in initiating some activity, it does not necessarily cease to communicate valid factual information. Even as a man traveling to some destination perceives the existence of leaves and grass at the side of the road, a statement might have its aim in

⁴² Ibid., 1.2.7, p.26.

⁴³ Ibid., 1.1.4-6, pp. 6-7. The argument here is that *dharma* is not amenable to any other *pramana* because it has no external or tangible form. It also has to be brought into existence by prescribed acts. Vedic injunctions are the only source of its knowledge. We should remind ourselves that Sankara accepts the Vedas as the authoritative *pramana* for *dharma*.

⁴⁴ There is a linguistic dimension to the *Mimamsa* argument that the central concern of the Vedas in the initiation of activity through injunctive statements. They hold the view that in all sentences, words derive their meaningfulness only from their relationship with the verb. The pivot of any sentence is the verb and all usage is thus meant for instituting action. A factual statement, therefore, is never an end in itself, but has its reference in some activity. See *ibid.*, 1.1.25, p. 18.

activity, but its factual content is not thereby invalidated.⁴⁵ Against the *Mimamsa* proposition that existent things are knowable through ordinary sources of knowledge, Sankara contends that while this is true for most existent things, *brahman* is unique. Possessing no characteristics apprehensible through any other *pramana*, it can be known through the words of *sruti* alone. Its existence cannot be denied just because its nature precludes all other sources of knowledge.⁴⁶

In reply to the claim that mere factual statements in *sruti* that neither persuade us into activity nor dissuade us from it are fruitless, Sankara asserts that "the test of the authority or otherwise of a passage is not whether it states a fact or an action, but its capacity to generate certain and fruitful knowledge. A passage that has this is authoritative and one that lacks it is not."⁴⁷ He never tires of continuously affirming the independent fruitfulness of the *Vedanta-vakyas*. Even as a simple statement of fact, "This is a rope, not a snake" is fruitful in removing the fear occasioned by the error of taking a rope for a snake, *Vedanta-vakyas*, by helping to distinguish the self from the nonself and by releasing us from the sorrow of taking ourselves to be incomplete.⁴⁸

Is or is not certain and fruitful knowledge generated by passages setting forth the nature of the Self, and if so, how can they lose their authority? Do you not see the result of knowledge in the removal of the evils which are the root of transmigration, such as ignorance, grief, delusion and fear ? Or do you not hear those hundreds of Upanisadic texts such as, "Then what delusion and what grief can there be for one who sees unity." (*Isa Upanisad* 7)⁴⁹

Sankara points to the transformed life of the knower of *brahman* as further evidence of the fruitfulness of knowledge gained through the words of *sruti*.

For one who has realised the state of the unity of the Self and Brahman, it cannot be proved that his mundane life continues just as before; for

⁴⁵ See *Brahmasutrabhasya*, 1.3.33, p. 225.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.1.4, p.22.

⁴⁷ *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad-bhasya*, 1.4.7, p. 92.

⁴⁸ . See *Brahmasutrabhasya*, 1.1.4, p. 25.

⁴⁹ *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad-bhasya*, 1.4.7, p.92.

this contradicts the knowledge of the unity of brahman and the Self arising from the Vedas which are a valid means of knowledge. ... Just because a householder, who had been rich and prided himself on that account, had been seen to be sorrowing for the theft of his wealth, it does not follow that this very man will be miserable for any loss of that wealth even after he has become a monk and given up the idea of being wealthy.⁵⁰

It is Sankaras often repeated contention, supported by numerous scriptural references, that, for the prepared and qualified aspirant, the fruit of spiritual knowledge (that is, *moksa*) is simultaneous with the gain of that knowledge. He is emphatic in his denial of the necessity for any intervening action between the two.⁵¹ This is a clear refutation of the view that Sankara understands *sruti* as according only a provisional or hypothetical knowledge of *brahman*. In fact, from the standpoint of Sankara, it is not even accurate to say that *moksa* is the fruit or effect of knowledge (*jnana*). *Moksa*, being identical with *brahman*, is ever accomplished and eternal. The function of the knowledge revealed in *sruti* lies in the removal of obstacles to the appreciation of the ever liberated self. The relationship, says Sankara, is comparable to that obtaining between standing and singing, where no other action intervenes.⁵² The knowledge of *brahman*, contends Sankara, is very different from the knowledge of a ritual enjoined in *sruti*. In the latter case, certain prescribed actions are necessary, subsequent to understanding, for bringing the desired results of the ritual into being. *Sruti* sentences revealing *brahman*, however, fulfill their purpose in being correctly understood.

In connection with the subject-matter of injunctions are to be found certain acts which are like the Agnihotra to be performed subsequent to the understanding of the text, through a combination of numerous accessories, to wit, the agent etc.

⁵⁰ *Brahmasutrabhasya* 1.1.4, pp. 39-40.

⁵¹ It should be explained here that in Sankara's view, knowledge itself, once it has emerged, requires no accessories for giving rise to *moksa*. Its emergence, however, is dependent upon various factors, including a moral transformation of intellect, will, and emotion. Sankara, for example, emphasizes that even inquiry with the aid of the right *pramana* does not produce knowledge in one who lacks self-control and austerity, and who is arrogant. See *Bhagavadgita-bhasya*, 15: 11, p. 405, and *Katha Upanisad-bhasya*, 1.2.24, pp. 155-156.

⁵² See *Brahmasutrabhasya*, 1.1.4, p.28.

Unlike this, nothing remains to be performed here within the domain of the higher knowledge; but all actions cease simultaneously with the comprehension of the meaning of the sentences, inasmuch as nothing remains to be done apart from continuance in mere knowledge revealed by the words.⁵³

In fact, adds Sankara, the absence of any intervening action constitutes the very beauty and glory of *brahmajnana*. The gain of knowledge alone leads to the fulfillment of the aim of all human desires.⁵⁴ Even the gods, says Sankara, cannot frustrate the fruits of *brahmajnana* (that is, the attainment of *brahman*) since the latter consists merely in the cessation of *avidya*. Even as in our everyday world a form is revealed as soon as it is properly illumined in light, similarly *avidya* and its effects are negated through the proper comprehension of the words of *sruti*. In Sankara's understanding, the relationship obtaining between *brahman* and *sruti* is one between an existent but incorrectly known entity and the appropriate means of its knowledge. It is not the creation or attainment of anything new, but the right knowledge of something already there.

IV. SANKARA'S USE OF THE TERM *ANUBHAVA* IN *BRAHMASUTRABHASYA* 1.1.2

In current studies, the most often cited statement from Sankara in support of *anubhava* as a *pramana* of *brahman* occurs in his commentary on the *Brahmasutra*. Here Sankara says that *anubhava*, and so forth, can be used as a means of inquiry about *brahman*.⁵⁵ In view of the significance attached to this statement, it is important that we examine the context in which it occurs.

The discussion in which Sankara expresses this view is prompted by an objection that the second *sutra*, "That (is Brahman) from which (are derived) the birth etc. of this universe," seeks to establish *brahman* by an inferential argument.⁵⁶ Sankara emphatically denies this

⁵³ Mundaka Upanisad-bhasya 1.15, p. 88.

⁵⁴ *Brahmasutrabhasya*, 1.1.4, p. 36. Also *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad-bhasya*, 1.4.7, p.93.

⁵⁵ *Brahmasutrabhasya*, 1.1.2, p. 16.

⁵⁶ The inference suggested here is the *Nyaya* argument that any purposeful effect must have an intelligent cause. The aim of this objection is to challenge the claim of *sruti* as the only *pramana* of *brahman*.

view. The *sutras*, he says, are meant for "stringing together the flowers of the sentences of the Upanisads." They only cite and analyze the *Vedanta-vakyas* because

the realization of Brahman results from the firm conviction arising from the deliberation on the (Vedic) texts and their meanings, but not from other means of knowledge like inference, etc.⁵⁷

Having said this, Sankara adds that after *brahman* is revealed as the world-cause by *sruti*, inferential arguments not opposed to the Upanisad texts can be employed as a means of reinforcing these texts. *Sruti* itself, Sankara points out, in texts such as "(The Self is) to be heard of, to be reflected on," and "A man well informed and intelligent can reach the country of the Gandharas; similarly in this world, a man who has a teacher attains knowledge," prescribes and accepts the aid of human intelligence and reasoning.

It is in the immediate context of suggesting a supplementary role for all other *pramanas* that Sankara mentions *anubhava* as a means of knowledge. It is also significant that he adds "and so forth" after *anubhava* (*anubhavadayas ca*). This would suggest that no special significance is being attached to *anubhava*. The inevitable conclusion here is that *anubhava* is grouped along with all other *pramanas* whose roles are conceived by Sankara as only subordinate and supplementary to *sruti*. There seems no justification from this discussion for the deliberate singling out of *anubhava* and the claim that it is the ultimate *pramana* of *brahman*. The context and development of argument here does not vindicate such an interpretation.

Sankara clearly explains why it is possible to have supplementary *pramanas* in inquiring about *brahman*. In the case of inquiry into *dharma*, for example, *sruti* alone can be employed, for the result is yet to be produced and is dependent on human effort. The result cannot be experienced prior to its production.⁵⁸ The inquiry into *brahman*, however, Sankara says, relates to an already existing entity and admits, therefore, of the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 1.1.2, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 16. Where *sruti*, for instance, mentions a certain result as the effect of a particular ritual, there is no scope for enforcing such a connection by resorting to any supplementary *pramana*. One is dependent entirely on the authority of the *sruti*. Even reasoning has little scope in helping to establish that such and such a ritual will produce such and such a result. One is called upon to implement the mandate.

use of other *pramanas*.⁵⁹ The clear idea of the contrast here is to suggest that because *brahman* is immediately available and not outside the range of one's knowledge and experience, other *pramanas* can be used to support the revelations of *sruti*. Besides, *anubhava* here seems to be used in a very wide sense. It can include any experience which can be analyzed to support and reinforce the primary revelations of *sruti*. Sankara, for example, frequently uses the experiences of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep to demonstrate a persisting and unchanging knower. This is a good example of the supportive use of everyday experience.

The important point is that there are no grounds here or elsewhere for seeing any of these other sources of knowledge as independent or alternative means of *brahmajnana* in Sankara. This is reinforced in the course of the same discussion where an objection is raised that if *brahman* is an existing reality, it should be the object of other means of inquiry, and *sruti* inquiry is futile. Sankara's reply leaves no room for doubt.

Not so; for Brahman's relation with anything cannot be grasped, It being outside the range of sense perception. The senses naturally comprehend objects and not Brahman. Had Brahman been an object of sense perception, knowledge would have been of the form, "This product is related to (i.e., produced by) Brahman". Again, even when the mere effect (i.e., the universe) is cognized, one cannot ascertain whether it is related to Brahman (as its cause) or to something else. Therefore the aphorism, "That from which" etc., is not meant to present an inference.⁶⁰

The issue is put even further beyond doubt when Sankara says that the next *sutra* (1.1.3), " Since the scriptures are its valid means," is meant for establishing *sruti* as the only *pramana* of *brahman*.⁶¹ We are left with no choice, therefore, but to see this reference to *anubhava* in the same light as Sankara's mention of any other *pramana* in relation to *sruti* and *brahmajnana*. It is difficult to accept that if Sankara wished to establish *anubhava* as

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

⁶¹ Ibid., 1.1.3, pp. 19-20.

the definitive *pramana* of *brahman* he would have chosen to do so through this single reference. Sankara's point here is that while the direct revelation of *brahman* is the concern of *sruti* alone, other methods of inquiry and reasoning can assist us in removing doubt and in understanding the words of *sruti*.

CONCLUSION

It is palpable, therefore, that Sankara presents an argued and developed rationale for *sruti* as a unique source of *brahmajnana*, centered on its logicity, its adequacy, and its fruitfulness. Radhakrishnan's view that it is difficult to find support in Sankara for the claim that inquiry into the Vedas is the only avenue to the knowledge of *brahman* is absolutely without basis. In fact, there is no dearth of evidence to support the view that Sankara saw *sruti* as the only valid source of this knowledge. Unsubstantial also is Devaraja's argument that Sankara's reliance on *sruti* is an expression of his "ultra-orthodox mood." Sankara's elaborate way of justifying the necessity for a *pramana* consisting of words (*sabda*) completely belies the argument that his recourse to *sruti* was motivated merely by the wish to gain the support of an authoritative tradition for his views. *Sruti*, contrary to the view of current opinion, is perceived by him as a unique source of knowledge about *brahman*, justified by the fact that we cannot otherwise know *brahman*. While one may question Sankara's exegesis of particular scriptural passages, his endorsement of *sruti* as the only credible *pramana* of *brahmajnana* seems beyond dispute.

In relation to the views of Smart and others that *sruti* only affords a provisional or hypothetical knowledge of *brahman*, we cannot overemphasize the significance and implication of Sankara's arguments for the adequacy and immediate fruitfulness of the knowledge of *brahman*, afforded through the words of *sruti*. There is no evidence that Sankara conceives knowledge gained from inquiry into *sruti* as provisional, or that it needs to be confirmed by any other source of knowledge. There is no justification for the claim by modern commentators that Sankara posits a special experience (*anubhava*) as an alternative or ultimate *pramana* over *sruti*. In fact, it is accurate to say that Sankara perceives *sruti* as being necessary for correcting and interpreting the meaning of all

human experiences in relation to the gain of *brahmajnana*. In the logic of Sankara's views, *sruti* could not claim the status of a *pramana* if it fails independently to engender valid knowledge (*prama*). In the case of Sankara, it is entirely conjectural to affirm that he saw *sruti* as being useful only for the inferior inquirer or that he cited *sruti* merely to support conclusions about *brahman* which were independently established through some other source.