

# Aham brahmāsmi—Not A ‘Sampad’ Correspondence Statement

Ivan Andrijačić

**T**HIS ARTICLE FOCUSES ON Śrī Śaṅkarācharya’s interpretation of the famous statement ‘*Aham brahmāsmi*; I am Brahman’ as found at the beginning of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BAU) 1.4.10.

ब्रह्म वा इदमग्र आसीत्, तदात्मानमेवावेत् ‘अहं  
ब्रह्मास्मि’ इति । तस्मात् तत् सर्वमभवत्तद्यो यो देवानां  
प्रत्यबुध्यत स एव तदभवत्तथर्षीणां तथा मनुष्याणां  
तद्धेतत्पश्यन्नृषिर्वाग्देवः प्रतिपेदेऽहं मनुरभवं सूर्यश्चेति ॥

This (self) was indeed Brahman in the beginning. It knew only Itself as, ‘I am Brahman.’ Therefore, It became all. And whoever among the gods knew It became That; and the same with sages and men. The sage Vamadeva, while realising this (self) as That, knew, ‘I was Manu, and the sun.’<sup>1</sup>

Śaṅkara’s interpretation of this statement appears in the context of his refutation of two different interpretations of *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10. Rejecting these two interpretations (which most likely belong to some older Vedānta sub-schools) is important for Śaṅkara because the main metaphysical and exegetical tenets of his philosophy are mirrored in the key question of whether the statement ‘I am Brahman’ conveys *correspondence* or *identity*.

The text of the Upaniṣad begins with the claim that, in the beginning, this world was *Brahman*, which knew only itself as ‘I am Brahman’ (*aham brahmāsmi*). As a result, it became the Whole (*sarva*). The Upaniṣad continues with the claim that, whosoever of the gods, seers, and human beings realises unity with Brahman becomes the *Whole*. But whosoever worships the gods believing that the gods are different from oneself, does

not know and serves the gods, as animals serve human. This is why it does not suit the gods for people to know themselves as Brahman.

Śaṅkara begins his commentary by conveying two different interpretations of the nature of Brahman in this Upaniṣadic passage. Ānandagiri<sup>2</sup> attributes the first (wrong) interpretation paraphrased in Śaṅkara’s commentary to an unnamed (and unknown to us) *vṛttikṛt*, ‘author of a commentary’. The passage states that the Brahman in question is lower Brahman (*brahmāparam*). It should also be noted that this argument is carefully structured in a five-fold fashion resembling the famous ‘syllogism’ structure described in Nyāya-Sūtra 1.1.32–39. (1) First, the thesis (*pratijñā*) is presented that the Brahman referred to here is lower Brahman (*brahmāpara*). (2) The reason (*hetu*) for this claim is that only lower Brahman can become Whole as a result of effort. (3) As it is a general rule (*udāharāṇa*) that the highest Brahman cannot enter the state of becoming Whole by knowledge, and (4) becoming Whole as an effect of knowledge is mentioned in the text of the Upaniṣad (*upanaya*), (5) the Brahman referred to in the passage *brahma vā idam agra āsīt* must be conditioned Brahman (*nigamana*, conclusion).

The second interpretation that Śaṅkara paraphrases (and later criticises) states that the Brahman in question is actually a man belonging to the Brāhmaṇa class who strives to become Brahman. According to this interpretation, man first attains unity with lower Brahman through the knowledge of lower Brahman or Prajāpati, accompanied by rites. Afterwards, he seeks unity with the

highest Brahman through the knowledge of unity with him. According to this second interpretation, identification with the highest Brahman is obviously attained through a gradual process, wherein identification with Prajāpati is a halfway point. The final realisation of the highest Brahman is achieved through the statement 'I am Brahman'.

Ānandagiri attributes this interpretation to Bhartṛprapañca, the author of an older, now lost commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* that has survived only in fragments found in Śaṅkara's Bhāṣya, Sureśvara's Vārtika, and Ānandagiri's sub-commentaries (Tīkā) on both works (of Śaṅkara and Sureśvara). This idea of two steps of realisation corresponds appropriately to the idea of gradual release (*kramamukti*) advocated by the school of Bhedābhedavāda, to which Bhartṛprapañca supposedly belonged. The claim that knowledge accompanied with ritual action brings the realisation of Brahman corresponds to the doctrine of *jñānakarma-samuccaya* or the combination of knowledge and action also advocated by the Bhedābhedavadins.

The word 'Brahman' that Bhartṛprapañca interprets as 'a man of the Brāhmaṇa class' refers to the Brahman mentioned in the sentence, '*Brahma vā idam agra āsīt*; in the beginning, this was only Brahman'. The statement '*aham brahmāsmi*' from the same passage is used as the means by which this man of the Brāhmaṇa class may become the Whole, but only after unity with lower Brahman or Prajāpati, is established through knowledge and rites. This interpretation is in accord with the previous statement asserting that the highest Brahman cannot become Whole as a result of knowledge.

Śaṅkara rejects both of these interpretations by claiming that, if Brahman is understood in this way, the error of transitoriness (*anityatva-doṣa*) would apply, as it is impossible to assume a different state and remain eternal and immutable. Śaṅkara here claims that the knowledge of

Brahman (*aham brahmāsmi*) cannot change some state of lower Brahman into the state of being Whole, because in this case the Whole cannot be eternal (as it existed as lower Brahman previously and might evolve further into something else). Śaṅkara here, of course, indicates the idea that the knowledge 'I am Brahman' means the cessation of the idea of not being the Whole created by ignorance (*avidyākṛta*), and not a real change in state. Therefore, the word 'Brahman' should be taken literally, in its primal sense (*mukhyārtha*), and the forceful interpretation of Brahman as a man belonging to the Brāhmaṇa class is superfluous. Essentially, both interpretations that Śaṅkara criticises imply a transformation of Brahman that Śaṅkara cannot accept because Brahman is immutable. If the transformation of Brahman is real, it cannot remain absolute and as such unchangeable. Therefore, Śaṅkara considers change no more than a false idea brought about by ignorance, which is dispelled by the knowledge of unity with Brahman.

After Śaṅkara refutes a few possible smaller objections, he conveys another comprehensive objection according to which the transmigrating soul (*samsārin*) is different from the Lord (*īśvara*), which is also emphasised in doctrine founded on reasoning (*tarkaśāstra*) represented by Kaṇāda and Akṣapāda. On the other hand, revelation (*śruti*) also prescribes the path of knowledge and the path of (ritual) action embodied in the Upaniṣadic doctrine of two paths,<sup>3</sup> which would be meaningless if the transmigrating self is equal to the Brahman who has fulfilled all desires (*āptakāma*). Therefore, the Brahman in question must be a man on a path to becoming Brahman. This objection surely further elaborates Bhartṛprapañca's interpretation; this may also be a paraphrasing of Bhartṛprapañca's commentary. It is, however, possible that Śaṅkara is simply deriving all possible implications that might arise from Bhartṛprapañca's interpretation in order to refute any objection that might be raised.



Śaṅkara answers with the claim that such a position would render Upaniṣadic scriptural statements about the highest Brahman useless. Why? In this case, statements such as, '*Ayam ātmā brahma*; Brahman is this Self here' would mean that *ātman* in the sentence is a transmigratory Self, implying that unity with the transmigrating soul would lead to becoming the Whole. If the Upaniṣadic text here does not describe the highest Brahman, how can the knowledge of the highest Brahman appear regardless?

The opponent further maintains that the instruction here is meant for aspiring practitioners who practise *sampad*. This objection is interesting as the question arises as to what *sampad* means here.<sup>4</sup> The root-noun *sampad* and its corresponding verbal forms cover a wide array of concepts and meanings in Vedic and post-Vedic literature. However, in this case, the most likely meaning of *sampad* is the Vedic 'equation' and 'correspondence'. Therefore, Śaṅkara's objector's interpretation of the concept of the *sampad* implies a system of correspondences found in Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads that contain ritual, micro- and macrocosmic correspondences. These appear to be a central concern of the Upaniṣadic thinkers who believed the universe to be constituted of a web of relations or cosmic connections hidden from ordinary people.<sup>5</sup> These correspondences were mostly devoted to the establishment of a relationship between sacrificial ritual and the universe, the gods, and people. In the objector's opinion, 'I' (*aham*) is a microcosmic correlative to the macrocosmic entity 'Brahman' in the same way, that is, the head of the sacrificial horse is equated with the dawn, its sight with the sun, and so on in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.1.1.

Śaṅkara, however, rejects the claim that the statement '*aham brahmāsmi*' is a *sampad* correspondence. Contrary to the structure of *sampad* correspondences (head of the sacrificial horse = dawn), the word *ātman* 'Highest Self' is used

synonymously with Brahman in Upaniṣadic statements. In *sampad*, different corresponding entities are equated. Śaṅkara answers the possible objection that *sampad* correspondences may lead to unity by stating that *sampad* correspondences are just ideas that never lead to the unity of concepts they compare. He asserts that if the terms are not identical in the moment the correspondences are stated, meditation of such correspondence cannot lead to identity, for the simple reason that one thing cannot become another.

The point is that, in Śaṅkara's philosophy, knowledge mediated by Upaniṣadic statements does not create anything new; it merely dispels ignorance by revealing knowledge that is constantly present. Knowledge only removes ignorance and reveals the truth; knowledge does not create anything new. Therefore, a word of revelation cannot make different things equal. The Upaniṣads are informative, and not creative.

This is how Śaṅkara actually interprets the role of revelation: it mediates knowledge. Thus, he makes the Upaniṣadic revelation independent of the traditional division of the Vedas into *mantras* (sacred sayings), *vidhi* (ritual injunctions), *arthavāda* (explanations, eulogies), *nāmadheya* (titles), and *niṣedha* (prohibitions) which originate from Pūrvamīmāṃsā. Śaṅkara and his followers consider the Upaniṣadic revelation an independent textual unit whose sole task is to mediate knowledge of ultimate truth. As *sampad* passages in Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads are traditionally treated as *arthavāda*, illustrative and explanatory passages, it is clear that the most important proclamations such as *aham brahmāsmi* cannot be merely *arthavāda* that are subordinated to the *vidhi* injunctions.

As a part of this discussion, Śaṅkara introduces the exegetical rule according to which the beginning of the text (*upakrama*) should be in accordance with its end (*upasamhāra*). The argument is that the Brahman that appears at the beginning

of the text cannot be a transmigrating soul—different from Brahman, *who will only know himself by insight into himself* as 'aham brahmāsmi' (I am Brahman)—because in such an interpretation, the beginning and end of the text discussing Brahman and not a transmigrating soul would not correspond, and the text would lose its coherence. Also, the name *brahmavidyā* 'knowledge of Brahman'<sup>6</sup> would be compromised, if the 'it' in 'it knew only itself' (*tad ātmānam evāvet*), from BAU 1.4.10, were a transmigrating Self (*samsārin*). If the passage truly described the transmigrating Self, the name *samsārividyā* 'knowledge of the transmigrating one', as Śaṅkara puts it, would appear in BAU 1.4.9 instead of *brahmavidyā*. The terms *upakrama* 'beginning' and *upasambhāra* 'end, conclusion' belong to the group of the six means for determining the meaning of the text (*śadliṅga*).<sup>7</sup>

It is very important for Śaṅkara to refute the claim that the statement *aham brahmāsmi* is a *sampad* correspondence for reasons that can be grouped into two categories. The first group of reasons can be considered metaphysical ones. Śaṅkara must refute metaphysical claims that the Self is essentially different from the highest Brahman, and that the statement *aham brahmāsmi* conveys a comparison of corresponding but essentially different concepts (*ātman* as the individual, transmigrating self vs. Brahman). If such a claim were postulated, Brahman would not be absolute. Therefore, Śaṅkara must maintain synonymy between *ātman* and *Brahman* and between the identification of 'I' and 'Brahman'. In the same sense, Śaṅkara considers it impossible for any transformation to take place that is brought about by knowledge engendered from meditation on the *sampad* correspondence in the sense of older ritual interiorisation. Knowledge implies only the dispelling of ignorance, not the transformation of an entity or the creation of a new one.

The second group of reasons are exegetical and

hermeneutical, as they are mainly concerned with the status of Upaniṣadic revelation. *Upaniṣadic text plays the role of mediating knowledge that does not transform the seeker, but rather only dispels false knowledge*. The implied idea that the statement 'I am Brahman' would fall into the category of *arthavāda* if it were a *sampad* correspondence, falls under the exegetical group of reasons. In this case, the statement would lose its power of mediating highest knowledge and would become subordinated to the *vidhi* injunctions for ritual performance. However, in Śaṅkara's system, this would imply that the Upaniṣads are subsidiary to Brāhmaṇas, and that knowledge is subsidiary to (ritual) action. This is a major threat to Śaṅkara's system, for which reason he must refute such claims and postulate the statement '*aham brahmāsmi*' as insight that reveals the unchanging truth of the one absolute Brahman. ❧

## References

1. *Bṛihadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.10.
2. Ānandagiri's subcommentary (ṭikā) on Śaṅkara's *Bṛhadāranyakopaniṣad-Bhāṣya*. Ed. K.S. Agase, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 15, Poona 1891, p. 142.
3. The path of the gods (*devayana*) and the path of ancestors (*pitryana*) cf. *Bṛhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad* 6.2.2; 6.2.15–16; *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* 4.15.5; 5.3.2; *Kauṣītaki-Upaniṣad* 1.3; *Muṇḍaka-Upaniṣad* 3.1.6; *Praśna-Upaniṣad* 1.9–10.
4. For an elaborate discussion on both *sampad* and references to other works discussing the issue, see Bodewitz, H.W. (2003) 'The concept of 'sampad' in the Arthaśāstra, the Vedic prose texts and the Gītā. *Indo-Iranian Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 231–259.
5. Olivelle, P. (1998), *The Early Upaniṣads*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 24.
6. The title *brahmavidyā* 'knowledge of the Brahman' appears in BAU 1.4.9.
7. Others are repetition (*abhyāsa*), novelty (*apūrvatā*), result (*phala*), explanation of meaning (*arthavāda*), and fitness/analogy (*upapatti*). For details, see Andrijanić, I. (2019) *Aspects of Early Upaniṣadic Exegesis, Manas: Studies into Asia and Africa*, Vol. 4, No. 2.