Self-Knowledge as Non-Dual Awareness: A Comparative Study of Plotinus and Indian Advaita Philosophy

Binita Mehta
Senior Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, Texas State University
601 University Dr., San Marcos, TX 78666, USA
bvm6@txstate.edu

Abstract

The paper examines the problem of self-knowledge from the perspectives of Plotinus and the Indian Advaita (non-dual) school. Analyzing the subject-object relation, I show that according to both Plotinus and Advaita thinkers, full self-knowledge demands complete absence of otherness. Plotinus argues that if self-consciousness is divided into subject-object relation then one will know oneself as contemplated but not as contemplating (v.3.5) and no real self-knowledge obtains in this case. Śaṅkara, who constitutes an important representative of Advaita thought, points out that the self cannot know itself as an object because what is called an object to be known becomes established when it is separated from the self, the subject. I argue that at the level of the One, similar to the state of ātman consciousness in Advaita framework, the soul experiences itself in expansive non-dual consciousness. Lastly, I examine the role of non-duality as the foundation of knowledge.

Keywords

Plotinian mysticism – Indian Advaita thought – non-discursive cognition – philosophy of self – mind and consciousness

Introduction

Plotinus and Indian Advaita (non-dual) school of thought investigate a question of fundamental importance: in what condition can the human self come to possess knowledge of itself. In this paper, I examine the reasoning employed
by Plotinus and Indian Advaita thinkers in their discussion of the nature of self-knowledge. Though a number of comparative studies on Neoplatonism and Indian philosophy exist, so far a detailed analysis of the manner in which Plotinus and Advaita thinkers elucidate the problem of self-knowledge has not been carried out. I focus on the analysis of the subject-object relation at different cognitive levels and show that Plotinus and Advaita thinkers are aligned in their understanding about the necessary condition for achieving true and complete self-knowledge. According to both, the full reality of the self is brought to oneself in a mystical awakening constituted by the non-dual awareness.

I address the question regarding the nature of the union with the One, in particular, about the status of the self that has ascended to the One. Lawrence Hatab (1982), in a perceptive comparative study, has shown a parallel structure between the Plotinian and the *Upaniṣadic* metaphysical schemes. The Plotinian and the Advaita Vedantic framework—founded upon the worldview of the *Upaniṣads*—may be seen as complementary to each other, with certain aspects presented more explicitly in one and certain others in the other. Drawing also upon the Advaita view of self-consciousness, I argue for an encompassing consciousness rather than the loss of self-awareness in the state of union. At the end of the paper I examine the epistemological significance of the non-dual mode of awareness. While fully activated at the level of the One and in the state of *Brahman* (or *ātman*), the non-dual mode I suggest is also reflected in more circumscribed contexts as the power of recognition and is involved in all forms of valid knowledge exercised by the soul.

I will present the Plotinian and the Advaita frameworks individually in the first and the second sections respectively. In the first section, I discuss Plotinus’ analysis of cognitive acts associated with the soul and the Intellect and explain why according to Plotinus self-knowledge demands transcendence of the subject-object duality. In the second section, I analyze the Advaita view that the self can truly be known only as the subject and show how this entails the non-dual mode of awareness. The third part examines their views in a comparative fashion, analyzing the parallels in their understanding of the self’s experience of the ultimate union (with the One and *Brahman*) and in their assessment of the cognitive faculties.

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1 Bussanich (1994) too indicates that union with the One “means an unlimited expansion, not an annihilation, of the self” (p.5326). This paper will further support this type of view that the highest mystical experience is constituted by “unlimited” self-awareness.

2 I do not consider the question of cross-cultural historical influences in this paper. This paper focuses on an examination of the structural similarities between Plotinus and the Advaita framework regarding the problem concerning self-knowledge. Vishwa Adluri addresses...
1 Plotinus

In *Ennead* V.3 Plotinus discusses the problem concerning the nature of self-thinking. The opening chapter poses the question whether something complex that divides itself into a subject and object could think itself. In a situation where something is a compound such that “with one of its constituents” it thinks the rest of the constituents then that thing cannot know the whole of itself, if the constituent that thinks of other constituents did not also “think itself” (V.3.1). Self-thinking requires that the knowing element in its act of knowing simultaneously apprehended itself. A compound in which the knower and the known belong to different centers or to distinct parts cannot possess self-thinking. Plotinus in this chapter (V.3.1) indicates that true self-thinking belongs to an entity that is sufficiently simple. He first notes that the absolutely simple might not be able to “return to itself” and hence think itself. I will discuss the implications of the One’s perfect simplicity to the problem of self-knowledge towards the end of this section. In this first chapter of V.3 Plotinus

the issue of Plotinus’ Orientalism in a recent work (2014). Adluri suggests that the Indian epic *Mahābhārata* has greater likelihood of direct influence than the *Upaniṣads* given that: “whereas the *Upaniṣads* were esoteric texts, and thus guarded within a lineage of pedagogical succession, the *Mahābhārata* was freely circulated and actively propagated” (p.92). If this has been the case, then the similarities between the Plotinian and the Advaita philosophies point in the direction of universal structures of human consciousness, a position which Hatab and R. Ciapalo (2002) both support.

The likelihood of more wide-ranging influences also cannot be conclusively ruled out given that the exact nature of exchanges in the ancient world could be difficult to pin down and the interactions could have taken place in a variety of ways. Armstrong (1979) mentions a curious fact about Plotinus’ articulation of the One. According to him, Plotinus is the first philosopher in the West “to attempt any serious treatment of the question of the Divine Infinity” (p.48). Plotinus clarifies the distinction between true infinity (what is without limits) and the “unboundedness” of “indefinite, vague material multiplicity” (p.58); i.e. he draws a clear demarcation between infinity and indefiniteness. When the term “unbounded” is applied to the Intellect, it is in a restricted sense as what is “unbounded in one way but limited in another” (p.53). Plotinus carefully delineates the notion of absolute infinity and resorts to “negative theology” to express the reality of the One (p.53). The idea of highest reality as infinite is explicitly articulated in the *Upaniṣads*; this raises the question about the probability of transmission of the notion of infinity from the Indian sources. In the case of Plotinus, there is a tendency to address the problem of influences in binary terms, but the situation could be more complex. Influence need not imply passive reception. It could be that Plotinus was attracted towards Indian thought due to the fact that he saw his philosophical views and experiences as being resonated in it. Thus even if one argues for some Indian influence on Plotinus, this does not necessarily preclude inspiration or dilute originality.
refers to something that is qualifiedly simple, the Intellect. In what follows, I discuss the cognitive functions characteristic of the soul and the Intellect to determine their status with respect to self-thinking.

The acts of the (embodied) soul are associated with the faculties of sense perception and discursive thought. In sense-perception there is an awareness of external things or of the phenomena that occur within the body, but in both the cases the apprehension is of something that is outside of the perceptive elements (V.3.2). Reason analyzes the impressions provided to it by sense-organs. The reasoning faculty is illuminated by Intellect and in making a judgment about a particular thing it relies on the Intellect. In determining certain qualities of objects perceived through the senses, the reasoning part makes use of the standards that originate in the Intellect. This means that reason in its act of apprehension employs norms that lie outside of itself (V.3.3). Plotinus concludes that the reasoning element does not “return upon itself” (V.3.2) and self-thinking cannot be granted to it (V.3.3). The reasoning part does not wholly think itself given that its act of knowing proceeds from the duality of the knower and the known; that is, reason maintains a relation of separation between itself and the objects it thinks. In the case of reason, the knowing act is also not fully contained within itself. The existence of externality or otherness in the operation of sense perception and discursive reason renders them incapable of carrying out genuine self-thinking.

Next in V.3.5 Plotinus proceeds to show how self-thinking could be posited of Intellect. The thinking or the seeing of Intellect is not on the basis of one part of itself grasping another part of itself. If this were the case then we have a situation where one part of the Intellect will be the seer and the other the seen. Such a relationship of duality between the seer and the seen, as Plotinus showed earlier, cannot constitute self-thinking. But because there is identity of the Intellect, intellection and the intelligible (V.3.5), the Intellect thinks that which is itself or contemplates itself with itself.3

... it (i.e. Intellect) will think with the intellection which it is itself and will think the intelligible, which it is itself. In both ways, then, it will think itself, in that intellection is itself and in that the intelligible is itself which it thinks in its intellection and which is itself (V.3.5).

The “Intellect itself is its objects,” (V.4.2) and hence when the Intellect sees the intelligibles it sees itself. Unlike the soul whose thinking draws from something else, Intellect’s thinking is “from its own nature” (V.3.6). The Intellect,

3 All translations of the *Enneads* are from the Loeb translation by A.H. Armstrong.
whose being is activity, has its thinking entirely self-directed (v.3.7). Plotinus likens Intellect’s thinking to light seeing itself. The Intellect sees or thinks not through a medium different from itself, but its seeing operates through itself (v.3.8). “Thinking itself,” the Intellect “is thus with itself and holds its activity directed to itself” (v.3.7). The true Intellect, in contrast to the practical reason, which concerns itself with external world, does not look to the “outside” (v.3.6); the true Intellect carries out contemplation of what is within itself.

Plotinus’ initial analysis in v.3 construes the self-thinking of Intellect as divested of otherness and as fulfilling the requirement for self-knowledge. But his examination in the latter sections of v.3 seems to bring the self-knowledge of Intellect into question. Regarding the self-thinking of Intellect, Plotinus says: “… Intellect needs to see itself, or rather to possess the seeing of itself, first because it is multiple, and then because it belongs to another, and must necessarily be a seer, and a seer of that other …” (v.3.10). Intellect is a complex whole since it contains plurality of forms or intelligibles; it is a “unity with internal differentiations”.4 Though Intellect thinks itself, its thinking is still a unity-in-duality:

The thinking principle, then, when it thinks, must be in two parts, and either one must be external to the other or both must be in the same, and the thinking must be in otherness, and necessarily also in sameness; and the proper objects of thought must be the same and other in relation to the intellect (v.3.10).

The relation between the thinker and the object of thought in the intelligible realm is not that of perfect unity.5 Hence Intellect’s thinking necessarily involves a movement towards the object: “… the intellect has its intellectual effort empty of content if it does not grasp and comprehend the object which it thinks; for it does not have thinking without its object of thought” (v.6.2). It is only through the act of reaching out to the object that Intellect thinks itself or

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5 Certain passages in the *Enneads* suggest that Intellect is unified while some others indicate it to be a multiplicity. According to Bussanich (1997, p.194), this is Plotinus’ manner of highlighting both the unity and the plurality of the intelligible world. The identity of the Intellect, intellection and the intelligible asserted in the passage cited above (v.3.5) must be understood qualifiedly because ultimately the Intellect is a one-many, which is again indicated by the following statement: “And if intellect itself is what thinks and what is thought, it will be double and not single and so not the one ...” (vi.9.2).
sees itself. This implies that there is a degree of disjunction between Intellect and the apprehension it has of itself and which means that Intellect does not possess an immediate knowledge of itself.

The One is the source of Intellect’s existence and thinking power. In v.3.7, Plotinus suggests that Intellect’s knowledge of itself relies upon its knowledge of the One. Intellect strives towards the One but it continually fails to fully attain the One; Intellect does not apprehend the One in itself, in its simplicity. If there remains a certain degree of cognitive gap between Intellect and the One, then Intellect does not perfectly satisfy the condition of the identity of the subject, the object and also the act of knowing which Plotinus in v.3.5 saw as essential for the exercise of complete self-knowledge. In the relation of duality with the One, Intellect would possess imperfect vision of the principle on which it is dependent and this would consequently limit Intellect’s grasp of itself. Henri Oosthout characterizes the self-knowledge of Intellect as a “deficient form of self-knowledge.”

Now the soul when it ascends to the Intellect comes to be assimilated to the intelligible world (VI.7.36); “A man has certainly become Intellect when he lets all the rest which belongs to him go and looks at this with this and himself with

6 I am indebted to H. Oosthout for clarifying this particular critical point about the way in which Intellect’s apprehension of itself takes place through cognitive movement (1991, p.133).
7 Intellect is actualized through contemplation upon the One. Intellect’s contemplation of the One though emerges as a pluralized vision (v.3.11). When Intellect looks towards the One, it apprehends not the absolute unity but an image of multiplicity (See Bussanich (1996) 52).
8 H. Oosthout (p.131). He observes based on v.3.7.9 that when Intellect’s “seeing, the act or the activity of seeing, is likely to be identical with the thing seen,” then Intellect’s object of contemplation “cannot be a god outside” of Intellect (p.116-117). That is, otherness between Intellect and the One would disallow Intellect to completely realize the identity of the object and the act of knowing.

Intellect attains more unified intuition, as compared to intellection, in its supra-intellectual vision. There are differing viewpoints about whether Intellect achieves complete identification with the One in the supra-intellectual intuition. According to John Phillips, Intellect is brought in more immediate presence of the One, but even in this mode of apprehension Intellect does not entirely bridge the relationship of duality with the One (1990, p.79). Bussanich notes that Intellect’s (mystical) vision seems to fall “short of identity” but then adds that the presence of “non-Intellect’ might indicate that unification is imminent” (1987, p.171); the term ‘non-Intellect’ is in reference to the passage in v.5.8: “... because it is Intellect, it sees him, when it does see him, with that of it which is not Intellect.” The critical point for my analysis is that Intellect in its activity of intellection does not attain complete self-knowledge and hence the soul would need to transcend the noetic level in order to satisfy the condition for self-knowledge.
himself: that is, it is as Intellect he sees himself” (V.3.4). Since the Intellect and
individual souls derive from the One, the noetic life of the soul does not yet af-
ford complete awareness of its reality. Only when the soul reaches the level of
the One that it fully grasps the root of itself. The soul “... when it comes to be
there [with the One] it becomes itself and what it was ...” (VI.9.9).

Plotinus speaks of the One as beyond thinking. For Plotinus, thinking nec-
essarily implies a dual structure, or the presence of otherness. He states that
“... existence of something else is a necessary condition of seeing, and if there
is nothing else seeing is useless” (V.3.10), and that “all thinking ... is of some-
thing” (VI.7.40), i.e. it involves two things that are distinguished to some de-
gree. There is thinking in Intellect, which is a differentiated whole. But the One
is completely simple, beyond all differentiation; it encompasses all things in
absolute unity without them being dispersed into diverse things (V.5.9). The
One “does not think, because there is no otherness” (VI.9.6); it has “nothing to
which to direct its activity” (V.3.10). It is an “object of thought to the intellect,
but in itself it will be neither thinker nor object of thought in the proper, au-
thentic sense ...” (V.6.2).

Though Plotinus attributes no thinking to the One, he does attribute con-
sciousness to it.9 He also states that the One “will have a simple concentration
of attention on itself”, and that its attention is not other than itself due to there
being “no distance or difference in regard to itself” (VI.7.39). This suggests that
the One is the state of non-dual consciousness without an object, rather than
a state where consciousness is absent. The One is in complete union with itself
and immediately present to itself and hence according to Plotinus the One has
no need to think itself (VI.9.6). For Plotinus, thinking is also intertwined with
the need to get an intimate understanding of oneself.

For it seems likely that thinking has been given as a help to the natures
which are of the more divine kind, but lesser, and as something like an
eye for their blindness. But why should the eye which is itself light need
to see real being? But what does need to seeks light through the eye be-
because it has darkness in itself. If then thinking is light, and light does not
seek light, that ray which does not seek light would not seek to think, and
will not add thinking to itself ... (VI.7.41).

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9 “It is completely able to discern itself; it has life in itself and all things in itself, and its think-
ing of itself is itself, and exists by a kind of immediate self-consciousness, in everlasting rest
and in a manner of thinking different from the thinking of Intellect” (V.4.2).
The One transcends thought because it has no ignorance about itself due to the absence of all duality (VI.9.6). The One undergoes no cognitive movement within itself and can be said to be fully established in the self-awareness devoid of any degree of distinction between itself and its awareness.\(^{10}\)

The soul attains the One by eliminating all otherness (VI.9.8). In the state of union with the One the soul is one and simple, “with no distinction in himself either in relation to himself or to other things” (VI.9.11). It so completely fuses with the One that the One is not apprehended as a “seen,” or as an object of cognition, but as the very existential reality of its being.\(^{11}\) The soul's awareness of the One is experienced as a “presence”, which is not an extension of reasoned knowledge or noetic perception (VI.9.4), but superior to both. In this non-dual awareness of the One, where all thought and consciousness of duality have been transcended, the soul comes to achieve perfect self-knowledge.

\(^{10}\) Now there are passages, such as the following, which seem to suggest that the One does not possess self-consciousness: “... the multiple might seek itself and wish to converge on and be conscious of itself. But by what way will that which is altogether one go to itself? At what point will it need self-consciousness? But it is one and the same thing which is better than self-consciousness and better than all thinking” (V.6.5). Gary Gurtler (1988) analyzes the use of the term *synaisthesis* in the *Enneads* and argues that Plotinus employs it with two distinct meanings. The primary meaning of this term is associated with the “moment of self-abiding” of the One and of the Intellect in their respective states of completeness, when each is “most of all what it is” (p.53-54, 58). This is the sense in which *synaisthesis* is used in V.4.2, in which the self-consciousness of the One is affirmed. In the above passage however, the term has a different implication. It signifies a “power moving from multiplicity to unity” and which means that Plotinus is speaking of a consciousness that results from a unifying activity (p.54, 58). This type of consciousness cannot be attributed to the One. Based on Gurtler’s analysis it can be concluded that when Plotinus denies consciousness to the One, he denies that consciousness which is associated with the movement towards unity.

See also Bussanich (1987) who argues for the presence of undifferentiated self-awareness at the level of the One; Phillips speaks of the “highest degree of intuitive awareness” as the state of the One “in which the One is its own intuition of itself” (p.100, footnote 39).

\(^{11}\) “Since, then, there were not two, but the seer himself was one with the seen (for it was not really seen, but united to him (the One)) ...” (VI.9.11).
Indian Advaita Thought

Now I turn to Śaṅkara (8th-9th CE), who in this paper will serve as one of the chief representatives of the Indian Advaita thought.Śaṅkara carries out an investigation of the human self on the basis of the principle of “negation.” In this method, the multifarious aspects of our being are subjected to a type of phenomenological analysis for the purpose of arriving at that which cannot be negated or excluded. An element constitutes a remainder if it is not superseded by something else or cannot be cancelled out or invalidated by another experience. Śaṅkara locates the real Self in the remainder, which survives the process of negation and which cannot be eliminated. He speaks of the Self as the very limit beyond which negation cannot go.

For Śaṅkara, the reality of the Self is manifested in the fundamental awareness of “I am,” which we possess about our very existence. He points out that the experience of one’s self is evident given that we have a constant sense of “I exist” or “I am” (Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya I.1.1). The “I am” awareness does not represent the complete consciousness of the Self, as I will explain later in the section, but it qualitatively expresses the nature of the real Self in the ordinary waking state and hence could be said to participate in the real Self. This basic consciousness of the reality of my own being is beyond negation. Moreover, it doesn't depend on any external means of knowledge to establish itself; the sheer fact of my existence requires no proof and is known immediately, without my having to resort to any discursive judgment. This fundamental ‘I am’ awareness is thus self-evident or self-authenticated. Śaṅkara characterizes it as self-luminous because it reveals itself by its own power, i.e. it does not require another level of awareness to

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12 Śaṅkara is the first systematic expositor of the Advaita Vedānta doctrine. The Upaniṣads, the Brahma Sūtras, and the Bhagavad Gītā constitute the foundational texts, or the starting-points (prasthānatraya) of the Vedānta school. Śaṅkara composed commentaries on these texts. Śaṅkara may have written a number of independent works, but only the text called Upadeśa Sāhasrī has been established with certainty by modern scholarship as an authentic work of Śaṅkara. See Alston’s introduction in vol.1 (2004), chapter 1 on the sources of Śaṅkara’s doctrine.

13 “Because the Self cannot be negated, it is that which remains after saying ‘not thus, not thus’ (to all else)” (Upadeśa Sāhasrī11.2.1). All excerpts from the Upadeśa Sāhasrī are from the translation by A.J. Alston (1990) except when indicated otherwise. Alston had consulted Sengaku Mayeda’s (1979) translation in preparing his own translation.

illuminate itself or to make itself known. Such consciousness is not identified with the mental, psychological or bodily phenomena. This fundamental awareness continues to abide amidst the fluctuating mental and bodily events; whether a particular mental or bodily state is present or not, the basic “I am” consciousness remains in the waking state. That is, the “I am” consciousness is not intertwined with or dependent upon the activities of the mental-bodily complex. But rather it is on the basis of this consciousness that we come to observe mental or bodily phenomena or know an object.

The Self for Śaṅkara is ultimately the knower itself. He speaks of it as the “Seer” that beholds the perceptions and other mental phenomena of the waking state (and also the images of the dream state) with its self-luminous light. In the Advaita framework, the mind is not in itself conscious but functions on the basis of the light of the Self (Upadeśa Sāhasrī II.18.83). Śaṅkara states that “all cognitions in all minds in all bodies are illumined” by the Self (Upadeśa Sāhasrī II.14.7). In section 3.2, I will discuss in some detail the Advaita view about the structure of the mind.

The Self as the fundamental knower consciousness cannot become an object of its own knowing given that it is the very means by which something is known. Hence one cannot step outside of the Self to observe it as an object or as the known, as Śaṅkara very well explains below:

And another reason why the knower (the Self) cannot be an object of knowledge is that he is in no way separate from himself. For it is the general rule in the world that an object of knowledge is possible if it is something separate from the knower and mediated for him by the rise of desire to know, memory, effort and means of knowledge. Knowledge bearing upon an object is only found in these circumstances. But no one can suppose that the knower is in any way separate from himself as knower and mediated through desire or any of the other factors. Memory concerns an object of memory, not the rememberer. And in the same way, desire

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15 With respect to the real Self, in which the “I am” consciousness participates, Śaṅkara says the following: The Self, which is “of the very nature of knowledge and light ... requires no other knowledge to be known by” (Upadeśa Sāhasrī II.15.40), and further: “The sun does not need the help of any other light to illumine itself. Because it is self-luminous, [Self] consciousness, likewise, requires no other consciousness to illumine itself” (Upadeśa Sāhasrī II.15.41).

16 The analysis of self-consciousness in this section is drawn from my dissertation (2012, p.49-51).

has for its object something desired, not the desiring person. And even if the rememberer or the desiring person could be the objects of memory or desire, the aforementioned infinite regress (when we tried to make the knower dependent upon means of knowledge) would in any case be unavoidable (Upadeśa Sāhasrī I.2.99).18

One cannot know the Self as an object because it is never the case that one is ever separate from one’s own self. What is called an object to be known becomes established only when it stands over and against oneself in a distinctive mode. According to Śaṅkara’s analysis, whatever appears as an object is an “adjunct” and does not belong to the essential reality of the self: “The Self should ever be apprehended as the bare knower to the exclusion of the knowable. Even that which is known objectively (i.e. in the object mode) as ‘I’ must be rejected” (Upadeśa Sāhasrī II.6.4). The mental and bodily phenomena belong to the object pole since they could potentially serve as objects of cognition. Śaṅkara states: “I (i.e. the real Self) am not of the nature of the elements composing the physical body nor of the nature of the organs of knowledge, whether taken individually or collectively. For the ultimate knower (my true Self) is different from all these since they are objects of knowledge and instruments of action” (Upadeśa Sāhasrī II.15.20). Here Śaṅkara highlights the distinction of the real Self from the body, sense-organs and mental processes and faculties, and reiterates the idea that the Self is truly experienced in the subject mode.

Now in the ordinary state of consciousness there is a certain degree of awareness of oneself as the self, but the full nature of the Self remains veiled in our ordinary experiences for two fundamental reasons. First, our sense of self comes to be conjoined with what appears in our consciousness on the object side, i.e. with the bodily and mental states. According to Śaṅkara, ordinarily an individual fails to properly distinguish the real Self from the non-self (i.e. the bodily and mental phenomena) and erroneously transfers the properties of the real Self on the non-self and vice versa. Because of the mutual superimposition (adhyāsa) of self and non-self, the person comes to identify her “I” with the attributes of the body and the mind (Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya, Introduction).19

Secondly, even though the “I am” awareness is a manifestation of the real Self, it is a curtailed form of the real Self. The true Self in the Advaita framework

18 Alston’s translation of this passage is more lucid compared to Mayeda’s (1992/1979, p.244), though essentially the same idea is expressed in both the translations.

19 In Gambhirānanda (1977). The ego constitutes the individualized awareness associated with the bodily and the mental and psychological states; i.e. the sense of oneself as an ego is brought about by a misplaced identification with the ‘non-self’.
is signified as the ātman and is identical to the Brahman, the Absolute reality. The ātman is all-pervading (sarvaga), undivided or without parts (niṣkala), free from “the pairs of opposites” (dvandva-vivarjita);20 it is the Witness or the Seer “present in all beings” and “always and everywhere the same” (Upadeśa Sāhasrī 11.15.36, 37). The ātman-Self as the subject is to be understood as the state of consciousness where nothing is experienced outside of or against the Self. Since the ātman as Brahman pervades all things, the realization of identity with ātman entails the state in which the yogi by immediate awareness sees that everything is ātman, that is, perceives all that exists as her own Self.21 The basic awareness of ‘I am', which is ordinarily limited to one's own individual existence, comes to be extended to include everything in the undifferentiated self-consciousness. Thus, complete self-knowledge implies obliteration of all duality in the Advaita framework.

Based on the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Śaṅkara defines Brahman as ‘Reality (or Truth), Knowledge, Infinity’ (satyam jñānam anantam).22 For Śaṅkara, the definition of a thing has the purpose of differentiating that thing from other things. The term satya indicates that which “does not change the nature that is ascertained to be its own”; according to this meaning of the word satya, a “mutable thing” or a thing that undergoes change is said to be “unreal”.23 The term jñāna, which connotes knowledge, when employed in conjunction with the term ‘infinity’ implies not an “agent of knowing”, i.e. it denies the notion of a subject carrying out an act of knowing towards an object from which the subject is separated in some fashion. Śaṅkara reasons that what is infinite is not restricted by anything. If Brahman “be the agent of knowing. It becomes delimited by the knowable and the knowledge, and hence there cannot be infinitude ...”24 The terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘infinity’ together thus negate the types of knowledge that proceed from the duality of the knower, the known and the act of knowing. Knowledge as pertaining to Brahman rules out particular factors related to the distinctive mode of knowing. Knowledge, which Śaṅkara considers as the very nature of the Brahman or the Self, is understood not in terms of Brahman sustaining any cognitive movement but as its intrinsic state. The term infinite establishes the infinitude of Brahman from the

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20 Mayeda translates as “free from duality” (p.145).
21 According to Śaṅkara's formulation, at the level of supreme identity "the one ātman is realized as existing in all beings and all beings are seen (non-discursively and immediately) as existing in ātman" (Māṇḍākya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya 3, translation by Nikhilānanda).
22 Taittirīya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya (11.1.1); translation by Gambhirānanda (1989).
24 Ibid., 309.
“point of view” of space, time and objects. *Brahman* is not limited in space or time. *Brahman* is “non-different from everything” and since there is nothing ultimately distinct from it, no thing acts as a limitation to it. Hence it is infinite with respect to substance too.25

The above three terms mark *Brahman* off from things having opposite characteristics. The above definition thus differentiates *Brahman* from all conditioned objects or beings. The way the term knowledge is applied in the definition, it serves to distinguish *Brahman* from all the familiar modes of knowing consisting of knowledge obtained in the object mode. The definition of *Brahman* for Śaṅkara has the function of revealing the incommensurability of *Brahman* with what is ordinarily understood as reality or existence, and knowledge.26 According to him, this definition only indirectly indicates the nature of *Brahman*; it does not directly designate *Brahman* or elucidate *Brahman* as it is. Ultimately *Brahman* or the ātman cannot be construed through language and thought. *Brahman*, Śaṅkara explains, is “beyond all concepts and all words”.27 Ordinary language and thought operate within the category of determinate or particularized entities. *Brahman* (or the ātman), which is the all-embracing reality, devoid of all distinctions and actionless, cannot enter into the types of functional relationships conveyed in syntactic structures.

3 Comparative Analysis

Important parallels can be drawn between Plotinus and the Advaita philosophy regarding the nature of the ultimate union and the role of non-dual awareness.

3.1 *The One, the Brahman, and the Self*

The One, Plotinus says, is “ineffable” (V.3.13). What is simple and absolutely without parts cannot express itself in a linguistic statement (V.3.10). A statement contains at least two elements, a subject and a predicate, that is, the subject-object structure is basic to language in general. Hence any statement will compromise the absolute unity of the One and will end up describing the One as a many. The One does not carry out an act of self-apprehension and

25 Ibid., 319-20.
26 Ibid., 32-5.
27 *Taîtirîya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* II.9.3; in Gambhirânânda (1989) 387. In his *Upadeśa Sāhasrî*, Śaṅkara cites from the *Taîtirîya Upaniṣad* (11.4.1, 11.9.1): “Without attaining [It-the Self], words turn back together with the notions [of the intellect] ...” (11.15.31; translation by Mayeda (1979)).
hence it cannot even proclaim “I am existent” (V.3.13). For Plotinus, “knowledge is a kind of longing for the absent, and like the discovery made by a seeker” (V.3.10). If there is no split between the One and its apprehension of itself, then it cannot explicate itself or think itself. Śaṅkara’s analysis, as discussed above, concludes that no act of thinking or knowing can happen in the state of absolute non-duality. This particular idea is again articulated in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*:

... when there is duality, as it were, then one smells something, one sees something, one hears something, one speaks something, one thinks something, one knows something. (But) when to the knower of *Brahman* everything has become the Self, then what should one smell and through what, what should one see and through what ... what should one think and through what? (II.4.14)

Śaṅkara explains that the possibility of seeing or knowing *something* results from an otherness between the agent and the object.28 Where everything is apprehended as the Self, there no separation obtains between the Self and anything else. The Self is also not dependent upon any means outside of itself or on a distinctive instrument for its inherent nature as knowledge or as the knower (which in the context of the Self is understood not as an agent of action). In the state of *ātman* there is immediate all-encompassing apprehension; hence the experience of the Self precludes dualistic thought processes or any consciousness of duality.

The non-dual mystical experience, I argue, should not be seen as the dissolution of the self; rather the self here is experienced in infinite expansiveness. The following quote of Plotinus suggests that selfhood persists in the state of union with the One, though in a highly transformed fashion: “There one can see both him and oneself as it is right to see: the self glorified, full of intelligible light—but rather itself pure light—weightless, floating free, having become—but rather, being—a god ...” (VI.9.9).29

29 Bussanich (1987) discusses the significance of the metaphor of ‘seeing’ in the context of the soul’s union with the One. The image of vision is frequently used by Plotinus to describe the thinking activity of Intellect and thus it often has the connotation of duality (of the subject and object). However, when Plotinus employs the language of vision in his accounts of the mystical experience of the One, it is in the unitive sense that the soul’s ‘seeing’ must be understood, according to Bussanich. Drawing attention to VI.8.16, which makes reference to the One’s self-vision, he argues that if the soul’s vision persists in the
Here the analysis of consciousness provided by another well-known figure of the non-dual school named Abhinavagupta\textsuperscript{30} (10th-11th CE), is illuminating. He characterizes consciousness in terms of two aspects as ‘light’ (prakāśa) and ‘self-reflexivity’ (vimarśa).\textsuperscript{31} The light aspect refers to the very presence of the consciousness, and with respect to the ultimate Reality or the Absolute (termed also as Śiva, Bhairava), the light denotes its capacity as the ontological ground of existence. Consciousness also possesses the power to revert back on itself or to become aware of itself.\textsuperscript{32} At the level of the highest reality, there is perfect mystical union, this does not mean that the soul “continues to exist as a distinct entity” but implies the merging of the soul’s vision with the self-vision of the One (p.180). The passage such as: “... he (i.e. the soul) will know that he sees principle by principle ...” (VI.9.11) is also suggestive of the presence in the ascended soul of self-awareness that is non-distinct from the One’s self-awareness.

Abhinavagupta technically belongs to the non-dual Kashmiri Śaiva tradition, which represents another important Advaita framework within Hindu thought. This school accepted the set of texts known as Śaiva Tantras or Āgamas as authoritative scripture. The Pratyabhijñā (‘recognition’) and the Spanda (‘vibration’) doctrines, which did not directly originate from the Āgamas, also played an important role in the formation of the non-dual Kashmiri Śaiva school. (See Mark Dyczkowski’s Introduction in The Doctrine of Vibration (1987)). Abhinavagupta was a great synthesizer of the diverse trends of Śaivite and tantric doctrines, and a highly prolific writer, having composed more than sixty works. He also wrote a commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā. Abhinavagupta’s non-dual viewpoint, I have argued (in an unpublished paper) to be compatible with Śaṅkara’s non-dualism. I must mention that a number of scholars of Kashmiri Śaivism see Śaṅkara’s and Abhinavagupta’s views as essentially different. But their assessment is by no means based on an in-depth analysis of Śaṅkara’s framework; they tend to consider certain passages in isolation and misconstrue the import of what Śaṅkara articulates (Dyczkowski (1987), for instance). My claim is not that Śaṅkara’s and Abhinavagupta’s frameworks are exactly identical; each has its own peculiarity but ultimately both are aligned in the fundamental principles of non-dualism.


That the world of diverse forms is manifested at all is due to the “light” of Śiva Consciousness, and the appearing of the world is itself this light; i.e. the phenomenal world is contained within this “light.” Vimarśa is identified with śakti, which is the power of Śiva or the power of Consciousness. Śakti is essentially one with Śiva and is also the power by virtue of which finite phenomenal objects appear as self-manifestations of the infinite Śiva (Muller-Ortega, p.96).

“The light is one, and it cannot ever be divided, and for this reason there is no possible division capable of sundering the non-duality, the Lord, beautiful with light and bliss. But (someone might object) space, time, forms, knowledge, qualities attributes, distance, and so on are usually considered to be diversifying elements. Not so (we reply), because
identity between light and self-reflexivity and which means that the reversion of the Absolute Consciousness on itself is not a distinct moment or a distinct act but intrinsic to the very nature of this Consciousness.\footnote{33} In other words, the Absolute possesses an immediate and direct awareness of itself.\footnote{34} The self-reflexivity of the Absolute is inherently devoid of otherness. The self-reflexivity in human self ordinarily functions in an attenuated state and the goal of yogic practices is to harness this capacity in its fullness.\footnote{35} In the condition of perfect self-awareness of \textit{vimarśa}, one achieves complete entry into his own true nature and experiences the state of the supreme \textit{Śiva}. Self-knowledge then is the attainment of the non-dual consciousness where what initially was seen in a differentiated form as \textit{idam} (‘this’) is fully resolved in the Self-consciousness.\footnote{36}

\begin{quote}
that which so appears is nothing but the light. If the light were not such, then non-duality would be useless ... But even if we admit a portion of reality to differences, then according to what we have said, it will have its basis only in non-duality. This is a pot, this is a cloth, the two are different one from the other. The two are different from other cognizing subjects, the two are different even from me. All these notions are nothing but the one light, which by its own intrinsic nature displays itself in this way. (Quoted in Muller-Ortega (1989) 97 from Abhinavagupta’s \textit{Mālinī-vijaya-vārtika} 1.620b-630.)\footnote{36}
\end{quote}

\footnote{33} Muller-Ortega (1989) 119.
\footnote{34} Now Śaṅkara does not explicitly speak of \textit{Brahman} or \textit{ātman} as possessing the two aspects of light and self-reflexivity the way Abhinavagupta does. Nonetheless, both these aspects and their identity are implicit in his conception of self-luminous \textit{ātman}. The self-luminosity of \textit{ātman} means that \textit{ātman} is the conscious principle of the nature of illuminating light and the ground of all manifestation, and at the same time it possesses full awareness of itself. R. Sewnath (1996) states this point as follows: “To say that the Self is self-luminous or internally conscious is to say that it reveals not only the world and its objects, but it also reveals itself to itself without becoming an object of experience to itself” (p.109). The advantage of Abhinavagupta’s formulation is that it is more amenable to showing the possibility of non-discursive (or trans-discursive) and non-dual experience of the all-pervasive reality in the mode of enhanced or pure “I”.

\footnote{35} Muller-Ortega (1989) 96.
\footnote{36} See Raffaele Torella’s note to the \textit{Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā} (‘Stanzas on the Recognition of God’) of Utpaladeva, verse III 2.20 (2002, footnote 35, p.209). Utpaladeva (10th CE) is another important representative of the non-dual Kashmiri Śaiva school who gave a systematic exposition of the \textit{Pratyabhijñā} doctrine. In the commentary to his \textit{Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā} verse IV.14, Utpaladeva states: “when the cognizable (that is, the object) is entirely dissolved within him and there is the full consciousness of the I, the state of \textit{Śiva} is attained” (translation by Torella, p.217). The \textit{Pratyabhijñā} doctrine provides the philosophical foundation to the principles of non-dual Kashmiri Śaivism (Dyczkowski, p.19). Abhinavagupta wrote two commentaries on Utpaladeva’s work; in these commentaries, Abhinavagupta closely follows the views of Utpaladeva (Torella, p. xliii).
In the Advaita view, the light of supreme reality is always present in human self, but because self-reflexivity is not fully active, there is no complete awareness of it. Plotinus echoes similar idea when he says that the “One is not absent from any, and absent from all, so that in its presence it is not present except to those who are able and prepared to receive it…” (VI.9.4). Here the light could be seen as referring to the omnipresence of the One and self-reflexivity as the condition of receiving the light of the One and uniting with it. Thus Plotinus’ above statement could be expressed as follows using the Advaitic terminology: the real is always present but whether it is apprehended or not depends on the degree to which self-reflexivity is exercised.

When vimarśa is not fully developed, the individual views herself as a limited subject, or an ego, and relates to objects in the distinctive mode of cognition (vikalpa). In this condition one’s consciousness is dominated and constrained by the mental states associated with the manifold of objects, which because of the subject’s sense of incompleteness and separation causes attachment. A text called Vijñāna-Bhairava Tantra, which Abhinavagupta held in high esteem, teaches a method of fixing one’s attention on the interval (madhya) between two mental events for the purpose of extricating self-awareness from its entanglement with objects, both internal and external, so as to experience the underlying fullness of the essentially non-dual Self-consciousness. “When the mind of the aspirant that comes to quit one object is firmly restrained (nirud-

37 John Bussanich (2005) sees a difference in the way the Advaita school and Plotinus construe the reality of the self. In his view, the true self for Plotinus is nous and not the One (p.17). He notes that whereas the Advaita texts emphasize the identity of the self and Brahman, Plotinus does not explicitly identify the soul with the One (p.16). Nevertheless the Enneads provide clear indications that the self’s reality must be sought at the level of the One. Plotinus employs the imagery of a center to refer to the One and terms the soul’s movement in a circle around this center as its natural movement (VI.9.8). This passage suggests that the true identity of the self lies at this center (See Gurtler, p.119-121). There also cannot be a strict identity of the soul with the nous because as Bussanich himself points out: “The infinite, indeterminate nature of the Good requires a capacity or activity on the part of the soul that is infinite and undefined in order to be united with it” (1996, p.57). Bussanich considers the noetic level as the level at which self-knowledge is perfected. But noetic awareness does not bring full vision of the source of the soul’s being. As the close analysis of V.3 shows, the condition of the identity of the subject, object and the of knowing ascertains complete and true self-knowledge and this is satisfied in the state of union with the One.


39 In Plotinus, the soul’s forgetfulness of its divine origin causes it to become preoccupied with material life; “unaware of its dignity, soul is fascinated by externality: the body, the sensible” (G. Aubry (2014) 312).
and does not move towards any other object, it comes to rest in a middle position between the two and through it (i.e. the middle position) is unfolded intensely the realization of pure consciousness in all its intensity” (verse 62). This practice, whose purpose is to crystallize an awareness unencumbered with intentional quality, resembles Plotinus’ method for attaining the One: “… the soul must let go of all outward things and turn altogether to what is within, and not be inclined to any outward thing, but ignoring all things (as it did formerly in sense-perception, but then in the realm of Forms), and even ignoring itself, come to be in contemplation of that One …” (VI.9.7). For Plotinus too it is necessary to develop an object-free, nonrelational consciousness because “the soul must be without form” (VI.9.7) in order to be illuminated by the formless One.

In the Advaita framework, complete self-reflexivity implies the absence of otherness. At the level of the ātman, the object pole has been fully dispelled such that there is no awareness of being an ego separate from the ātman. From the perspective of the ordinary ego consciousness, the state of identity with the ātman appears as the loss of “self-consciousness” since there is no distinctive ego consciousness, but from the standpoint of the identity with the ātman, the self abides in the all-encompassing, undifferentiated awareness. The state of union with the One could be understood in terms of the identity of light and self-reflexivity.

40 Translation by J. Singh (1979) 59.
41 Pierre Hadot (1993) characterizes the higher states of the soul as being devoid of self-consciousness: “we only are that of which we are aware, and yet we are aware of having been more fully ourselves precisely in those moments when, raising ourselves to a higher level of inner simplicity, we lose our self-awareness” (p.32). He associates the presence of consciousness with our ordinary state of being that operates in the mode of duality. He says that “our consciousness is only an inner sensation: it requires us to split into two, for there must be a temporal distance—however infinitesimal—between that which sees and that which is seen. Consciousness is thus more of a memory than a presence” (p.32). His analysis of consciousness draws upon an example that Plotinus presents:

“One can find a great many valuable activities, theoretical and practical, which we carry on both in our contemplative and active life even when we are fully conscious, which do not make us aware of them. The reader is not necessarily aware that he is reading, least of all when he is really concentrating … Conscious awareness, in fact, is likely to enfeeble the very activities of which there is consciousness; only when they are alone are they pure and more genuinely active and living; and when good men are in this state their life is increased, when it is not split out into perception, but gathered together in one in itself (I.4.10)."
When therefore the seer sees himself, then when he sees, he will see himself as like this, or rather he will be in union with himself as like this and will be aware of himself as like this since he has become single and simple (VI.9.10).

Hadot concludes that self-consciousness weakens in proportion to the intensity of an activity (p.33). Jean-Marc Narbonne interprets this passage to imply that consciousness is not involved when an activity is carried out in a perfectly focused manner (2002, p.13-14). A different phenomenological analysis can be presented here. It is true that when I am fully engrossed in an activity such as reading, I do not have the thought “I am reading” lingering in my mind and if such a thought were to break into my mental space, this would compromise my concentration. But this simply shows that no distinctive ego awareness is present in a focused activity, or that the appearance of the consciousness of ego has a diluting effect on our activities. The example could also be understood in terms of the immediate merging of one's awareness with the activity. It would be much more appropriate to characterize the self's immersion as ego-transcending, non-dual self-awareness (in the given circumscribed context) rather than as a state unaccompanied by consciousness because if consciousness is absent unqualifiedly, then no processing of the act of reading or of the words is possible.

Hadot and Narbonne take the above example as an analogy for the status of the true self and consequently they are led to argue for the loss of consciousness (or for the presence of "only a confused self-consciousness"; Hadot, p.33) in the higher states of the soul. In my account though, a different type of awareness is present that does not operate dualistically and the loss is only that of a strict awareness of myself as a subject separate from the activity or the object. Hadot also asserts that the soul's experiences of the Intellect and the One are unstable, since he attributes consciousness to the mode of duality and assumes that “we are, irremediably, conscious beings, split into two” (p.33). Thus for him the states of unitive experiences cannot be prolonged: “It is just for a few, fleeting moments that we can identify ourselves with our true self, for the spiritual life which our true self constantly lives represents a higher level of tension and concentration than what is appropriate for our consciousness” (p.32). The problem of instability is a pseudo problem that disappears if one recognizes the possibility of expansive self-awareness either as unity-in-duality or as absolute non-duality. This is not to deny that long-lasting unitive experience of the One is very difficult to achieve. In VI.9.3, Plotinus alludes to a hindrance faced by the soul in its journey towards the One: “… in proportion as the soul goes towards the formless, since it is utterly unable to comprehend it because it is not delimited and, so to speak, stamped by a richly varied stamp, it slides away and is afraid that it may have nothing at all. Therefore it gets tired of this sort of thing, and often gladly comes down and falls away from all this, till it comes to the perceptible and rests there as if on solid ground;…” Ordinary awareness is habituated to concreteness and hence the necessary reorientation for solidifying the formless awareness is an extremely arduous task. I am inclined to accept Bussanich's position, which favors the idea of the soul's permanent unification with the One (1994, 5325-28).
Such self-consciousness is in the non-dual mode with no gap between the self and its awareness of itself as the One.42

3.2 The Cognitive Faculties

In the Advaita framework, a distinction is made between the mind and the ātman consciousness. Mind (antahkaraṇa) includes two aspects: the higher as buddhi (intellect) and the lower as manas (“inner sense”). The relationship between the two aspects of the mind and the ātman consciousness is expressed as follows:

The intellect (higher mind as buddhi) receives a reflection of the light of the Self as pure Consciousness first, since it is transparent and stands in immediate proximity to the Self … Consciousness next illumines the lower mind (manas), as the next inmost principle, mediatelly through its contact with the intellect. Next it illumines the sense-organs mediatelly through its contact with the mind (manas), and next the body through its contact with the sense-organs.43

Manas—the lower mind—is the faculty of deliberation. It is the mode of the mind in the process of considering alternate notions or reflecting on ideas.44

The acts of manas are associated with the consciousness of duality and with

42 Paulina Remes (2007) raises the question of whether we can meaningfully speak of the subject of experience or a sense of self at the level of the One. Remes characterizes the state of union as a “transformation into something richer than one’s limited self” (p.250) and as an “experiential summit not only of goodness, happiness and beauty but also of two aspects crucial for selfhood, namely unity and self-sufficiency” (p.253). But at the same time she refers to “self-conscious separateness” as the prime feature of selfhood (p.253). She notes that “for the self, the limits are essential” (p.252). According to her analysis, there is a certain degree of ambivalence between existing as a self, which entails being the “subject of thinking and acting”, and being possessed by the One (p.251). Now if we take our ordinary sense of the self as paradigmatic, the unitive experience will render itself as alien to the natural state of the self or as not fully reachable in a permanent fashion. Thus Remes says that “in order to reach it (i.e. the One), the self needs, as it were, to borrow this nature (of absolute unity, independence and self-sufficiency) from the One” (p.252). But as Gary Gurtler (2005) argues, for Plotinus the self is essentially a “unity beyond the distinction between subject and object” (p.122) and hence defining the essence of selfhood in terms of the features of (determinate) subject or of individual thinker and agent misconstrues the Plotinian view of the self.


44 See Alston, vol.3, p.93, note 72.
discursive thinking. *Buddhi* (intellect) is the supreme faculty of discernment through which proper understanding is achieved. Because of its very close proximity to *ātman* it holds special position in the path of Self-realization. In the context of the meditative practice of *adhyātma yoga*, involving gradual dissolution of the activities of the body and mind in the *ātman* consciousness, Śaṅkara speaks of the attainment of subtle and refined *buddhi* (*Bhāgavata Pātha* 1.4.1). According to the Advaita framework, there are different manifestations of *buddhi*. Ordinarily the mental awareness is drawn towards external objects and what appears in the mental space such as thoughts, feelings, desires etc. have their basis in an individualized consciousness. In this situation, the functioning of *buddhi* is reflected in the individual in an attenuated fashion. *Buddhi* comes to be applied for the purpose of promoting the aims and the goals of the ego or the empirical self. A more sophisticated manifestation of *buddhi* could contribute to the process of obtaining knowledge but if the consciousness is limited to individualized state, the *buddhi* in this case brings only a partial or relative understanding of an object. The practice of *adhyātma yoga* involves releasing the mental space from preoccupation with the sense objects and from the relative notions and ideas achieved through dualistic outlook.\(^{45}\) Pure *buddhi* manifests itself when one’s awareness is made completely free of individual desires and thoughts. Such *buddhi* fully and integrally receives the light of *ātman*, enabling an immediate awareness of the presence of the *ātman* consciousness; its apprehension of reality arises not as a propositional understanding, or in a third person perspective, but through direct contact with the *ātman*. In the Indian Advaita school, one does not find a detailed analysis of the cognitive structure of pure *buddhi*. But it is a faculty that operates non-discursively through actualization of a different type of awareness. At the level of pure *buddhi* there is an unveiling of the reality of *ātman*, effecting an overarching, synthetic comprehension about the truth of existence “without any thought process on the part of the [lower] mind”.\(^{46}\) The hierarchical relation of the lower mind (along with ordinary *buddhi*) and pure *buddhi* corresponds to

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\(^{45}\) See Raphael (2006) 106-113 who provides an insightful discussion of the Advaita Vedantic view of *buddhi*.

\(^{46}\) Raphael, 177. Pure *buddhi* is also associated with the emotion of higher love. Such love derives from the cognizance of the presence of the *ātman* reality in all things (R. Ravinda (1982) 68-71). *Buddhi* has a transformative effect on one’s self-consciousness. It brings the transition from the opaque and separative egoistic consciousness to an awareness of a penetrating and transcendent consciousness. The emotion of love blossoms in the awareness of unity. The perception of oneness with others generates spontaneous sympathy for others. A person whose consciousness of selfhood extends to all beings cannot not have compassionate disposition towards everyone. Hence Śaṅkara says: “Whoever sees
the gradation of the discursive and the noetic faculties in the Plotinian framework. Moreover, both Plotinus and Advaita philosophy trace a similar path of ascent from the sensible realm to the One and the Brahman through the full exercise of noetic activity and pure buddhi respectively.

In the context of Plotinus, Eric Perl (2007) speaks about continuum of cognition with respect to the faculties of sense-perception, discursive reason, and intellection. According to him, these faculties access not different sets of objects but the same reality in differing degrees of unity and depth. He says: “Discursive reason … apprehends the same content as intellection, but in greater multiplicity. As the unfolded representation of intellection in soul, discursive reason functions as a mean between the unity of the forms in Intellect and the still greater dispersion at the level of sense” (p.87). Since the sensible and the intelligible realms are the manifestations of the One, what also follows is the idea that “all cognition is the apprehension, at higher and lower levels, of the One” (p.92).

The Advaita framework embodies a similar type of viewpoint regarding cognitive faculties. Brahman is the only Reality in the sense that there is no other reality that stands opposed to Brahman; that is, the manifestation of the world takes place within Brahman Itself.47 This implies that what presents itself even before an ajñānī—a person operating in the state of ignorance, especially through the senses and the lower mind—is essentially not anything.

In Advaita framework, the Absolute is also conceived as bliss (ānanda). In Self-knowledge, or knowledge of Brahman, a person becomes fully established in bliss (Taittiriya Upanisad Bhāṣya II.6). As compared to the temporary and finite bliss of mundane life, the bliss of Brahman is absolute.

"... worldly bliss is a particle of the Bliss that is Brahman, which becomes transmuted into impermanent worldly bliss ... when the division of subject and object (on which worldly bliss relies), created by ignorance is eliminated by enlightenment, there is only the intrinsic all pervading Bliss that is one without a second" (Taittiriya Upanisad Bhāṣya II.8.1-4; translation by Gambhirānanda (1989)).

Brahman is thus the supreme goal of erotic desire and its final consummation. Such understanding of the relation of eros with Brahman is congenial with Plotinus’ perspective.

47 In Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya, Śaṅkara states: “The water and other features of a mirage are nothing over and above the stretch of desert on which they appear ... In the same way, it should be seen that this world of experiencers and experienced objects is nothing over and above the Absolute” (11.1.14; translation by Satchidanandendra (1989) 118).
other than *Brahman*, but as the result of curtailed cognitive power, instead of seeing the reality of *Brahman*, he only apprehends distinct phenomenal entities or particularized beings, i.e. a world of duality. Śaṅkara holds that in the state of ignorance “it is invariably real Being (referring to *Brahman*) that is perceived, only it is perceived under the distinctions of duality and hence as different from what it really is”.48

Ascending to the level of pure *buddhi*, one comes to have perception of unity of all beings. Because *buddhi* functions through intimate contact with *Brahman* or *ātman*, the activation of pure *buddhi* as compared to the lower mind brings a much more integrated vision of the same reality, the *Brahman*.49

### 3.3 Non-Dual Mode as the Principle of Knowledge

In the Advaita framework, the *ātman* is the light that illuminates the mind, implying that the *ātman* consciousness constitutes the essential principle that enables the perceptual, mental and intellectual activities to take place. The epistemological import of the idea that the light of consciousness is present in

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48 Quoted in Satchidanandendra (1989) 116; from *Chāndogya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* VI.2.3. Satchidanandendra (p.116) makes a penetrating remark about Śaṅkara’s framework that “from the standpoint of the highest truth Advaitins should not be considered and spoken of as people who proclaim the falsity of the world. They should be considered, rather, as people who proclaim the sole existence and (undifferentiated) reality of the Self (i.e., *Ātman* or *Brahman*).”

49 In Advaita Vedānta, the phenomenal world is presented as *māyā*. The word *māyā* is commonly translated as ‘illusion’ but without proper qualification the word ‘illusion’ could lead to a misconstrual of the concept of *māyā* as Śaṅkara expounds it. In his commentary to Gaṇḍapāda’s *Kārikā*, Śaṅkara states:

> “… non-duality which is the Supreme Reality appears manifold through Māyā, like the one moon appearing as many to one with defective eye-sight and the rope appearing (to the deluded) as the snake, the water-line, etc ... the changeless (unborn) Ātman which is without parts cannot, in any manner, admit of distinction excepting through Māyā or the illusion of the perceiver (111.19; translation by Nikhilānanda, p.169-170).”

*Māyā* relates to perceptual error because it makes reality appear not in the way it really is. The phenomenal manifold derives its existence from *Brahman* and cannot subsist without it. The world has “illusory” character when it is taken as the ultimate, self-subsistent reality due to one’s limited range of awareness. The sense in which *māyā* is associated with our experience of phenomenal existence is very well expressed by Ananda Coomaraswamy: “… Vedantic *māyā-vāda* doctrine must not be understood to mean that the world is a “delusion,” but that it is a *phenomenal* world and as such a theophany and epiphany by which we are deluded if we are concerned with nothing but the wonders themselves, and do not ask “Of what?” all these things are a phenomenon” (1977, p.538, footnote 41).
all cognitions can be stated to mean that all forms of perception and knowing are a participation in the ātman consciousness. According to Śaṅkara, all acts of mind are pervaded by the ātman light; that is, this light is manifested in all sensible or mental awareness and intellectual understanding. The significance of the illuminating light of ātman is very aptly explained by Shah-Kazemi in his comparative study involving Śaṅkara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart. He explains as follows:

It is thus the unique light of the consciousness of the Self ... through successive degrees of relative awareness ... Thus, all awareness, from bodily to sensible, mental, and intelligible, is at one and the same time both the absolute consciousness of the Self—in its essential nature—and also relative knowledge, in the measure that it is identified with its particular faculty.50

In Indian Advaita, the identity between the knower, the known and the process of knowing is characterized as “intuitive” knowing (anubhava), and intuition as immediate non-dual awareness is seen as the very essence of the Self (ātman).51 What the above quote suggests is that a mode reflecting intuition or a direct, non-discursive knowing is involved in any type of understanding. As an example, consider an analytical proof in logic or mathematics. I understand the proof only when I recognize its validity; but this recognition is not based on another proof, rather it comes through an insight or a direct understanding which does not rely simply on the deductive correctness of the sequence of steps leading to the proof. Intuitive realization in this case functions in an attenuated form. Abhinavagupta employs the term pratibhā to refer to the pure intuitive light of the ātman.52 Pratibhā is the power of recognition or self-illumination and is the very basis of the subject’s knowledge since it underlies all modes of cognition.

In Plotinus’ framework, the One or absolute non-duality is the foundation of all knowing. The One shines upon the intelligible world (VI.7.36) and the light of Intellect illuminates the soul and makes it intelligent (V.3.8). The mode in which the subject bridges duality with the object is of critical significance.

51 In the context of Plotinus, the term intuition is generally employed to refer to noetic thinking, but the way it is defined in the Advaita framework, it would correspond to the state of the One. John Phillips refers to One’s self-awareness as ‘simple intuition’ (p.100). The intuition, or intuitive knowing, in Advaita would then be equivalent to the simple intuition of the One.
52 G. Kaviraj (1966) 2.
in cognitive acts. Intellect “possesses the real beings” or “is the same as the real beings” (V.3.5) and as a result noetic knowledge is infallible. Truth is ascertained in the mode of identity of the subject with objects. The reasoning soul cannot acquire absolutely true knowledge, but it could be argued that even partially valid knowledge (gained by the embodied soul) requires participation in the known, that is, it entails certain degree of unity between the knower and the known. The role of direct mode of cognition is revealed in scientific knowledge, particularly in the context of discoveries.

A scientific theory or scientific laws do not logically follow from experimental findings or observations, that is, they are not deduced simply through empirical generalizations on the basis of conventional induction or logically-analytical reasoning. The well-known logical empiricist Carl Hempel says that the rules of inductive inference do not provide “effective canons of scientific discovery”, and that there is no general and mechanical inductive procedure available which would allow us to infer scientific laws and theories from the sets of observation statements. Deductive logic too does not furnish the rules of discovery. The function of deductive logic is retrospective; it provides a set of standards for checking the validity of a proposed proof once a new theorem or a law is presented. The influential philosopher of science Karl Popper states that “there is no such thing as a logical method of having new ideas, or a logical reconstruction of this process”. Some form of direct illuminative insight seems to be involved in the formation of truly constructive ideas. The physicist Wolfgang Pauli emphasizes a “preliminary stage of figurative and intuitive viewing” as integral to scientific conceptualization. In order to have

54 See H. Brown (1977) 130-1.
55 Quoted in Brown, 131.
56 We have intriguing examples of a number of famous mathematicians such as Fermat (1601-1665), Riemann (1826-1866) and Galois (1811-1832), who provided correct mathematical results but whose proofs lay beyond the scope of the mathematical development of their times (See J. Hadamard (1954) 116-121). For example, Galois in a letter to a friend states a theorem on the “periods” of a certain kind of integrals. Hadamard, who himself was a distinguished mathematician, points out that this theorem could not have been conceived in terms of the available mathematical knowledge, but became comprehensible only years later after the discovery of certain principles in the theory of functions. These are clear cases of discoveries which cannot be explained purely as an end product of analytical-inferential thinking.
57 See S. Gieser (2005) 346. Pauli, who won the Nobel prize in physics in 1945, sought to develop an expanded framework that would transcend the distinction between the ‘objective, physical, scientific’ and the ‘subjective, psychic, religious’ and allow an integrated understanding of various facets of human experience (Gieser, 341).
apprehension of the inner features of an object, there must be participation in the object. In the condition of the alignment of self-awareness with the essential character of the object, the object is grasped from within. Pauli speaks of a level of understanding where the scientist’s “internal images and the structures of external objects come into congruence and overlap.” The moment of this “congruence” can be seen as a manifestation of unitive knowing founded upon instantiation of the qualitative principles of the known in the self-space of the knower.

In the Plotinian framework, proper judgement by the soul about the nature of objects derives from the contact with Intellect. Reason applies the notions and concepts that it receives from Intellect to the study of external objects. Participation may be considered as the recognition of the structural features of objects in the light of what Intellect has imprinted on the soul. Because of its relation with Intellect and ultimately with the One, the soul possesses certain degree of possibility of developing participatory knowledge. If everything is an emanation of the One, then at no level of reality is there complete ontological separation between subject and object. This would mean that the operation of the soul’s cognitive faculty is not limited to the third person perspective or to the strict subject-object duality. If discursive thinking is conceived, as is

58 Gieser’s formulation, p.347.
59 Here I incorporate the analysis of the influence of “non-rational” factors and participatory cognition in scientific discoveries which I developed in my dissertation (2012, p.105-110). I also want to note that I accept the position of Seyyed Nasr, who has articulated a penetrating analysis of modern science and of traditional sciences (Islamic in particular). According to him, modern science presents to certain extent a true picture of physical reality and cannot be “reduced to a subjective or simply “mental” mathematical pattern imposed upon physical reality” (p.466). At the same time he advocates the view that there could be multiple sciences, each corresponding to a “true picture of reality” but not in an exclusive fashion (p.466). Illuminative insights then are a genuine participation in the architectonics of the sensible world. Nasr’s assessment also implies that scientific knowledge is not fully equivalent to noetic knowledge and draws mainly from the cognitive capacities of the embodied soul.
60 H. Blumenthal (1971) 107.
61 Riccardo Chiaradonna (2012) notes that the same essential structures or forms exist both in nature and in the embodied soul; these forms ultimately depend on Intellect. The soul in carrying out an analysis of the sensible world activates these “a priori forms” (p.194-6). Since these forms are also instantiated in the sensible world, this allows the discursive soul to have participatory grasp of properties of objects. Building upon the work of Eyjólfur Emilsson, Chiaradonna also argues that Plotinus’ perspective accords with the realist model of sense perception. According to him, peremptual judgements could be “conceived as acts through which our soul immediately realizes that the qualities per-
generally the case in contemporary thought, as the mode where the knower is existentially removed from the object of study, then this conception does not exactly correspond to Plotinus’ view of *dianoia*. Plotinus’ framework suggests that analytical thinking becomes productive when it works in conjunction with participatory awareness. Propositions possess efficacy, i.e. power to truly point to the nature of objects, when their formulation comes forth on the basis of realization of the qualities manifested by objects. Things themselves are attained, even if in a partial or fragmentary fashion, in an act of knowing that reflects to some degree non-dual relation between the subject and objects.\(^{62}\)

From the points of view of Plotinus and the Advaita school, the depth in which reality is grasped is the function of the development of non-dual awareness. Thus movement towards self-knowledge goes hand in hand with stages of greater comprehension of existence.

4 Concluding Remarks

According to both Plotinus and Advaita philosophy, the self can be known only in an immediate awareness or as immediate presence that transcends the recived via sensory affections belong to, and qualify, a certain *object*’ (p.193). Our perceptions (acquired in proper conditions) relate directly to objects themselves; it is not via the intermediary of mental representations that we access the world. For Plotinus, the sense qualities do have the status of “images” but this is because the sensible reality is derived from and dependent upon higher metaphysical principles; this notion of “images” then does not correspond to the representationalist theory (p.194). Perceptual experience is a unifying experience, though clearly the relation enacted between the subject and object is much less intimate as compared to what is attained at the level of Intellect. See also Emilsson’s discussion of ordinary vision; (2007) 191-198.

\(^{62}\) A notion in order to be a valid notion cannot be entirely severed from objects. In the context of discursive soul’s cognitive activity, Riccardo Chiaradonna makes a perceptive observation that “a clear-cut distinction between objects and propositions may be somewhat misleading” (p.202, footnote 49). In physical sciences, ideas are presented in propositions or mathematical formulas but this need not imply that knowledge of these ideas is to be reduced to propositions. It could be argued that the reason the study of physical sciences poses a challenge to students is because the understanding of the subject matter is not achieved just through learning the rules of logical relations between propositions. Until the truth of the structural configuration of objects is not recognized through assimilation of objects by the subject, the significance of the propositions (or formulae) remains rather vague. Reflection on propositions would facilitate the direct insight, but without attaining the insight, or “possessing” objects to certain extent, proper knowledge of the concepts cannot be gained.
subject-object duality. Even self-reflection or introspection does not constitute genuine self-knowledge because in this case the object of reflection is separated from the subject that carries out introspection. Any notion of the self which arises from the object pole does not belong to the essential selfhood. As Sara Rappe points out, the self cannot know itself through representation: “If self-knowledge is to be valid, it must be able to circumvent the intentional structure in which objects are normally represented to consciousness. For Plotinus, any conceptual representation of the self or subject of consciousness can never be complete and can never succeed in conveying the self that it purports to represent.”

A representation is something that is cast against the subject and is thus an objective determination. By grounding non-duality in the nature of self-knowledge, the Plotinian and Advaita frameworks provide an avenue for a fruitful reassessment of non-discursive modes of knowing in contemporary context.

Also, the essence of mystical experiences in these frameworks is constituted by states of integrated self-consciousness. Such a manner of understanding would allow the unifying mystical modes to be seen without any connotation of irrationality, and the discursive mode, which in its fruit bearing operation participates in the non-dual mode, not as opposed to non-dual awareness but as a dispersed form of it. In the modern philosophical outlook, the ordinary

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64 Both Plotinus and Advaita thought furnish an indirect critique of the constructivist strain in the contemporary theories of self. Such theories tend to conflate the distinction between the subject and the object of cognition. Two representatives of the idea that the notion of the self is merely a construct can be mentioned here. For example, Daniel Dennett claims that “a self, according to my theory, is not any old mathematical point, but an abstraction defined by the myriads of attributions and interpretations (including self-attributions and self-interpretations) that have composed the biography of the living body whose Center of Narrative Gravity it is.” Susan Blackmore says “our sense of self came about through the body image we must construct in order to control behavior, the vantage point given by our senses and our knowledge of our own abilities—that is the abilities of the body-brain-mind. Then along came language. Language turns the self into a thing and gives it attributes and powers.” (Dennett and Blackmore are quoted in Deikman (1996) 15-16). From the perspective of Plotinus and Advaita school, the matrix where Dennett and Blackmore are locating the self belongs to the realm of object and hence the conclusions they draw are erroneous.

65 Lloyd Gerson draws a strict distinction between the mystical mode and the discursive knowing. He seems to consider them as having separate spheres of operation. According to him, “much of what Plotinus has to say about the One is inspired by Plato and based on arguments which have a lot more to do with scientific realism than they do with mysticism. The elements in Plotinus’ thought that can usefully be labeled “mystical” are rather
waking awareness is taken as the primary mode of awareness. Since the waking state is experienced predominantly in dualistic terms, the possibility of nondual consciousness then becomes difficult to conceive.66 But if the idea of multiple states of consciousness is recognized, then the discursive and the mystical or non-dual modes become functions of different levels of self-consciousness.

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easily isolated from his other epistemological doctrines” (p.218). Further he states that “in sharp contrast to the doctrines of many mystics, Plotinus’ own experience or even a claim he might have made that such an experience is possible for anyone are logically disengaged from his entire philosophy” (p.220). Gerson’s position does not take into account the evidence that emerges from recent scholarship regarding Plotinus’ sources, which also include mystery religions (see A. Uždavinys (2009) 14 & V. Adluri (2014) 89). A philosophically cogent framework does not necessarily mean that mystical type experiences did not inform its formulation. See Uždavinys (p.16-20), who emphasizes the role of “noetic and supranoeic” experiences in Plotinus’ exegesis of Plato. One finds a highly coherent system in Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedanta but the non-dual experiential dimension is central to it. Moreover, it would seem that it is only through experience that one can verify the existence of realities that transcend the empirical level because otherwise the corresponding ideas have merely a conceptual force.

The Advaita Vedanta school carries out detailed investigation of other states such as the dream state and deep sleep. According to Śaṅkara’s analysis, the deep sleep state is qualitatively different from the ordinary waking state in that the deep sleep presents the mode of undifferentiated consciousness. (See Śaṅkara’s commentary to the Brahma Sūtra 11.3.18 in Gambhirānanda (1977), and L. Hatab (1982) 37). An expanded notion of evidence and experience points to a broader scope of self-consciousness than what is realized in the ordinary waking state.


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