

Sannyasa and the Incompatibility of Action and Knowledge in Shankara-Vedanta

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Abstract

Shankara is known to have emphasized upon the renunciation of all actions (sarva-karma-sannyasa) for the pursuit of liberation. The main reason for this view was that Shankara considered self-knowledge as the sole means of liberation and he believed that such knowledge is opposed to actions. He considered action and knowledge incompatible like darkness and light. While the proponents of Purva Mimamsa and Bhedabheda Vedanta advocated the combination of knowledge and action (jnana-karma-samuchaya) for liberation, Shankara believed that such combination was not possible and defended his view on the basis of both scripture (shruti) and reason (yukti). This research article examines the scriptural and logical foundations of Shankara's views on the subject to arrive at a deeper understanding of his philosophical outlook. The study concludes that for Shankara, the incompatibility of action and knowledge is absolute and, thereby, sannyasa is an essential condition for liberation.

Keywords: Advaita Vedanta, Renunciation, Asceticism, Liberation

Introduction

It is a well-established fact that Shankara considered self-knowledge (atma-jnana) as the sole means of liberation. Shankara believed that the self or Atman is never really bound but is eternally free (nitya-mukta). The self is existence-consciousness-limitless Brahman, who is transcendent to the cycle of birth and death. Bondage is a mere appearance superimposed upon the self, due to ignorance. Since the cause of bondage is ignorance, the means of liberation is knowledge. In his Bhagavadgita-bhashya, 3.1, Shankara writes, “the well-ascertained conclusion in the Gita and all the Upanishads is that liberation follows from knowledge alone” (Gambhirananda, 2018, p. 118). In Atmabodha, 2, Shankara says, “Just as fire is the direct cause for cooking, knowledge is the direct means of liberation. Compared with all other forms of discipline, knowledge of the Self is the only direct means of liberation” (Chinmayananda, 2011, p. 12).

Shankara did not consider actions as directly useful in the attainment of liberation. By actions, he meant the actions prescribed by the Vedic scriptures (vaidika karma). Worldly actions (laukika karma) are not relevant in this context because they are not conducive to any end prescribed by the Vedas. Shankara believed that scriptural actions can serve as an indirect aid (upaya) on the path of liberation by facilitating mental purification (cit-shuddhi or antahkarana-shuddhi) but they cannot be a direct means (aparoksha-sadhana) of liberation. Shankara also did not believe that actions could become a direct means of liberation in combination with self-knowledge (jnana-karma-samuchaya) because he considered them thoroughly incompatible. The proponents of Purva Mimamsa and Bhedabheda Vedanta held these beliefs but Shankara was strictly opposed to them and defended his position on the basis of both scripture (shruti) and reason (yukti). In his Ishopanishad-bhashya (2), Shankara remarks that the opposition of actions and knowledge is unshakable like a mountain (Gambhirananda, 1957, p. 7).

Based on the above views, Shankara believed that to pursue liberation, one must renounce all actions (sarva-karma-sannyasa) and devote oneself completely to the path of self-knowledge. In other words, Shankara advocated the

renunciation of grihastha-ashrama (householder mode) and adoption of sannyasa-ashrama (ascetic mode) for the pursuit of liberation. In Bhagavadgita-bhashya, 2.11, Shankara writes, "Sorrow and delusion are the sources of the cycles of birth and death and their cessation comes from nothing other than the knowledge of the Self which is preceded by the renunciation of all duties"(Gambhirananda, 2018, pp. 45-46). In his commentary on Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 4.4.22, Shankara states, "should a person desire that world of the Self, for him the chief and direct means of that would be the withdrawal from all activities, just as the son and the like are the means of the three external worlds" (Madhavananda, 1965, p. 525). In light of such views, it becomes important to examine the scriptural and logical foundations of Shankara's views. This research article reflects upon Shankara's emphasis on sannyasa, particularly in the context of his belief in the incompatibility of action and knowledge, to arrive at a better understanding of his philosophical outlook.

Scriptural View on Action and Renunciation

The primary basis of Shankara's philosophical views is the Vedic scripture and Shankara believes that his views regarding sannyasa and the incompatibility of action and knowledge are entirely based on it. Shankara primarily refers to Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.22 in this context:

"Desiring this world (the Self) alone monks renounce their homes. This is (the reason for it): The ancient sages, it is said, did not desire children (thinking), 'What shall we achieve through children, we who have attained this Self, this world (result).' They, it is said, renounced their desire for sons, for wealth and for the worlds, and lived a mendicant's life" (Madhavananda, 1965, p. 520).

In his commentary on the above passage, Shankara explains that according to the Upanishads, a son is the means of conquering the world of mortals (manushyaloka), Vedic actions are the means of conquering the world of manes (pitraloka), and Vedic meditations combined with Vedic actions are the means of

conquering the world of gods (devaloka or Brahmaloaka). These are the three external worlds and their respective means. Just as these actions are the means for attaining the ends of the outer world, renunciation is the means of attaining the inner world of the self. Household mode is where one begets a son and performs Vedic actions and meditations. Hence, it is meant for the attainment of the three outer worlds. These actions are renounced in the ascetic mode. Therefore, it is meant for the attainment of liberation. Apart from the passage cited above, Shankara also refers to numerous other sections of the Upanishads on this subject, including Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.6, Chandogya Upanishad 2.23.1, and Jabala Upanishad 4.1. Shankara follows the principle of renunciation as stated in Jabala Upanishad 4.1, "Let him even renounce on the very day that he becomes detached" (Olivelle, 1992, p. 143).

Proponents of Purva Mimamsa raise objections against Shankara citing such scriptural statements which prescribe life-long commitment to actions. For instance, Ishopanishad, 2, says that remaining engaged in actions alone should one wish to live here for a hundred years (Gambhirananda, 1957, p. 6). Shankara responds that such scriptural statements are intended for those who are ignorant and who desire worldly attainments, not for the wise and the detached. In his commentary on Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 4.5.15, Shankara says that Vedic scriptures contain both types of statements – those which prescribe life-long actions and those which prescribe renunciation of all actions. This does not mean that there is a contradiction in the scriptures. It only means that while the former are intended for the ignorant, the latter are for the wise. This can only be understood by one who has a deep understanding of the Vedas and reason (Madhavananda, 1965, p. 546).

In his Ishopanishad-bhashya, 2, Shankara writes that the Vedas have spoken of a two-fold division of life consisting of the path of action (pravritti marga) and the path of renunciation (nivritti marga). He says that these two paths have been established by God since the time of creation, prescribing the former for worldly attainments (abhyudaya) and the latter for the supreme good (nihshreyas), i.e.,

liberation (Gambhirananda, 1957, p. 8). Shankara affirms the same at the onset of his Bhagavadgita-bhashya (Gambhirananda, 2018, pp. 20-21). Shankara says that this two-fold division of life is the basis of the two-fold division of the Vedas into 'karmakanda' (action-section) and 'jnanakanda' (knowledge-section), wherein the former prescribes actions while the latter prescribes renunciation of all actions. Based on this division, the path of liberation consists of two distinct stages: 'karma-nishtha' (commitment to action) and 'jnana-nishtha' (commitment to knowledge). In the first stage, one purifies the mind through actions, and in the second stage, one renounces all actions to pursue self-knowledge.

The proponents of Bhedabheda Vedanta cite such scriptural passages which speak of the combination of actions and knowledge, such as Ishopanishad 9, and on their basis argue that the scriptures do not demand the renunciation of all actions for the pursuit of liberation. In response, Shankara says that the Upanishads speak of two forms of knowledge: higher knowledge (para-vidya) and lower knowledge (apara-vidya). Higher knowledge is the knowledge of Atman or Brahman and the Upanishads do not speak of its combination with actions because it is naturally opposed to actions. Lower knowledge, on the other hand, is the knowledge pertaining to Vedic actions and meditations and it has a natural association with actions. Therefore, it can be combined with actions and that is the combination that the scriptures speak of (Gambhirananda, 1957, pp. 17-19).

However, Shankara points out that the combination of actions with lower knowledge will not result in immediate liberation (sadyo mukti) but only gradual liberation (krama mukti). Shankara explains that the Upanishads speak of two post-death paths that lead to higher realms: northern path (uttara marga) and southern path (dakshina marga). If one has performed Vedic actions, one is taken by the southern path to the world of manes, from where one returns to the mortal world when the merit of the Vedic actions expires. But if one has combined Vedic actions with meditations, then one is taken by the northern path to the world of gods, i.e., the realm of Hiranyagarbha. There, one receives self-knowledge and attains liberation. Thus, the combination of actions and lower knowledge does lead

to liberation but not here and now. It is only by self-knowledge that one attains immediate liberation and, therefore, it alone must be pursued.

The opponents cite examples of self-realized householders from the Upanishads, such as King Pravahana Jaivali and King Ashvapati who did not renounce to pursue self-knowledge. Their examples suggest the combination of actions with higher knowledge. Shankara rejects these views in his Bhagavadgita-bhashya. He says that actions of such individuals are not really 'actions' because they are devoid of desire for the results of actions and the sense of agency. Therefore, there is no combination of actions and knowledge in their case (Gambhirananda, 2018, pp. 23-24).

Moreover, Shankara does not consider such examples as conclusive proofs for anything. In his Brahmasutra-bhashya, 3.4.9, Shankara says that if there are mentions of self-realized householders in the scriptures then there are also mentions of such individuals who renounced the household mode in pursuit of knowledge, such as Yajnavalkya in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and Kavasheya seers in Kaushitaki Upanishad (Gambhirananda, 1965, p. 765). In his introduction to Mundaka Upanishad, Shankara says that such mentions of self-realized householders are mere indirect indications (lingam), not direct prescriptions (vidhi). Direct prescriptions advise one to adopt asceticism and the indirect indications must be understood with the help of proper reasoning which takes into account the direct view of the scripture (Gambhirananda, 1958, p. 74).

Logical Arguments for the Incompatibility of Actions and Knowledge

While Shankara derives his views from the scriptures primarily, he lays immense emphasis on reason as well. He considered it essential to apply reason to resolve the apparent conflicts in the scriptures and provide rational support for their esoteric vision. Regarding the incompatibility of actions and knowledge, Shankara advances a number of logical arguments, among which the main arguments are presented here.

According to Shankara, the main reason for the incompatibility of actions and knowledge is that actions are rooted in ignorance and are, thus, naturally

opposed to knowledge. Knowledge in this context refers to the knowledge of the true self, Atman, which is one with the absolute truth, Brahman. It is, thus, the knowledge of oneness, of non-duality. Actions, on the other hand, presuppose a divided view of the world (bhedadrishti). They presuppose distinctions of agent, action, result, and so on. In particular, actions emerge from the notion of agency (kartrtva-bhaava) which is a direct product of ignorance. Hence, actions are rooted in ignorance and naturally opposed to knowledge. Their opposition is absolute like darkness and light (Chinmayananda, 2011, p. 13).

Secondly, Shankara believes that while actions are dependent upon an individual's will, knowledge is not, and if liberation were to become dependent upon an individual's will, then it would become subject to alternatives and that goes against the concept of liberation. Therefore, actions and knowledge cannot be combined for the pursuit of liberation. Shankara explains this idea in his Brahmasutra-bhashya, 1.1.1, in the following manner. Actions can either be done, not done, or done differently. For instance, if one wishes to reach a place, one can choose to walk or ride a horse or decide not to go. In this, actions are dependent upon an individual's will (purusha-tantra). But, in the case of knowledge, particularly valid knowledge, there are no such alternatives available. Valid knowledge is about knowing a thing as it really is. If one fails to do so, then it is not valid knowledge at all. 'This is a stump, or a man, or something else' does not constitute valid knowledge. Therefore, knowledge is not dependent upon an individual's will but on the object of knowledge (vastu-tantra) (Gambhirananda, 1965, pp. 16-17).

Thirdly, Shankara says that liberation does not involve the attainment of something unattained (apraptasya-prapti) but rather the realization of the already attained (praptasya-prapti). As noted earlier, Atman is eternally free; it does not have to *become* free. All that is required is to overcome the mistaken notion of its bondage and recognize its eternal freedom. That itself is liberation. Actions are always about attaining the unattained whereas knowledge is about attaining the

attained, as illustrated in the well-known example of the tenth man. Therefore, actions cannot be combined with knowledge for the pursuit of liberation.

Fourthly, results of actions are impermanent. If liberation was considered to be a result of actions, then it would become impermanent and that would go against the very notion of liberation. Shankara says that actions have four types of results and all of them are impermanent in nature: origin (utpatti), attainment (apti), purification (samskara), and modification (vikara). In his commentary on Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 3.3.1, Shankara writes that liberation is not produced because it is eternal; for the same reason, it cannot be modified; for the same reason, and because it is not a thing which serves as a means for something, it cannot be purified; and it cannot be attained because it is the very nature of the self and one (Madhavananda, 1965, p. 315).

In light of these reasons, Shankara firmly believes that actions and knowledge cannot ever be combined and that one must necessarily adopt sannyasa for the pursuit of liberation. Thus, in the tenth verse of Vivekachudamani, Shankara says, “For release from the bonds of samsara, after having renounced all actions, let the wise brave ones strive with unceasing cultivation of the knowledge of their Atman” (Sankaranarayanan, 2008, p. 20).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Shankara considers sannyasa essential for the pursuit of liberation because he believes that actions are incompatible with knowledge of the true self. The opposition of action and knowledge is absolute for Shankara and he defends it on the basis of both scripture and reason. He offers strong arguments in defence of his views and demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the scriptures. Based on the opposition of action and knowledge, he believes that the path of liberation consists of two distinct stages: karma-nishtha and jnana-nishtha. In the first stage, one purifies the mind through actions, but in the second stage, one renounces all actions to devote oneself completely to self-knowledge.

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