

## **The Concept of Falsity in the Upaniṣads: The Advaita Vedāntins' Approach to the Upaniṣadic Worldview**

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### **Abstract**

The Problem of reality has played a significant role in Indian philosophical thought. To deal with this problem all the distinguished Indian philosophers have tried their best to ascertain the ontological status of the world as it stands to our sense-experience. In the Upanisads, the final or concluding part of the Vedas there are plenty of statements and passages which imply the falsity of the world and affirm the absolute oneness of the ultimate reality. This worldview has been analyzed and elucidated by the Indian philosophers specially by the Advaita Vedāntins. According to the Advaita metaphysics, there is one and only one ultimate reality i.e. Brahman. This single non-dual reality can be established only if it can be shown that everything which appears to us is false or illusory in character. So the concept of falsity is of supreme importance in the entire Vedāntic tradition. The Advaita Vedāntins hold that the Upanisads being revealed texts, are of greater authority than other texts composed by human beings. This paper tries to explain and examine the concept of falsity on the basis of those scriptural statements which directly or indirectly deal with the ontological status of the world.

**Keywords:** *Upanisads, Advaita Vedānta, Falsity, Reality, Brahman, Non-duality, Truth*

From early Vedic period searching for truth has been regarded as principal task to attain the ultimate end of human life. This search for truth by the ancient Indian thinkers reaches its culmination in the Vedic literature called the Upanisads also known as Vedānta or the final portion of the Vedas. Although the nature of truth and falsity can be discussed from epistemological, metaphysical and logical point of view, the Upaniṣadic seers dealt with the problem of truth and falsity through discussion on the major metaphysical question: Is the world with its diversity as it stands to our sense experience is true or false? This question had been the chief element of the Upaniṣadic worldview. This view has been discussed and analyzed by the subsequent Indian philosophical systems specially by the Vedānta system

which has been treated as one of the major orthodox philosophical systems of ancient India. The Upanisads, are the first and foremost source of the Vedānta system. This system has been flourished and came down to us through different writings of such distinguished Ācāryas as Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, Madhva etc. The Vedānta system is also designated as 'Uttara Mīmāṃsā' meaning thereby that the system is a discipline which concentrates upon interpreting the Upaniṣads which constitute the *anta* or the final part of the Vedas. Among the distinguished Ācāryas of the Vedānta system only Śaṅkara and Madhva have enriched us with complete commentaries on the major Upaniṣads which form the basis of this system.

The Advaita system of Śaṅkara is developed based on the philosophical teachings of the Upaniṣads and the *Brahmasūtra* of Maharṣi Vyāsa. Śaṅkara and his followers hold that the Upaniṣads, being revealed texts, are of greater authority than *Brahmasūtra* and other texts composed by human beings. So according to the Advaita Vedāntins, Upaniṣadic knowledge (scriptural knowledge) is superior to any other form of knowledge. On this occasion, it may be considered that all the doctrines, advanced by the Advaita Vedāntins should be warranted by the Upaniṣads. Regarding the ontological status of the world, Śaṅkara maintains the view that Brahman alone is real and the world around us is false or illusory in character. The Advaita Vedāntins have argued at length to show that the entire Vedas converge to establish the single reality, namely Brahman. The term 'Brahman' is etymologically derived from the root 'vr̥ha' with the suffix 'man' added to it. The literal meaning of this term is that which is ubiquitous or all-pervasive. The Upaniṣads regard this ultimate reality as identical with the universal self. Now the main issue to be discussed in this article is whether the Upaniṣads accept the falsity (*mithyātva*) of the world.

In this connection, it should be noted that distinguished Ācāryas of the Vedānta system hold different views on the ontological status of the world. For instance, Rāmānuja and Madhva accept the reality of the world, although the world is dependent for its existence on Brahman. On the contrary, the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara and his followers asserts the falsity of the world. The Advaita Vedāntins state that Brahman or the ultimate reality appears illusorily as the world due to *avidyā* or *māyā* as the rope is cognized as a snake due to *avidyā*. If we look into the principal Upaniṣads we can see that there are various passages and statements which directly speak of the illusoriness of the world. There are other statements which do not directly assert the falsity of the world, but these statements imply the phenomenal character of the world. All those passages and statements help us to understand that the concept falsity of the

world is embedded in the Upaniṣadic worldview. Our primary task in this article is to find out and analyze such Upaniṣadic statements and passages which directly or indirectly speak of the falsity of the universe and affirm the absolute oneness of the ultimate reality.

The following *mantra* of the *Īśopaniṣad* directly speaks of *jīvanmukti*, but it also indicates the falsity of the world. The *mantra* is:

“*Yasmin sarvāṇi bhūtānyātmaivābhūdviājānataḥ |*  
*Tatra ko mohaḥ kaḥ śoka ekatvamanupaśyataḥ*” ||<sup>1</sup>

Śaṅkara interprets this *mantra* as follows:

The world appears as plural and full of misery to the ignorant. Although the individual self is intrinsically enlightened, *avidyā* deprives him of realization of the truth. *Avidyā* conceals the true nature of the ultimate reality by means of its veiling capacity (*āvaraṇa śakti*); and makes this single reality (Brahman) appear as something else, namely the world with the help of its power of superimposition (*vikṣepa śakti*). When *avidyā* is destroyed by the final immediate knowledge of Brahman, the phenomenal appearance of the world with its plurality disappears. At that very moment the enlightened person (*jīvanmukta*) realizes that he is free from grief and delusion.

The following *mantras* of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* asserts the falsity of all kinds of plurality:

“*Yadeveh tadamutra yadamutra tadanviha |*  
*mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyumapnoti ya iha nāneva paśyati ||*  
*manasaivedamāptavyaṁ neha nānāsti kiñcana |*  
*mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyum gacchati ya iha nāneva paśyati*” ||<sup>2</sup>

Śaṅkara explains these *mantras* as follows:

The absolute (Brahman) which is pure consciousness and devoid of all worldly attributes, appears to the ignorant *jīva* as possessing worldly attributes, such as name and form, body and senses. This world of diversity persists so long as the ignorance (*avidyā*) of *jīva* persists. This world of plurality is negated on the rise of the knowledge of Brahman. The knowledge of Brahman is attained only when the mind is purified by studying the scriptures, reflecting on them, and meditating upon the teachings of these scriptures. But anyone who has not attained

the knowledge of Brahman, perceive plurality of the world and consider the self as different from Brahman. As a result, he suffers from the cycle of life and death.

The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* asserts: “Brahman is truth, knowledge and infinite” (*Satyam jñānāmanantam Brahma* ||<sup>3</sup>). Śaṅkara points out that *satyam*, *jñānam* and *anantam* - these three words stand for a definition of Brahman and represent the essence of Brahman. The word *satyam* declares Brahman as the ultimate truth. If Brahman is the ultimate truth, then it is deduced that what is other than Brahman (the world and its diversity) is other than truth. In this way Śaṅkara advocates for the falsity of the world.

A *mantra* in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* declares the all-pervasiveness of Brahman and implies that the world of plurality is only apparent. The *mantra* is:

“*Brahmaivedamamṛtam purastad –  
Brahma paścadbrahma dakṣiṇataścottereṇa |  
Adhaścodhvram ca prasṛtam  
Brahmaivedam viśvamidaṁ variṣṭham*” ||<sup>4</sup>

Śaṅkara interprets this *mantra* as follows:

The ultimate reality or Brahman is not limited by space, time and objects. Whatever appears to a subject, whether it is in front of him or behind him, or above him or below him, is nothing but Brahman. Brahman alone is the ground of phenomenal appearances. The entire world is Brahman itself. Brahman is extended everywhere falsely appearing as the world of manifold entities with phenomenal attributes like name and form. So the plurality appearing to us is not ultimately real. The idea of plurality is illusory like the idea of a snake superimposed on a rope.

In the *Śvetāśvataropaniṣad* we have the assertion that the world-phenomenon is evanescent and it is removable by the knowledge of Brahman. This assertion is revealed in the following *mantra* of this Upaniṣad:

“*kṣaram pradhānamamṛtākṣaram haraḥ  
kṣarātmānāvīśate deva ekaḥ |  
tasyābhidyānād yoganāt tattvabhāvād  
bhūyaścānte viśvamāyānivṛttiḥ*” ||<sup>5</sup>

The *mantra* means that the world of manifold is fleeting and transitory. So it is not real. The only reality is Brahman, which is pure, eternal and indeterminate. This single reality is the controller of the apparent universe. By the realization of Brahman through hearing (*śravaṇa*), rectification (*manana*) and meditation (*nididhyāsana*) of the scriptures, the illusory world-appearance is contradicted and the enlightened individual is totally liberated from the bondage of rebirth and sufferings.

We come across a statement in the *Chāndodya Upaniṣad* which indicates the falsity of the world. The statement is: “*yathā soṃyaikena mṛtpiṇḍena sarvaṃ mṛṇmayam vijñātam syādvācārambhanam vikāro nāmadheyam mṛttiketyeva satyam.*”<sup>6</sup> Śaṅkara interprets this statement as follows:

If someone knows the clay, he knows all effects of clay. Clay is the material cause of a pot. It is obvious that the knowledge of the material cause leads to the knowledge of its effect, since the effect, in essence, is not different from its material cause. The effect differs from the material cause only in name and form. Whenever a pot is made from clay, the pot is not different from clay. In other words, the pot, in essence, is nothing but clay. By the same analogy, the world as the effect is not different from Brahman, the material cause of it. In so far as the world appears as different from Brahman, it is false; so far as it is identical with Brahman, it is real.

Another statement from the same Upaniṣad declares the non-dual character of the ultimate reality. The statement is: “*sadeva soṃyedamagra āsīdekamevādvaitīyam*”<sup>7</sup>. This statement means that before the creation of the universe, there was existence (*sat*) alone – the only one reality, without a second. This reality is all-pervasive, part less, eternal and pure consciousness. The universe, perceived by us, is nothing but a modification of this reality. So, the worldly things possessed of name, form and movement are not different in essence from this ultimate reality or Brahman just like the pot in essence, is not different from clay. But before the apparent modification, the single reality does not possess name, form and movement.

We may here cite an instance from our practical experience. When a person is in deep-sleep (*susupti*), he does not realize the world of multiplicity, possessed of name, form and movement. After rising from this state, he realizes that in deep-sleep the only thing that appeared to him was pure consciousness. So, in deep-sleep the thing that exists is pure consciousness – the single reality which is devoid of name and form. Although a bound individual during deep-

sleep becomes identical with this pure being, he does not realize his identity with Brahman due to *avidyā*. We come across a passage in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* which asserts that the empirical world of plurality appears as real due to *avidyā*. The passage runs as follows:

“*atha ye cāseyha jīva ye ca pretā yaccānyadicchanna labhate sarvaṁ tadatra gatvā vindate'tra hāseite satyāḥ kāmā anṛtāpidhānāstadyathāpi hiraṇyanidhiṁ nihitamakṣetrajñā uparyupari sañcaranto na vindesurevamevemaḥ sarvāḥ prajā aharahagacchantya etaṁ brahmalokaṁ na vindantyanṛtena hi pratyudhāḥ.*”<sup>8</sup> Śāṅkara interprets this passage as follows:

The individuals belonging to the enlightened person, whatever they are alive or dead and whatever else he desires – food, drink, clothing etc., but does not come by in the mundane world, he gets all these objects of desire by having the knowledge of identity between the self and Brahman. Because, all these objects of desire of him are covered by *ajñāna* (*anṛta*). In essence, all these worldly things are identical with the single, unqualified Brahman. But *ajñāna* or *avidyā* conceals the nature of Brahman and the ignorant *jīva* does not have the objects of desire, being identified with the ultimate reality. The person who is ignorant about the land containing gold, walks repeatedly over the treasure of gold, hidden underground, but does not find it, although its knowledge is possible. Similarly, the ignorant *jīva* does not realize Brahman although everyday he reaches at this single ultimate reality during deep-sleep. The only reason is that he is covered by *anṛta* (*avidyā*). The individual is prevented by *avidyā* from realizing his identity with the single ultimate reality (Brahman), and suffers from the cycle of life and death.

The following statement of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* asserts the oneness of the ultimate reality and refutes the plurality of the world:

“.....*yatra vā asya sarvamātmaivābhūt tat kena kaṁ jighret tat kena kaṁ paśyet tat kena kaṁ śṛṇuyāt tat kena kambhivadet tat kena kaṁ manvīta tat kena kaṁ vijānīyāt.*”<sup>9</sup> The statement means that Brahman which is identified with the self (*ātman*) does not have a second. This ultimate reality is devoid of all pluralities. But *avidyā* causes this single reality to appear as many. Before attaining liberation, the individual self smells something that can be smelt through something else, viz. the nose. Similarly, we can see, think, speak and know something. When the state of ignorance is destroyed by the knowledge of Brahman, there is nothing different from the self or Brahman.

The most important *śruti* which directly affirms the absolute oneness of the ultimate reality and denies the existence of everything else other than Brahman is: “*neha nānāsti kiñcana; mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyum āpnoti ya iha nāneva paśyati.*”<sup>10</sup> Śaṅkara interprets this statement as follows:

The ultimate reality or brahman has no duality in it. Though there is no duality, duality is superimposed on it due to *avidyā*. The individual self who sees duality or difference suffers from rebirth. When *avidyā* is destroyed by the immediate knowledge of the identity of the individual self and Brahman, the individual is totally liberated from the bondage of rebirth and its sufferings.

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* is the shortest of the principal Upaniṣads. But this Upaniṣad has a unique place in the Advaita Vedānta, because it presents the quintessence of the entire Upaniṣadic teachings through only twelve passages which may be considered as the key-passages of absolute non-dualism. It directly asserts the falsity of the world and that of all the components of the world-phenomena by adopting a unique method of investigating and interpreting the states of human consciousness.

The said Upaniṣad proclaims the *mahāvākya*: “*ayamātmā brahma*”<sup>10</sup> (“The self is Brahman”). This statement asserts that the ultimate reality is non-dual. This conclusion is established by analyzing the four states through which pure consciousness manifests itself. These four states are – *jāgrat*, *svapna*, *suṣupti* and *turīya*. Each of these states is called a *pāda* of Brahman. The term ‘pāda’ may be etymologically derived in two ways: (i) *padyate anena iti pādaḥ* (the means of realization) (ii) *padyate yaḥ iti pādaḥ* (the object realization). The first three states are the means of realizing the fourth; hence they are called ‘pāda’s in the sense that they are the means or instruments for attaining the highest end. Secondly, the fourth or *turīya* is what is to be realized (*padyate*). In case of the fourth state, the term ‘pāda’ means the object of realization. An analysis of the four states asserts the view of the non-duality of the self or the ultimate reality.

In the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* pure consciousness or Brahman is presented as possessed of four stages. *Vaiśvānara*, *taijasa*, *prājña* and *caturtha* (*turīya*) are the different stages of consciousness. The fourth stage (*caturtha*) or *turīya* alone is real which is identified with the ultimate reality (Brahman); and the first three stages stand respectively for the three states – the waking state (*jāgrat*), dream (*Svapna*) and the state of dreamless sleep (*suṣupti*). These four stages are not real stages of Brahman. Nor can they be looked upon as parts of Brahman.

Śaṅkara compares them with the value of a coin (*kārṣāpaṇa*). Just as a coin, considered as a metal dice has little or negligible value, but the real value is superimposed on the coin by convention or state laws, so these states do not really exist in Brahman, but are superimposed on Brahman by *avidyā*. Those states of pure consciousness may be looked upon from two different perspectives. From the cosmic point of view those states represent different stages of evolution or different stages of appearance of the universe out of pure consciousness. From the individual's point of view these states represent the various states or stages through which an individual undergoes in its journey through the cycle of birth and death.

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* employs the symbol 'om' to signify the ultimate reality. This symbol consists of three letters viz., 'A', 'U' and 'M'. These three symbols or letters have been equated with the three aforementioned states of consciousness. The first symbol 'A' represents the gross (*sthūla*) body, the waking state and the mode of consciousness which reveals itself through the gross body. Pure consciousness in this first state is called '*viśva*' or '*vaiśvānara*'. This mode of consciousness is related to outward objects on account of *avidyā*. It experiences the plurality of the world resulting from the operations of the sense organs, both external and internal. The second symbol 'U' represents the subtle (*sūkṣma*) body, the dream state and the mode of consciousness possessed of the impressions from the world during the waking state. The mode of consciousness in this state is called '*taijasa*'. The consciousness becomes aware of internal objects which are nothing but mere impressions left by the previous waking state. The third symbol 'M' signifies the state of deep sleep (*susupti*) and the individual who does not desire any object nor does he see any dream. This mode of consciousness is called '*prāñña*' in which all experiences of waking and dream state become unified and undifferentiated under the cover of *avidyā* which is the principle of ignorance or nescience. The fourth (*caturtha*) or *turīya* is the absolute self which is the partless *om*. No word can express this ultimate reality. So, this state has been described just by the term '*caturtha*'. The aforementioned modes of consciousness have their own names, but the *turīya* is beyond of name and form. This absolute reality is that which is not conscious of external world, nor conscious of the internal world. It is a state where consciousness reveals itself in its unadulterated form. It is beyond all empirical phenomena like name, form and action. It is unseen, uninferable, unthinkable, and indescribable. There is no duality or plurality in it as it is the cessation of *avidyā* and the pluralistic world caused by it. This reality is full of peace (*śāntam*), auspicious (*śivam*) and non-dual (*advaitam*).

It should be mentioned here that there is a similarity between the state of deep-sleep (*susupti*) and the *turīya*. In both states there is no plurality of the universe. But the distinction between the two states is that in the deep-sleep *ajñāna* or *avidyā* persists, but in the *turīya* state there is no *avidyā*, as *avidyā* is destroyed by the final immediate knowledge of Brahman. When the individual self, sleeping under the influence of *ajñāna* is awakened, he realizes himself as the birthless and non-dual *turīya ātman*.

The other Vedantins do not agree with worldview of the Advaita Vedantins. Some argues that the Upanisadic worldview does not assert the falsity of the world. Although some statements of the Upanisads mention the non-dualistic character of the ultimate reality, they do not imply the falsity of the entire universe. There are some utterances from various Upanisads which admit Brahman as the ultimate reality but do not deny the truth of the world with its all kinds of plurality. A few selected sayings from the Upanisads can be quoted in this context.

In the very beginning of the *Īsopaniṣad*, the world with all kinds of plurality, is described as the manifestation of God (Brahman). The statement is: “*Īśāvāsyamidam sarvaṃ yatkiñca jagatyām jagat*”<sup>12</sup> (‘everything of the world is covered by God’). A statement from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* states more explicitly that everything in the world is Brahman. It says, “*Sarvam khalvidam Brahman tajjalani*”<sup>13</sup> (‘All this is Brahman, and Brahman is their birth, existence and dissolution.’). These statements reveal all-pervasiveness of Brahman but do not deny the plurality. In the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, Yajñavalkya himself says, ‘*This Brahman, this Kṣatriya, these various people, these various living beings all of these are that soul.*’<sup>14</sup> Brahman exists within the many, embracing the many, but not excluding the many. The same idea is echoed in several other Upanisads. All the above statements support pantheism which holds that the supreme reality exists invisibly in all objects or beings and does not deny the existence of the visible world of plurality.

In the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* we see that the seer of the Upanisad says, ‘This Brahman existed previously as one and unique. But he did not enjoy it. That is why no one enjoys it alone. Therefore, he wanted a second one.’<sup>15</sup> From this statement we can understand quite easily that before emergence or appearance of the diverse world there was only one reality, i.e. Brahman. But he did not enjoy his solitude and therefore he took on his various names and forms, divided by many. So this statement also asserts non-dual Brahman as the ultimate reality, but does not imply the falsity of the world with its all kinds of plurality. Now the

question is: whether the Upanisadic view admits the falsity of the world or not. This question is not to be answered so easily. From the Advaita Vdantins standpoint, the world is quite real from the phenomenal point of view. But this phenomenal diversity of the world disappears when *avidyā* is destroyed and the *jīva* realizes the absolute nature of Brahman or the Self.

The Upaniṣads often describe and explain their thoughts in colorful language, imagery, analogies and parables. For this reason, logical steps of the philosophical postulations often remain obscure and the distinguished ācāryas of the different philosophical schools adopt different interpretations of the Upaniṣadic statements on the status of the world. But *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* of Gauḍapāda, a treatise on *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, may be considered as the earliest attempt to systematize the world-view of the Upaniṣads. In the second chapter of this expository treatise namely the *Vaitathya Prakaraṇa*, Gauḍapāda establishes the illusoriness or the falsity of the world based on an analogy between the dream and the waking experience. The following *kārikā* clearly reveals his view on the dream experience.

“*vaitathyaṃ sarvabhāvānaṃ svapna āhurmanīṣiṇaḥ |*  
*antaḥsthānāntu bhāvānāṃ samvṛtatvena hetunā ||*”<sup>16</sup>

The *kārikā* means that unreality (*vaitathya*) is the nature of all dreamt objects. The reason of this unreality or falsity is: The dreamt objects are perceived inside the body though they do not actually exist inside it. For instance, a mountain, an elephant etc. which appears in the dream, are cognized inside the body and not outside of it. But it is not possible for a mountain or the elephant, to exist within a body. Therefore, all these dreamt objects are to be regarded as false.

In the dream state one may see himself visiting hundred miles away from his body. The dreamer's going outside of the body is not possible on account of the shortness of time. Moreover, if the dream experience is real, the dreamer should wake up in the different region, he dreamt of. But when the dreamer wakes up, he does not find himself in the place, dreamt of. Gauḍapāda says that the unreality of the objects perceived in dream is evidenced by *śruti* in such passage as, “There are no chariots, nor animals to be yoked to them...” [“*na tatra rathā na rathayogā na panthāno bhavanti ...*”].<sup>17</sup> This passage clearly declares the non-existence of the dreamt objects like chariots etc. Gauḍapāda here argues that the objects of the waking state are as illusory as the objects cognized in dream. He says:

“*antaḥsthānāttu bhedānām tasmājjāgarite smṛtam |*  
*yathā tatra tathā svapne saṁvṛtatvena bhidyate ||*”<sup>18</sup>

Ācārya Śaṅkara employs an inference (*parārthānumāna*) in his commentary of this *kārikā*. ‘The falsity of the objects perceived in the waking state’ is to be established (*pratijñā*) here. ‘Being perceived’ is the ground (*hetu*) of this inference. ‘The objects of the waking state are like the dream-objects’ is the illustration (*drṣṭāntah*). As the dream objects are false and the fact of ‘being perceived’ is common to the dream-objects as well as the objects in the waking state (*upanaya*). The falsity or illusoriness of the waking state is admitted (*nigamana*). There is a difference between the two states. The objects in the dream we perceived in a limited space within the body (*antaḥsthānāt*). The objects in the waking state are not so perceived. But the fact of being perceived and falsity are common to both. Though the argumentative approach of Gauḍapāda to prove the falsity of the universe may be considered as naïve, his attempt reaches culmination by the writings of Ācārya Śaṅkara and later Advaitins.

From the above discussions we may conclude that the main purport of the Upaniṣads as interpreted by Śaṅkara, consists in conveying the eternal truth that *avidyā* is the cause of bondage. Due to *avidyā* we perceive pure consciousness as the world consisting of many different things. The final immediate realization of the non-dual truth is the only means of salvation.

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