

DESMOND'S FOURFOLD SENSE OF BEING: A COMPARISON TO SRI SANKARACARYA AND THE ADVAITA VEDANTA TRADITION

JAMES EATON
Boston University

WORKING WITH ASIAN religious philosophy from within a Western context is a problematic but useful process. This is the process that the following essay undertakes by applying William Desmond's metaphysical conception of a *four-fold sense of being* to Indian philosophy. The focus of this discussion will be in the Advaita Vedanta tradition (non-dual philosophy) of Hinduism as it is presented by the "founder" of this school of thought, Sri Sankaracarya.

Desmond outlines the four-fold scheme in *Being and the Between* as four "fundamental senses of being"—univocal, equivocal, dialectical and metaxological. Discussing this aspect of Desmond's metaphysical work in conjunction with the work of Sankara serves two purposes. The first is to make an attempt at applying Desmond's four-fold system to another highly developed metaphysical system, Advaita Vedanta. This is an *attempt*, simply for the reason that both metaphysical systems have limitations and do not fit together perfectly. The second purpose is to try to articulate the work and ideas of Sankara in a Western context. This goal, in itself, should present difficulties, due to language limitations and to basic differences between the world views of the East and West. Nevertheless, I believe that a useful comparison can be made without resort to stretched interpretations of Desmond or Sankara.

Sankara, an Eighth Century C.E. reformer, only represents the Vedanta school of non-dualism or *Advaita*. His basic line of thought is that the soul or self (*Atman*) is identified and equal to the Ultimate, the One Divine Being (*Brahman*). The world of multiplicity and difference is mere illusion (*maya*). For Sankara, the only thing that holds ultimate reality is Brahman itself. Brahman can be generally spoken of as the only true being that lacks primary and secondary qualities and is eternal. The term *Vedanta*¹ refers to the teachings found in three works or collections known as the *Upanisads*, the *Brahma-sutras*, and the *Bhagavadgita*. These works and their commentaries (or *bhasyas*) written by Sankara will be the ground from which this discussion will build.

Sankara's philosophy operates with two main levels of reality—namely, the conventional and the ultimate levels of reality. In broad

terms, conventional reality is the reality of everyday life. It is what is regularly known and comprehended through the intellect (*buddhi*) and is normally associated with the unenlightened person or the yogi still in search of Brahman. Alternately, ultimate reality is beyond comprehension or conceptualization by the intellect and is generally associated with the enlightened person or the yogi that has realized true knowledge of Brahman. These two different levels of reality are also associated with two different intellectualizations of Brahman, respectively saguna-Brahman (Brahman with qualities) and nirguna-Brahman (Brahman without qualities). These two levels of reality are also known as the “two truths.”

The next sections of this essay will deal with each of Desmond’s four senses of being. The manner in which I will work through this progression of the four-fold senses as they relate to Sankara relies on an argument that I call the “stepping-stone” theory. As a preliminary and cursory definition, it is a systematic process or progression from the state of unenlightenment—nescience caused by the superimposition (*adhyasa*) of qualities—to the final state of enlightenment—a rapturous knowledge of the Divine. Swami Vivekananda characterized the progression as a “series or succession of mental efforts at religious realization” (Ramachan 75). The term “stepping-stone” is my re-formulation of this series that Vivekananda describes. In Sankara’s system, the notion of stepping stones involves and requires the practice of bhakti-yoga (discipline devotion). Therefore, the fact that Sankara places *bhakti* in second place and gives it “non-ultimate” status is significant. It is the exact reason why bhakti is part of a stepping-stone theory involving intermediate stages, as opposed to a non-gradual theory of enlightenment.² Desmond also presents a model structured after the basic four-fold scheme; associated with each of his senses of being is a type of self—or, as he calls it, a process of “selving.” These notions of self proposed by Desmond are worth examining, insofar as they relate to Sankara’s *Atman* and Brahman. In the conclusion of this essay, I will briefly address the problems and limitations of comparing Desmond’s system to Sankara’s version of Advaita Vedanta.

The first stage that Desmond proposes is the univocal sense of being. According to Desmond, when one first asks the questions concerning the nature of Being, she is hit by something awesome. Desmond describes this experience as *agapeic astonishment*—an opening up to the fullness of the other or the fullness beyond itself. Agapeic astonishment does not suggest an indeterminacy, but rather something that is more than determined, over-determined or perhaps even beyond determinacy. In other words, this agapeic “opening” causes a kind of domino effect. It is the start of the process that leads from this initial or pri-

mary astonishment to the most distant point—the metaxological sense of being. In the case of Sankara's school, the devotee becomes a student of Brahman, not because he chooses to, but because something is revealed to him. Pure astonishment towards that glimpse of ultimate reality. As mentioned above, Vivekananda speaks of the moment of “religious realization.” This epiphany is what I suggest to be the analog to Desmond's agapeic astonishment. The moment of initial realization in the Vedanta tradition may stem from any number of places and is not a realization in the ultimate sense; it is an opening up to a knowledge that there may be more to existence than is readily apparent.

The elusive nature of initial astonishment leads to the next step proposed by Desmond, something that he describes as *erotic perplexity*. The term itself explains much of what Desmond is conveying. The allusion is to the portrayal of the god Eros in Plato's *Symposium*. Eros or the erotic generally describes a desire or need stemming from a lack or an unsatisfactoriness. In this Platonic dialogue, Aristophanes describes this incompleteness as follows: “Love is born into every being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature” (Plato 191D). The “demigod” Eros represents a need for completion—i.e., finding your other “half”; the force behind this movement towards wholeness with the other is the love or *Agape* of the initial astonishment. The initially astonished person is suddenly exposed to something that exceeds her understanding. Its indefinite quality seems almost oppressive in nature, eliciting a sense of lack of control. The preliminary astonishment transforms into erotic perplexity—a perplexity that exposes the distance that she is from the knowledge of Being.

The agapeic mind is not entirely separate from the erotic mind. Desmond argues for a fluid movement through his four-fold structure. The connection between them is this flow from the one step to the next, a flow that cannot be stopped once it has begun. The student is presented with this “flood” and is forced into rectifying it for herself. Curiosity becomes the rule; beginning with primary astonishment, curiosity and desire (two closely related and recurring ideas) constitute the ingredients or fuel for erotic perplexity, which is the intermediate stage in the movement from indeterminate and overwhelming astonishment to the determinate, i.e., the univocal mind. The univocal mind is what appears to be the most immediate solution to the indefiniteness and perplexity.³

Agapeic astonishment causes the overload or flood of questions, and the erotic perplexity causes the desire to complete these questions with answers, which are not realized until the determined and articulate mind of the univocal sense of being has been reached. At this point, it is clear that astonishment and perplexity are not a true starting point;

rather, they are a kind of trigger. They do not do any work themselves but only illuminate the problem or situation. Desmond uses the term univocal mind to refer to a mindfulness that seeks determination and definition from this enigmatic state. The univocal mind is the most obvious and immediate place to turn for protection from the flood of perplexity. According to Desmond, this kind of mindfulness is akin to the role of ordinary common sense. In this definition of common sense, Desmond allows for a two-sidedness, a univocal side that is determining and exacting and an equivocal side that is willing to allow for uncertainty. It is, however, the determining and exacting quality of common sense that is most pleasing. Common sense is the normal form of working towards what is fully articulated and determinate—i.e., univocal. This is a process of “univocizing” or pinning down the equivocities and uncertainty of perplexity and ridding oneself of confusion. Intelligibility, such as mathematical intelligibility, epitomizes the goal of univocity. When put in these terms, erotic perplexity offers the univocal mind the problem—for instance, the addition of two and two—and, through the operation of “univocization,” the equation is completed with the answer of four. The answer cannot be anything more or less than four; any other answer would lead to unintelligibility and would be impossible for the univocal mind to produce.

This intelligibility, I argue, is the first step in the stepping-stone theory. In Sankara’s model, the mind is always in a state of flux. The univocal mind acts to focus and steady the intellect. “A man must have faith before he thinks—when one does not have faith, one does not think” (*Upanisads* VII 18). Like other parts of the Chandogya Upanisads, this selection demands that one have a focused mind. *Bhakti-yoga* (devotion or faith) is a univocal discipline. It uses the Lord (*Isvara*) as a focus-point for mind-calming meditations. Unlike Brahman, the Lord can be conceived of and determined by the human intellect (*buddhi*) because it is within the realm of conventional reality. This focus is a prerequisite to thought. The focusing quality of *Isvara* (the *saguna*-Brahman) does not, however, have an ultimate purpose due to the “closeness” of the Lord to *nirguna*-Brahman (unconditioned Brahman). The notion closeness or nearness will be dealt with more thoroughly later.

Both Desmond and Sankara subscribe to the notion that the univocal mind appears to be necessary. Desmond describes this require for intelligibility and determination for thought: “To be is to be a determinate something; to think is to think intelligibly, which for the univocal mind is to think something determinate; if we do not think something determinate, we are thinking nothing, and hence not thinking at all” (Desmond 53). Here, Desmond makes clear that the univocal mind has a

limited scope. It cannot process information that eludes determination or intelligibility; the esoteric and unempirical are avoided. This constraint on the univocal mind is the first instance of a negative limitation—in contrast to the positive limitation caused by the abundance of astonishment and the excess of perplexity. The univocal mind tends to act as a filter, removing the unintelligible. However, this type of mindfulness is soon exhausted; it leaves neither curiosity nor desire truly satisfied.

The univocal mind leaves one in a constricted state. The univocal mind could be seen as premature or childlike. Desmond uses the term *idiot self* to describe one's mindfulness at this level of being. He uses *idiot* in the sense of its Greek root, *idios*, which means private or one's own. Desmond suggests that there is a unity or identity of self that is formed before any type of mediation process involving the other or the space between self and other (or self and God, and so on). The univocalizations and determinations that the univocal mind attempts are done purely with reference to oneself, "opening into otherness within itself" (Desmond 383). The univocal mind perpetuates this oscillation between equivocality and univocity.

The idiot self and the univocal mind reach a limit. The search after final enlightenment exposes what seems to be an irreducible dichotomy between Brahman of conventional reality and Brahman of ultimate reality. To jump to the end of the story, ultimate reality is only Brahman—that is, Brahman is all, and all is Brahman. Difference is caused only by the superimposition (*adhyasa*) of limiting adjuncts onto the real or *nir-guna*-Brahman. These limiting adjuncts are described as creations of illusion (*maya*) that stem from the Lord Brahman's "playfulness" or *Lila*.⁴ From the conventional or everyday view, these differences are real and are empirically valid. *Isvara* is Brahman with limiting adjuncts (conditioned Brahman or *saguna*-Brahman), and the individual soul (*jiva*) is *Atman*, the divine spirit or soul, plus limiting adjuncts. After the final "disillusionment" of the world—or, in other words, after all these superimpositions have been lifted—there are no distinctions; *Atman* equals Brahman, and *Isvara* equals *jiva*. This equivalence, however, is not possible on the conventional level, and one possessed of univocal mindfulness cannot accommodate this abstraction.

Thus, the univocal mind cannot do more than merely catalog and determine these limiting adjuncts, since they are the only things that can be empirically validated. This point is an interesting one about Sankara; he does assign validity to these adjuncts because they exist according to perception by the intellect (*buddhi*), but they do not, of course, have any reality except for within the realm of conventional reality. Because ultimate Brahman is beyond intellectual comprehension, it must transcend the univocal mind. The operation of *bhakti-yoga* explores this re-for-

mulation. Using Vivekananda's definitions of *bhakti*, devotion can only be considered devotion if it is directed towards *Isvara*. *Bhakti* is further defined as a genuine search for the Lord as well as a relationship with the Lord (Ramachan 75-76). The dualistic nature of the Lord permits such a relationship. That is, it is impossible to have a relationship with something impersonal and abstract. Ultimate Brahman, by definition is non-dual, and a relationship requires duality, which can only be found in the conditioned Brahman. Alternately, ultimate Brahman cannot be the goal or object of *bhakti-yoga*. The destination of a search or the object of meditation must be associated with some sort of locus, whether concrete or abstract. Ultimate Brahman has no locus, while *Isvara* does have a locus and can logically be the goal of devotion. *Bhakti-yoga* (via *Isvara*) leads one only to the "inferior, conditioned, and qualified Brahman alone" (BSB 879).

The discipline of devotion reinforces this notion of dichotomy between the "two truths." The equivocities and indeterminations prove the univocal to be inadequate. The limiting adjuncts of conditioned Brahman are made more articulate, but this clarification does not satisfy the ultimate unity spoken of in the scriptures—namely, the unity of self and Brahman. Sankara argues that the true Brahman cannot be spoken of or comprehended; the word Brahman can only be used in a figurative sense. To say that one is seeking after Brahman only refers to the conditioned Brahman. According to the *Brahma-Sutra* commentaries, Sankara believes that any such formulation of thought is absurd because "there can be no such conception as an approacher, a goal, and progress towards It, for the absolute Brahman is omnipresent and it is the inmost Self of the travelers" (879). This feeling of unmediated difference is characterized by Desmond's equivocal sense of being. In Desmond's model, the process of "selving" follows from the contrast to the otherness of the unconditioned ultimate. Desmond names this process *aesthetic selving*—a selving that takes stock of the plurivocal nature of being. He goes further to say that this selving is a "patient selving," which is to say that this differentiating process is not completely active, but rather one *undergoes* this process passively. In the case of Brahman, the being of selfhood is defined in terms of the opposition to the other (i.e., Brahman). The basic formulation is the following: self is self because self is not Brahman. Without any mediation between the two, the oneness of Brahman appears to be less plausible, and a kind of dualism follows. The seeker after final release/enlightenment is plagued with a separateness from God and a separateness from the absolute. A sense of identity with Brahman can never be possible with this disparity. On the other hand, the relationship with the Lord requires this dualism, but not necessarily an unmitigated or unmediated dualism that the

equivocal mind produces. The equivocal sense ignores the dynamic process that ties the self to *Isvara* through *bhakti-yoga*, and it also ties the individual soul to Brahman through its oneness.

Desmond's dialectical sense of being addresses this shortcoming that is left by the equivocal. The dialectical takes into account this dynamic connection. Desmond defines this process as a self-mediation with a stress on sameness with the other. The relationship between self and Brahman is finally recognized as a dynamic relationship, not merely an opposition. The dialectical is the point in the stepping-stone theory that allows the yogi to recognize a "union" with the Lord, where *jiva* equals *Isvara*. This allowance rectifies the dilemma of disparity, at least at the conventional level of reality. The dialectical does not dissolve the duality between ultimate and conventional reality—the *nirguna*-Brahman and *saguna*-Brahman, respectively—but it does dissolve the duality that poses problems for the devotee or practitioner of *bhakti-yoga*. Desmond describes this process as *erotic selving*. This notion is similar to that of erotic perplexing in that it is fueled by a sense of lack and a desire for completion. To use Desmond's terminology, the goal of the erotic self is to reach "some achieved integrity of being" through the other. The self is mediated by the integrity formed by the union with the other and through the other. It is a feeling of fidelity or trust of the other. This conventional union of *jiva* and *Isvara* is clearly an intermediate stepping stone, a necessary precursor to the ultimate realization of the ultimate union of *Atman* and Brahman.

This union in no way completes the project set forth by the initial agapeic astonishment or the promise made by the Vedanta tradition. Desmond offers what he calls the metaxological sense of being as the answer to these concerns. The metaxological is the *logos* (reason) of the *metaxu* (middle or between). This form of mindfulness is more revealing than the dialectical. The dialectical merely shows us the opposition, and we are left with an indefinite sense of the indeterminate. However, the dynamic between cannot be fully articulated, according to Desmond, because if it were, the dynamic quality itself would be lost and a "static matrix" would arise. This state is characterized as looking at the individual frames of a movie reel while ignoring or forgetting the moving image that is projected on the screen. Rather than attempting to determine the between, the metaxological tries to reveal this mystery of the between through what Desmond calls *intermediation*, which is a pluralized mediation that involves the "relationship" as a whole—the self, the other, and the dynamic between.

This sense of being or this kind of mindfulness accomplishes what the dialectical did not. The erotic self of the dialectical was fueled by lack and incompleteness, but the "integrity of being" that followed from

the union did not account for the dynamic process. The dialectical does recognize the between, unlike the univocal and the equivocal, but once the goal of unity has been reached, the between (force and energy) is no longer needed. Why does this progression not stop here? It is for the same reason that brought us to this point originally: curiosity and desire. This idea is closely related to the Vedanta notion of non-return. “Those who proceed down this path [to Brahman] do not return to this human condition” (*Upanisads* IV 15.5). The human condition refers to the status of the person immersed in the ignorance caused by the superimposition of the limiting adjuncts (qualities) One cannot return to this lower state because of the “stripping” away of superimpositions. Sankara argues that once one gains knowledge of a less conditioned reality, she cannot revert back to a more conditioned knowledge. In other words, one cannot assign reality to the qualities and distinctions of *saguna*-Brahman after it is known that they are not ultimately real.

The type of “selving” that Desmond associates with the metaxological explores the role of curiosity and desire. Desmond names the process *agapeic selving* and calls the result *agapeic self*. As mentioned earlier, *agape* is a type of love or openness. It is not an opening to the other out of a feeling of lack or incompleteness, but rather an opening for the sake of the opening. The agapeic self has almost an emotional quality—a love for the excess of the other and that of the between. The realization of union with *Isvara* made by the erotic self is a limited view of devotion and meditation and hazards the possibility of a dead-end. The metaxological sense of being is apparent in the way Sankara deals with this objection. *Isvara* is only one intellectualization of the qualified Brahman. In this model, *Isvara* or a particular god such as *Krsna* or even a clay pot, for that matter, could be seen as objects of meditations (and devotion). One is not necessarily restricted to meditate on only those things mentioned and prescribed in the scriptures. As Sankara argues, the path exists only in the realm of conventional or non-ultimate reality. Ultimately there is no path, only Brahman. It is a process of recognizing superimpositions and “stripping” them away. This world has innumerable qualities caused by ignorance and superimposition. All of these differentiating qualities found in various meditations will disappear after the final dissolution of the world caused by knowledge of the absolute. Thus, it does not ultimately matter how you go about traveling the path to enlightenment, as long as the chosen paths are “calculated as they are to lead good fortune” (*BSB* 700).

The discussion so far has dealt with the importance and role of *bhakti-yoga* as it relates to the four-fold scheme, either seeing it as a series of stepping stones or in some way conceptualizing the systematized progression from nescience to enlightenment. However, as stated

earlier, *bhakti-yoga* is not of primary importance and is not an ultimate means to knowledge of Brahman in Sankara's metaphysical system—*jnana-yoga* is. Sankara has built a hierarchical system in which ignorance is the base; *bhakti-yoga* is an intermediate stage or stepping stone; and *jnana-yoga* is at the top. Above I mentioned the importance of faith or loving devotion in meditation: "A man must have faith before he thinks—when one does not have faith, one does not think." *Bhakti-yoga* is an acceptable tool for the calming and directing of the intellect; this calmness is a prerequisite for the practice of *jnana-yoga*. Sankara recognizes *bhakti* as a means to the end of conventional reality, but it stops short of the ultimate target of *nirguna*-Brahman. Sankara argues that it is only *jnana-yoga* that can bridge the gap between conventional and ultimate reality allowing the attainment of full knowledge of Brahman. It destroys the "nearness" of the supreme Brahman, where *bhakti-yoga* leaves us, thereby completing the union with the absolute.

Jnana-yoga bridges the gap that Desmond's four-fold scheme does not complete. Desmond's metaphysical theory seems to allow for a notion of two truths—that is, conventional reality and a reality that exceeds the "everyday," but it cannot give the ontological value to the latter reality that an Advaitan system can. The metaxological sense of being opens the self up to the possibility and existence of the excesses of otherness, but it is not accounted for in the same way that Sankara claims. Both thinkers admit to the limitations of the intellect, but Sankara does not see them as insurmountable. His understanding of *jnana-yoga* contains the potential to attain the knowledge that is beyond conceptualization and classification by the intellect—namely, the knowledge of the absolute. I would compare this type of knowledge with what Desmond calls *rapturous univocity*. This notion can be described as the immediate unity that a baby in a womb experiences. The baby cannot differentiate between what is self and what is other. As far as the baby is concerned, all is one. Desmond finds this radical form of unity troubling because of its unintelligibility, but then again that which exceeds the intellect is by definition unintelligible. This rapturous univocity is one of the causes for agapeic astonishment—the trigger that began the preceding four-fold process. I argue that this indifference should not always be looked at as a beginning stage; perhaps it is the actual goal—a radical sense of oneness.

NOTES

1. This word literally translates to "end of the Veda." The Veda is a long and ancient tradition of written and spoken narrations that date as far back as 1500 - 1000 B.C.E. They are generally thought of as divine in nature and as unauthored.

2. The notion of sudden enlightenment or instant realization of the ultimate is not found directly in Sankara's ideology. It is, however, raised as an objection, expressed primarily from the Buddhist perspective.
3. I do not want to suggest that univocity will "take over" for agapeic astonishment and erotic perplexity. The movement between the excess of *Agape* and the lack of *eros* continues as the force motivating this process through the stages, not just that which begins the process.
4. *Lila* or the playfulness of the Lord is a complicated subject; volumes have been written about it. For our purposes, this playfulness, as well as the superimpositions it creates, is not ultimately real and in no way can be designated as characteristic of *nirguna*-Brahman.

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