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Philosophy East and West, Volume 61, Number 2, April 2011, pp. 247-259
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: [10.1353/pew.2011.0026](https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2011.0026)

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of
Comparative Philosophy
Volume 61 - Number 2

University of Hawai'i Press

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THE *DIFFÉRANCE* THAT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE: A COMPARISON OF DERRIDA AND ŚAṄKARA

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To contemplate writing a comparison of aspects of the philosophical works of Śaṅkara, a major philosophical figure in India of the eight or ninth centuries, and Jacques Derrida, a so-called postmodernist thinker, gives a writer reason to pause and to consider moving forward with caution. A writer must proceed cautiously because writing is a risky endeavor, according to Derrida, who also perceives it as a violent exercise because language is more primary than writing in the sense that it is not possible to inquire about the origin of language because we already exist within it, and we cannot get outside of language to examine its origin.¹ From another Derridean perspective within the context of interpreting Plato, writing is something nearly dead: "Writing is not an independent order of signification; it is weakened speech, something not completely dead: a living-dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath."² In another context Derrida refers to writing as a *pharmakon*, a drug that is both a medicine and/or poison, because it goes or leads astray.³ This risky, violent, living-dead drug that can give life or take it away is an activity that possesses no positive or negative value or essence of its own because it simply plays in an unreal semblance.⁴

On the other hand, Śaṅkara also gives us reason to proceed with caution because language is a product of ignorance that develops mental constructions that tend to distort reality. Although language and writing can bind the individual, it can also liberate a person who hears a great sentence (*mahāvākya*) from the Upaniṣads, even though one might not understand what it means. Based on what Śaṅkara states about words, their meaningfulness,⁵ and the knowledge derived from perception and inference that they precede things,⁶ we can infer that writing is also a meaningful exercise, although both words and writing may have an inferior status in comparison to reality or Brahman. Thus, we will move forward with caution and assume that we have something meaningful to write when comparing these two figures, even if it means nothing, and to write in the Derridean sense of dissemination, a scattering of seeds whose recovery or ability to inseminate can never be guaranteed.

From Derrida's perspective, it is necessary to take the risk, even though writing can literally mean nothing, because to risk meaning nothing is to enter into play, which involves entering into the play of *différance*. In this spirit, we will compare the philosophical positions of Derrida with those of Śaṅkara, a representative of what the former calls logocentrism. A logocentric position is a privileged point of view and one that is often grounded in some ontological and epistemological absolute, such as Being, God, or mind. The logocentric perspective is ripe for and invites deconstruction from Derrida's perspective.

We do not, however, plan to deconstruct Śaṅkara's philosophy because deconstruction is more akin to a technique than an ideology that attempts to expose the foundation, limitations, and illogic, and underline the certainty of a philosophical position, a procedure that is beyond the purpose of this essay. We want to compare Śaṅkara and Derrida on what the latter calls *différance* because it is such a central notion in his postmodernist philosophy, whereas identity is stressed by the former thinker, which reasonably suggests a unity. Therefore, we will be comparing a philosophy that culminates in identity with a Western, postmodern philosophy that moves in the opposite direction by focusing on the ontology of both thinkers, which will necessarily involve a discussion of presence and otherness. Some scholars would claim that it is impossible to compare Derrida with anyone else because to the extent that he holds a philosophical position he holds it provisionally—beyond every closure or totalization.⁷ By taking this possibility seriously, this essay will be prefatory in nature and intent.

Différance and Nonduality

Rather than the nonduality experienced by Śaṅkara during his life and expressed in his philosophy, Jacques Derrida stresses difference in his philosophy in a very special sense. By emphasizing the ambiguity of the verb "to differ" because in some instances the verb signifies non-identity and in other cases it refers to the sameness of things, Derrida claims that it can also refer to a present distinction or a delay, an interval of space and time.⁸ Since Derrida wants to capture the sense of "differing" as spacing and temporalizing and to indicate the sameness that is non-identical, he uses the term *différance* to point to a necessarily finite movement that precedes and structures all opposition. The *ance* ending of *différance*, marked by a silent *a* suggests that it is not simply a word or a concept; it is neither existence nor essence, and is neither active nor passive because the perceiving subject is similarly constituted.⁹ *Différance*, a necessarily finite movement, is what precedes and structures all opposition. In other words, it originates before all differences, and represents the play of differences. It is impossible for it to be exposed because it cannot reveal itself in the present moment and never produces presence itself, whose structure is constituted by difference and deferment.¹⁰

In contrast to the finite movement evident in Derrida's thought, Śaṅkara makes use of the mental process of sublation (*bādha*), where an object or content of consciousness is canceled because it is contradicted by a new experience. Moving from an initial judgment about an object or content of consciousness to a radically conflicting judgment that renders the first judgment false, a thinker accepts the new judgment as valid because one's previous erroneous belief is rectified. The possibility of sublating one entity of consciousness with another implies that the sublated entity possesses a lower degree of reality.¹¹ If reality is that which cannot be sublated by any other experience, the realization of Brahman, a nondual state of being, is the only thing that cannot be contradicted by any other experience and is thus the ultimate reality.¹² For Derrida, it would be impossible to sublimate anything in one's conscious-

ness because *différance* is also the structure of the mind or psyche. Moreover, *différance* is ontically neutral because it does not accept or reject the possibility of existence or nonexistence of any finite or infinite entity.

While Derrida is suspicious about all existence claims and possesses no ontological commitments, a much less skeptical Śaṅkara accepts the Upaniṣadic designation of Brahman as *sat-cit-ānanda* (being, consciousness, and bliss). In contrast to the world, Brahman alone, which encompasses both being (*sat*) and nonbeing (*asat*), is a real, existing being that did not originate from anything else. As consciousness (*cit*), Brahman is the ground of all distinctions and the core of being, and makes distinctions and beings possible, whereas bliss (*ānanda*) suggests the unconditional value of Brahman.¹³ If the positive *sat-cit-ānanda* definition of Brahman represents its essence, Derrida's understanding of *différance* is quite different because it is without essence, which also implies that it cannot be equated with being, consciousness, bliss, truth, or reality.¹⁴ Moreover, Derrida thinks that being conceals even as it appears to reveal (or bring to presence).¹⁵

Śaṅkara gives the appearance of being closer to Derrida's position when he defines *Nirguṇa* Brahman or Brahman without qualities, which is free from limiting adjuncts and thus the highest aspect, in a negative way by stating that it is *neti, neti* (not this, not that), which asserts that it is indefinable, indescribable, lacking qualities, nonrelational and impersonal.¹⁶ *Nirguṇa* Brahman, an object of *vidyā* (knowledge), stands in sharp contrast to *Saguṇa* Brahman, which possesses qualities and attributes and is an object of *avidyā* (ignorance). This latter feature of Brahman is personal and describable, unlike the *Nirguṇa* aspect, both of which form two aspects of the single absolute. Positive and negative definitions of reality, two aspects of the absolute, and the corresponding knowledge or ignorance are distinctions that Derrida cannot accept.

For Derrida, *différance* is not a deity—hidden or revealed—and makes no appearance because it is not a phenomenal entity. It does, however, make possible what is present. Although for Śaṅkara nothing precedes Brahman or pure Being, *différance* is older than Being, more ancient than any name, and yet for Derrida is not itself a name. If *différance* is nameless, this does not suggest that it is an unnameable being. It rather implies that it points in the direction of the differential matrix that generates names and concepts. Moreover, *différance* does not affirm an ultimate entity or state of being nor does it establish the nonexistence of a super-ontic entity.

From Derrida's perspective, *différance* is a condition that makes it possible for Brahman to exist, since it is more ancient than any name or Being. There is no entity that is wholly the product of ignorance and none that is wholly the result of knowledge. Furthermore, having two aspects of Brahman, forming a single reality, makes no sense from Derrida's perspective because *différance* exists within the structure of each aspect. Śaṅkara asserts, for instance, that the distinction between the individual self (*jīva*) and Brahman is not, in reality, a fact.¹⁷ The difference between them is merely due to ignorance. If for Śaṅkara Brahman is the ultimate state of unity beyond the binding effect of karma and the ever revolving flux of time, this is unacceptable to Derrida because his use of irony and his articulation of both pro and anti aspects

of every philosophical stance do not allow him to adopt any thesis or argue any philosophical position for any substantial period with the possible exception of adhering to a provisional position. Due to the workings of negation in his method, Derrida must reject the nonduality of Śaṅkara's position because no nonduality exists due to a lack of discovery of a unifying factor. Within the context of Derrida's notion of *différance*, the Advaita Vedānta philosophy of Śaṅkara is merely a prefatory exercise; it can never become final in any sense because we can never arrive at the truth from Derrida's perspective.

Presence and Trace

When Śaṅkara points to Brahman as Being and to Ātman as a state of being he suggests that they, which are non-different from each other, are in some sense present, even though we might not be ordinarily aware of this due to our condition of ignorance. It can be affirmed that something is because it presents itself to a subject as a present object of perceptual experience, although for Śaṅkara this would be inadequate because of his monistic conviction about the nature of what truly exists. In the case of Brahman and Ātman, by successfully following the path of *jñāna-yoga*, a way that includes the steps of hearing, reflection on Vedānta philosophical principles, and meditation (*nididhyāsana*), one becomes detached from the phenomenal world and any trace of egoism, and an intuitive insight occurs that reveals one's true identity, freeing one from ignorance and the cycle of time and rebirth (*saṃsāra*).¹⁸ Having become the one universal reality, one loses one's false identity and presence and becomes present as the nonduality of Brahman and Ātman.

To suggest that Being is present, at least, according to *parāvidyā* (knowledge of ultimate reality), from Śaṅkara's perspective, is mistaken from Derrida's perspective because we cannot presuppose Being as presence. Calling into question the presence of Being becomes possible for Derrida through the unnameable presence/absence of *différance*. What makes a question even possible is the difference between Being and beings. In contrast, a distinction is only valid for Śaṅkara from the standpoint of lower knowledge, that is, perception, comparison, or inference. For Derrida, an initial consequence is that *différance* is not a being-present.¹⁹ Why is this the case? *Différance* never presents itself as present because it does not exist, does not belong to any kind of being present, nor does it belong to a category of being.²⁰ Because of the movement of *différance*, presence, which is usually a determination and an effect in a philosophical system, cannot have a privileged place in Derrida's thought.

According to Derrida, the movement of *différance* renders possible the difference between Being and beings, or what Śaṅkara might call the apparent differences between the Ātman and *jīva*, the individual person existing in the world limited by adjuncts (*upādhis*), all of which ceases when the *jīva* realizes its essential identity with the Ātman.²¹ The Derridean movement of *différance* represents the play of traces: "It is a trace that no longer belongs to the horizon of Being but one whose sense of Being is borne and bound by this play; it is a play of traces or *différance* that has no sense

and is not, a play that does not belong."²² Even as the trace presents itself, it does not present itself as such but rather presents and effaces itself at once.

Śaṅkara could respond at this point to Derrida that we take traces of finitude and change, for instance, and apply or superimpose them upon the Ātman, features that do not inherently belong to the nature of the eternal self. This indicates that the practice of superimposition (*adhyāsa*) occurs when one borrows qualities not immediately present to one's consciousness that properly belong to one thing and, by using one's memory of previous experiences, projects these former experiences and their qualities upon something new.²³ What Śaṅkara intends to convey can be referred to as an erroneous attribution of qualities or memory traces recalled from previous experiences. These products of memory are manifested as appearances for Śaṅkara and account for incorrect interpretation. Because the ground of all superimpositions is ultimately undifferentiated and nondual, all distinctions and differences are unreal.

Śaṅkara might also claim that Derrida seems to suggest that trace exists, that is, comes to presence. In order to clarify his position and respond to such assertions, Derrida declares that "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself."²⁴ Moreover, the trace does not exist in and of itself.²⁵ The trace can neither exist itself nor become present because it is always overtaken by effacement, which makes the trace disappear. In fact, a trace can only be a trace if it is overtaken by effacement. If effacement did not belong to the very structure of trace, the latter would be a permanent substance.²⁶ In a sense, effacement establishes the trace by making it disappear in its appearing, changing place, and issue forth from itself.

When we utter the term "trace" it presents itself, although not as it is in itself, and it also at the same time dies away because it becomes effaced when it presents itself. By not presenting itself as such, trace shares this feature with *différance*.²⁷ Derrida goes even further by stating, "*The (pure) trace is différence.*"²⁸ Moreover, the present is a trace: "It is a trace, and a trace of the effacement of a trace."²⁹ Due to the nature of trace, its connection to presence, and how it effaces itself when presenting itself, it is impossible for there to be a realm of *différance*, whereas one could speak of achieving the realm or, more accurately, a state of Brahman.³⁰ In sharp contrast to Śaṅkara's position, the notion of *différance* in Derrida's philosophy plays a role of subverting every realm or state of being.

Although it might be stretching the point a bit, there is a sense in Śaṅkara's philosophy in which Brahman shares some similar negative features with the trace of Derrida. As *sat* (being), Brahman, which alone is real, negates all empirical being. Brahman cannot be known by the mind and the senses like a normal thing in the world, since it is an object neither of perception nor of the mind. Thus it possesses an inherent unknowability by normal faculties of knowledge. As *cit* (consciousness), Brahman denies that it represents an agent of knowing; otherwise, it would become delimited by the knowable and knowledge and hence could not be infinite. Śaṅkara comments: "So also it is never thought, not being an object of the mind, but is itself the thinker, being thought itself. Similarly it is never known, not being an object of the intellect, but is itself the knower, being intelligence itself."³¹ Since Brahman is

also indicated positively as *ānanda* (bliss), it negates finitude because it is the only real value that exists in the nondual reality.³² We have also noted that the formula “*neti neti*” (not this, not that) indicates the ultimate indefinability of Brahman and the only legitimate way to indicate it. Śaṅkara explains: “These two negative particles are for conveying all-inclusiveness through repetition so as to eliminate every specification whatsoever that may occur to us.”³³ This negative formula refers to something that possesses no distinguishing marks, such as form, heterogeneity, species, and qualities.³⁴

Being and Alterity

According to Derrida, to understand Being is “to let be.” By this “letting be,” Derrida understands that any grasp of Being involves the alterity of the other, which suggests that one can only let be what one is not. “If Being is always to be let be, and if to think is to let Being be, then Being is indeed the other of thought.”³⁵ Even if one lets be Being, thought, and other, their sameness does not imply that they are identical. If one thinks of being, this does not mean that the other, if we recall that Being is not a category, becomes a part of the genre of Being. Moreover, the other is not reducible to my ego because the other can assert ego just as you do: “The other, for me is an ego which I know to be in relation to me as to an other.”³⁶ Therefore, one’s relationship to oneself is always within a system of interrelationships with others.

In contrast, Śaṅkara gives this matter a different treatment because the other is what is objectively given to me. The other is distinct and stands opposed to me. In comparison, that “I” (*asmat*) is the knowing subject. If the other is given as an object of one’s experience, it cannot be a subject because the I cannot be presented objectively. This suggests that the other is the not-self. If one takes the I to be an object, this is an erroneous notion because the not-self is superimposed upon the I. By claiming that one is handsome, ugly, intelligent, or stupid is merely to superimpose properties of the body or mind on the true I.³⁷

For Derrida, in our relationship with another the other is always exterior to me and can never become interiorized. As a perpetual outsider, the other is properly neither interior nor exterior. The other hovers around the margin—neither inside nor outside—assuming the guise of the wholly other, which cannot be conceived. If the other is on the margin, and if one’s self is also on the edge, what holds this relationship together? As the alternative of presence and absence, *différance* holds us in relationship to whatever exceeds us. The encounter with the other is neither a representation nor a limitation nor a conceptual relation. Why? “The ego and the other do not permit themselves to be dominated or made into totalities by a concept of relationship.”³⁸ This suggests that a concept, which presupposes a horizon in which it operates, cannot encompass the other.

For Śaṅkara, one can only be what one actually is—an Ātman. This absolute reality within each person that transcends time and space needs to be realized by the individual, a realization that occurs within oneself and not between oneself and another person or between a person and the world. The Ātman is not something with which one can enter into relationship, but is rather what we can become or what we

truly are in fact. If one can enter into relation only with something that is at a distance from us and stands opposite from us as an independent other, then one cannot encounter an Ātman as an other because it is what one is in reality. But from the context of the *saguṇa-nirguṇa* distinction made by Śaṅkara, it is possible to recognize the Ātman within other beings and even within all of nature from the *saguṇa* level of knowledge, which embodies implications for ethics.

According to Derrida, the other remains other in a relationship because it cannot be reduced to my ego: “The egoity of the other permits him to say ‘ego’ as I do; and this is why he is Other, and not a stone, or a being without speech *in my real economy*.”³⁹ Does Derrida want to suggest, like Martin Buber, that we can attain true selfhood in relationship to others? The answer is negative because “The trace is the erasure of selfhood, of one’s own presence, and is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance.”⁴⁰

This position does not mean that Derrida does not think that we are responsible for the other. If we examine his *The Gift of Death*, we find that there is a problem because we are responsible for the singular other, such as a loved one, and yet our responsibility extends toward others generally and what we might share with them. Derrida does not think that responsibility is simply a matter of acting dutifully according to ethical guidelines. Rather he wants to call attention to the paradox or problem (aporia) embodied within responsibility in which he sees equivocation. If a loved one places a radical singular demand upon us, it is inevitable that we will ignore the wholly other, the “other others.” Derrida elaborates: “I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others.”⁴¹ When we respond to the needs of a particular individual, we necessarily neglect our responsibility to those who are wholly other to us. Thus, when we respond to the singular other we demonstrate a problem with respect to other others who need assistance.

With relation to the Ātman in Śaṅkara’s philosophy, true selfhood cannot be erased because the Ātman is beyond trace and all relations, which can only be external to the Ātman or are superimposed on it. Beings that are in relation to other beings are not beings in themselves because the nature of beings in relation is determined by something else and making them dependent on that something. Moreover, only that which is subject to change can enter into relation with another. There cannot be a relation of the Ātman with another because it is not subject to change.⁴² Since Śaṅkara views the self as unrelated and relation itself as a hindrance to true selfhood, it is incumbent upon one searching for one’s true selfhood to erase the superimposed relations upon the Ātman by means of genuine knowledge, which he identifies with the *nirguṇa* perspective. From the perspective of higher knowledge for Śaṅkara, there is no relational other because the other is really not different from oneself.

Truth, Meaning, and Reality

By writing his commentaries on the *Vedānta Sūtras*, various Upaniṣadic texts, and other works of importance, by composing independent works, by establishing monastic communities, and by teaching, Śaṅkara intended to lead others to liberation

and the truth. We can find no such intention in Derrida's works, which are prefatory in nature, because none of them attempts to disclose the truth. Whereas truth is singular for Śaṅkara, it is plural for Derrida, who writes: "There is therefore no one truth as such, and besides, even for me, even about me, truth is plural."⁴³ Why bother to write, if the activity possesses no purpose? For Derrida, writing is without necessary justification as it is without essence, lacking negative or positive value, and it thereby literally means nothing or anything in itself apart from particular contexts.⁴⁴

Within a chain of signification for Derrida, meaning represents the space between terms, their relations and interrelations. By focusing on the terms as such, one stands to miss their relations to one another and their differences wherein their meanings, nonself-originating products, reside. For Śaṅkara, words have a universal character that gives them natural meanings. If one comprehends initially the meaning of the individual words, one can understand the meaning of a sentence, which necessarily implies that words give us knowledge. It is not, however, true that Brahman can be the meaning of a sentence because of its indefinable and unutterable nature and its forming the ground of the negation of all duality.⁴⁵ According to Derrida, meaning is not something that can be found; there is nothing that precedes it, and nothing ultimately controls it. This does not suggest that one cannot strive for meaning, but one must become aware that it involves a risk: "To risk meaning nothing is to start to play, and first to enter into the play of *différance* that prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a center the movement and textual spacing of differences."⁴⁶ According to Derrida, there is thus no center in the universe or the individual.

In direct opposition to Derrida's position, Śaṅkara thinks that a person does possess a center. In order to find this center, it is necessary for one to turn within oneself and discover one's immortal self. According to Derrida, the concept of the center is contradictory: "The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality) the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center."⁴⁷ We are condemned to live on the edge because we can never find a center that is permanent.

According to Śaṅkara, that which is permanent is real. The real, which is also eternal and infinite, cannot be sublated (*bādha*) by another experience, and the only thing that fits that criterion is Brahman, which excludes the nearly unreal world. This does not suggest that the term "real" directly designates Brahman. Because Brahman is devoid of all attributes, a term like "real" can only imply it. There is certainly nothing real for Derrida because everything is a combination of presence and absence. *Différance*, a matrix of all presence and absence, makes it both possible and impossible for there to be reality and truth.⁴⁸ Even if we could isolate the real for Derrida, the real would be subject to the process of supplement, which would add to it only to replace it.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, from a Derridean perspective, Śaṅkara's conception of the real is static. From Śaṅkara's perspective, Derrida's philosophy is radically finite and this-worldly.

Such a finite stance suggests that one cannot be certain of anything because knowledge is limited and leaves one in doubt about the validity of one's judgments formed on what we know. On the other hand, Śaṅkara thinks that one can reach

certainty through knowledge, which is only possible through an act of a conscious being. This is an indication of the unity of being and knowing for Śaṅkara, whose philosophy stands on certain truths, such as the certitude provided by the revelatory nature of Vedic literature and its message about ultimate reality.⁵⁰ Every act of knowing is intrinsically valid and self-luminous: "This argument may be summed up thus: whenever there is knowledge of an object, this fact is known in the very act; for nobody who has knowledge doubts whether he has it or not."⁵¹ Moreover, not only is revealed scripture a source of knowledge regarding Brahman, but *anubhava* (integral experience) is also a source of knowledge that involves the realization of oneself as Brahman.⁵² In contrast, Derrida does not seek certainty because he is more interested in exposing the presuppositions, limitations, and illogic of thought and interpretation. Derrida's philosophy seems to suggest that he can only know what he deconstructs. And if he did deconstruct the self as he informs his reader, how is it possible for him to possess any knowledge? From Derrida's perspective, Śaṅkara's position is too logocentric and represents a privileged point of view that invites deconstruction. It seems that the condition of *différance* guides Derrida's work and attitude toward other philosophical systems seeking certainty by marking off their borders and carefully delineating their margins. Derrida observes, for instance, that spirit was not a major concern for Heidegger, and he was able to avoid thinking about it and discussing it.⁵³

Before concluding this section, its remarks raise the following question: are not Derrida and Śaṅkara philosophizing from privileged positions? The answer is positive for Śaṅkara because he accepts the standpoint of the Upaniṣads on Brahman, whereas the answer is negative for Derrida with respect to *différance* because it is neither existence nor essence, not a being present, nor neither active nor passive. It is a finite movement that precedes and structures all opposition and thus originates before all differences. It never exists itself as present because it does not exist *per se*. Due to the movement of *différance*, there is only the play of traces, and thus there is no privileged place from which to philosophize for Derrida. However, both thinkers want to break free of conceptual language and the representational mode of thinking.

Concluding Remarks

Whereas Derrida emphasizes the equal importance of writing and speech and the repetitive nature of writing, Śaṅkara stresses intuitive insight and the meaningfulness of writing. If within the play of *différance* everything tends to be repetitive, there cannot be any uniqueness in the world and thus anything unique to write about. While Derrida is concerned with difference and the neologism *différance*, something without existence or essence, Śaṅkara seeks nonduality and accepts from the Upaniṣads that ultimate reality points positively to itself as *sat-cit-ānanda* (being, consciousness, and bliss). Thus Śaṅkara does not manifest the same skeptical attitude without ontological commitments that our postmodernist thinker does in his work.

For Derrida, *différance* is a finite movement that is ontically neutral, whereas Śaṅkara defines sublation as a mental process of rectification that is not neutral. *Différance* is not an ultimate entity or state of Being, although it does make it possible for Brahman, for instance, to exist. For Śaṅkara, Brahman does not owe its origin to

anything else and represents the source of all things; its presence is taken for granted by Śaṅkara, although it is possible for ignorant individuals to superimpose non-original characteristics upon it. According to Derrida, *différance* represents the play of traces. We discovered and discussed previously some commonality between the positive nature of Brahman and Derrida's notion of trace and its negative aspect in the sense that *sat* (being) negates all empirical being, *cit* (consciousness) denies that Brahman is an agent of knowing, and *ānanda* (bliss) negates all finitude. Because Brahman is unknowable and indefinable by normal human faculties of knowledge, it is best to define it negatively.

From Derrida's perspective, to grasp Being involves the alterity of the other, which is exterior to one. In contrast, Śaṅkara thinks that from one perspective the other is objectively given to me and can be referred to as the non-self. But from a more insightful perspective, there is no other because the other is not different from oneself. Derrida maintains, however, that the other is neither inside nor outside because it remains on the margin.

With regard to the problem of truth, Derrida does not think that it can be disclosed, whereas the purpose of Śaṅkara's works is to reveal the truth that is singular. At best, truth is plural for Derrida, which implies that his writings must be prefatory. Meaning is located by Derrida between relations and differences, and it cannot be ultimately found. If one persists in seeking meaning, this involves a dangerous risk because one must live on the edge in order to search for it. In contrast, Śaṅkara finds a universal character in words that makes meaning possible. It is also not necessary for an individual to live on the margin because it is possible for one to find the center of one's existence. This is possible because there is something permanent beyond the ever-changing flux of the world for the Vedāntist.

Since everything is a combination of presence and absence, there is nothing real and permanent according to Derrida. Taking into consideration his definition of *différance*, it is both possible and impossible for there to be truth and reality for Derrida. Not only does Derrida not seek for certainty, there is no genuine possibility for certainty to be attained, whereas Śaṅkara thinks that certainty is a real possibility in a unity of being and knowing.

The way that Derrida defines and uses *différance* in his work seems to suggest that it is, in its own way, a temporal and spatial monistic principle because it governs so much of his philosophy. There is a danger inherent within Derrida's position, or more accurately non-philosophical position, that Śaṅkara might argue tends to undermine it, because there can be no difference, if there is only *différance*.⁵⁴ In other words, if there is only *différance*, all distinctions disappear, resulting in a total identity or monism, although Derrida would counter that not all distinctions disappear in *différance* because they are irreducible and are inseparable from each other. This non-original origin of all differences and every identity is neither a word nor content. Since it is the matrix of all presence and absence, yet is neither present nor absent, it is an irreducible interval in which time and space interconnect, whereas Brahman is beyond all distinctions. Similar to Brahman, *différance* is unnameable, but it, functioning as a neologism, cannot be equated with essence or Being, unlike

Brahman. As the unnameable, *différance* cannot be uttered, although it is possible to write it. Any writing of the nameable involves inevitable rewriting without beginning or end, a type of cycle from which Śaṅkara urges those in the world to escape.

In contrast to the seriousness of purpose and possibility of certitude espoused by the philosophy of Śaṅkara, Derrida identifies himself playing the role of the mime who manages to occupy a position outside, or at least on the edges, of the Western philosophical tradition. The role of miming fits Derrida perfectly because “The speculum reflects no reality; it produces mere ‘reality-effects.’”⁵⁵ From the perspective of Śaṅkara, the mime—Derrida—plays on the level of appearance where differences exist, whereas the Vedāntist is primarily interested in the state of non-difference. In the Derridean spirit of play, Śaṅkara might be tempted to reply to Derrida that the level of knowledge from which one writes philosophy makes all the difference concerning the difference that *différance* makes.

Notes

- 1 – Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 37.
- 2 – Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 143.
- 3 – *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 4 – *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 5 – Śaṅkara, *Commentary on Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, trans. Swami Mādhavānanda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1965), 4.3.9.
- 6 – Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta-sūtras with the Commentary of Sankarācārya*, trans. George Thibaut (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), 1.3.26–33.
- 7 – Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 260. Christopher Norris stresses that deconstruction is a process that is not reducible to a method or concept in *Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987). Rodolphe Gasché is a bit misleading in his book because of his emphasis on what he calls the infrastructures of Derrida’s philosophy in *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophies of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). Robert R. Mangliola overstates the case for deconstruction in Buddhism in *Derrida on the Mend* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1984). A very fine discussion of the meaning of *différance* in Derrida’s philosophy is to be found in a book by Irene Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
- 8 – Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

- 9 – Ibid., pp. 130, 134.
- 10 – Ibid., p. 134.
- 11 – Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta-sūtras*, 3.3.9; *Upadeśasāharsī of Sri Sankarācārya*, trans. Swāmi Jagadānando (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970), 2.3.3–4. See also the discussion by Eliot Deutsch in his *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1969), pp. 15–17.
- 12 – Śaṅkara, *Upadeśasāharsī*, 18.4.
- 13 – Śaṅkara, *Commentary on Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 2.2.1, in *Eight Upaniṣads*, 2 vols., trans. Swāmi Gambhiranda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1965–1966).
- 14 – Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 158.
- 15 – Derrida, *Spurs*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 103–105.
- 16 – Śaṅkara, *Commentary on Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, 2.3.6.
- 17 – Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta-sūtras*, 1.1.11.
- 18 – For a discussion of the path, see Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta*, pp. 106–108.
- 19 – Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 153.
- 20 – Ibid., p. 134.
- 21 – Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta-sūtras*, 1.3.7.
- 22 – Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 154.
- 23 – Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta-sūtras*, 1.1, 3.3.9.
- 24 – Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 156.
- 25 – Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 167.
- 26 – Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 156.
- 27 – Ibid., p. 154.
- 28 – Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 62.
- 29 – Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 156.
- 30 – Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta-sūtras*, 2.3.9.
- 31 – Ibid.
- 32 – Śaṅkara, *Commentary on Kena Upaniṣad*, 1.3.
- 33 – Śaṅkara, *Commentary on Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, 2.1.
- 34 – Ibid.
- 35 – Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 141.
- 36 – Ibid., p. 126.

- 37 – Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta-sūtras*.
- 38 – Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 95.
- 39 – Ibid., p. 125.
- 40 – Ibid., p. 230.
- 41 – Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 68. Discussing the Jewish influence of Levinas on Derrida's philosophy, Christopher Norris calls attention to the ethical dimension of his thought (p. 230), which is confirmed by *The Gift of Death*.
- 42 – Śaṅkara, *The Bhagavad-Gita: With the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*, trans. A. Mahadeva Sastry (Madras: V. Ramaswamy Sastrulu and Sons, 1972), 18.17.
- 43 – Jacques Derrida, "The Question of Style," in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 187.
- 44 – Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 105; *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 14.
- 45 – For a more complete discussion of Śaṅkara's theory of meaning, see Karl H. Potter, ed., "Advaita Vedānta up to Śaṅkara and His Pupils," in *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 56–61. See also K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta* (Walrair: Andra University; New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 16, 63.
- 46 – Derrida, *Positions*, p. 14.
- 47 – Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 279.
- 48 – Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 168.
- 49 – Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 145.
- 50 – Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta-sūtras*, 2.1.11.
- 51 – Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, p. 13.
- 52 – Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta-sūtras*, 4.1.2.
- 53 – Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 3.
- 54 – Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 73.
- 55 – Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 286.