



Introduction

The Past, Present, and Future of Scholarship on Vedānta

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“Vedānta,” which means the “end” or “culmination” (*anta*) of the Vedas, originally denoted the Upaniṣads, the ancient Vedic texts which concern the ultimate reality, Brahman/Ātman, and the means to attain salvific knowledge (*jñāna*) of this ultimate reality.¹ The Upaniṣads declare that our true transcendental Self (Ātman) is intimately related to, or in some sense ontologically akin to, the divine reality Brahman. We are ignorant of our true nature as the divine Ātman due to our attachment to worldly pleasures, which leads us to identify with the superficial body-mind complex. Therefore, according to the Upaniṣads, we must renounce sense pleasures and worldly attachments, and engage in meditative practices, in order to break our identification with the body-mind complex and attain knowledge of our true divine nature.²

Eventually, the term “Vedānta” widened in meaning to encompass the “three pillars” (*prasthānatrayī*) of Vedānta: namely, the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and the *Brahmasūtra*. The *Gītā* (c. 200 BCE–100 CE), perhaps the most popular and influential scripture in India’s history, embeds Upaniṣadic doctrines within a broad philosophico-theological framework that strives to harmonize the paths of *jñāna* and *bhakti* (theistic devotion) and emphasizes the spiritual value of unattached action.³ The *Brahmasūtra* (c. 300 BCE–400 CE) is a compilation of 555 highly laconic aphorisms (*sūtras*) which attempt to reconcile the various teachings of the Upaniṣads.⁴ These foundational Vedāntic scriptures, in turn, were interpreted in a variety of ways, leading eventually to the emergence of numerous competing schools or sects (*sampradāyas*) within the broader philosophical tradition of Vedānta.

Vedānta has been, without a doubt, one of the most dominant and influential traditions in the history of Indian philosophy. Indeed, the importance of Vedānta extends far beyond its pivotal role in shaping Indian intellectual life for at least a

I am grateful to Michael S. Allen, Ankur Barua, and Ravi M. Gupta for their very helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this introduction. For elucidation of some aspects of Vallabha’s philosophy, I am grateful to Sharad Goswami and Maitri Goswami.



millennium. For many present-day Hindus, Vedānta furnishes the philosophical basis of their religious beliefs and practices. Vedānta has also had a far-reaching impact on Indian society, culture, and politics.⁵ Major nineteenth-century social and religious reformers—including Rammohun Roy, Debendranath Tagore, and Keshab Chandra Sen—justified their progressive agendas by drawing upon Vedāntic ideas. Some of the leading figures of India’s cultural renaissance, including Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore, articulated their worldviews and artistic visions on the basis of Vedānta. Twentieth-century political leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Bipin Chandra Pal, in their fight to end British rule in India, also found inspiration in Vedāntic thought. As several scholars have shown, Vedānta has even permeated Western thought and culture in various ways, especially since Swami Vivekananda first spread the message of Vedānta in America and England in the final decade of the nineteenth century (Goldberg 2010; Long 2014).

Not surprisingly, then, Vedānta has taken center stage in both past and present scholarship on Indian philosophy. This pioneering research handbook brings together sixteen chapters by leading international scholars on key topics and debates in various Vedāntic traditions. All but one of the chapters were newly commissioned for this volume.⁶ The handbook has three distinguishing features. First, while Indian and Western scholarship on Vedānta since at least the 1700s has been overwhelmingly dominated by the study of Advaita Vedānta, this collection highlights the full range of philosophies within Vedānta, including not only Advaita but also Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, Bhedābheda, Acinymbhedābheda, and numerous modern Vedāntic configurations. Second, it emphasizes that Vedānta, far from being a static tradition, is a dynamic and still vibrant philosophy that has evolved significantly in the course of its history. Third, this handbook explores the broader significance and contemporary relevance of Vedāntic philosophy by bringing it into dialogue with other Indian philosophical traditions as well as Western philosophies.

A comprehensive history of the voluminous scholarship on Vedānta since the early centuries of the Common Era would be a valuable but immensely ambitious project spanning several books. For the modest purposes of this introduction, I will sketch in four sections a very brief—and necessarily selective—survey of some of the main trends and phases in the history of scholarship on Vedānta up to the present. This high-altitude historical survey will help us discern both continuities and discontinuities between past scholarship and contemporary approaches to Vedānta. As we will see, the entire history of Vedāntic scholarship reflects a shifting and complex dialectic between what Bradley L. Herling (2006) calls “myth” and “logos.”⁷ That is, in both Indian and Western interpretations of Vedānta, the use of rational methods of exegesis, analysis, and argumentation has tended to be intertwined with various ideologically driven agendas and myths. In the fifth and final section of this introduction, I will explain the organization and aims of this handbook.

I.1 The Emergence of Competing Vedāntic *Sampradāyas*

Scholarship on Vedānta can be said to have begun in the first few centuries of the Common Era, when early Indian thinkers established competing schools (*sampradāyas*)

of Vedānta by articulating and defending a particular systematic interpretation of the Vedāntic scriptures. Some of the earliest Vedāntins, including Bhartṛprapañca, seem to have been proponents of the Bhedābheda school, which propounds the simultaneous “difference and non-difference” between the individual soul (*jīva*) and Brahman (Nicholson 2010: 28–30). Another early Vedāntic commentator was Gauḍapāda (c. 500 CE), who composed a verse commentary on the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad defending the standpoint of Advaita Vedānta. Śaṅkara (c. 700–800 CE), who belonged to the Advaitic lineage of Gauḍapāda, wrote massively influential commentaries on the entire *prasthānatrayī* and attempted to refute the Bhedābheda interpretation of Bhartṛprapañca. Meanwhile, Bhāskara, who was an approximate contemporary of Śaṅkara, defended a Bhedābheda interpretation of the *Brahmasūtra* in explicit *opposition* to Śaṅkara’s Advaitic interpretation.

Such polemical infighting among commentators within the Vedāntic fold only intensified in subsequent centuries. By the sixteenth century, numerous Vedāntic *sampradāyas* were established. Four of the most important traditional Vedāntic *sampradāyas*⁸ are as follows, with their founder(s) or earliest known exponent(s) listed in parentheses:

1. Advaita Vedānta (Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara)
2. Viśiṣṭādvaita (or Śrīvaiṣṇava) Vedānta (Rāmānuja)
3. Mādhva (or Dvaita) Vedānta (Madhva)
4. Bhedābheda Vedānta (Bhartṛprapañca)
 - (a) Aupādhika Bhedābheda (Bhāskara)
 - (b) Svābhāvika Bhedābheda (Nimbārka)
 - (c) Acintyābheda/Bhedābheda/Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism (Caitanya)
 - (d) Śuddhādvaita/Puṣṭimārga (Vallabha)

These Vedāntic *sampradāyas* diverged on a number of doctrinal points, including the nature and interrelationship of Brahman, the individual soul (*jīva*), and the universe (*jaḡat*); the nature of liberation (*mukti*); and the spiritual practices (*sādhana*s) necessary for attaining liberation. It should be noted that the four subschools of Bhedābheda Vedānta also differed on various points of doctrine, though they all accepted the simultaneous difference and non-difference of the *jīva* and Brahman.⁹ Exponents of different Vedāntic *sampradāyas* defended their views as the only correct ones, insisting that their *sampradāya* alone represented the one and only true Vedānta. Consequently, prior to the medieval period, Vedāntins of different *sampradāyas* did not actually see themselves as belonging to a common school or tradition known as “Vedānta” (Nicholson 2010: 3).

During the medieval period, however, all of these Vedāntic schools, in spite of their numerous doctrinal differences, were grouped under the broad label of “Vedānta” or “Uttara Mīmāṃsā” and were distinguished from other major Vedic schools of Indian philosophy, especially Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Pūrva Mīmāṃsā. Pūrva (“Earlier”) Mīmāṃsā was a philosophical school that provided both a methodology for interpreting Vedic injunctions regarding rituals and a philosophical justification for the beliefs on which ritualism was based (Chatterjee and Datta 1939: 313–40). According to this school, those who correctly perform the Vedic rituals will reap the fruits of these rituals in this earthly life as well as in heaven after the death of the body.

The Vedānta school was also known as Uttara (“Later”) Mīmāṃsā, not only because it accepted, adapted, or developed many Pūrva Mīmāṃsā doctrines but also because it went *beyond* Pūrva Mīmāṃsā by emphasizing the transiency of the fruits of Vedic ritualism and the superiority of the knowledge of Brahman, which affords eternal liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

It is well beyond the scope of this introduction to discuss all the doctrines of the various Vedāntic *sampradāyas* and their subschools. The first four chapters of this handbook provide detailed discussions, respectively, of Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Mādhva Vedānta, and Acintyabhedābheda Vedānta. Here, I will only outline very briefly the views of some of the major Vedāntic schools on six key points of doctrine.¹⁰

1.1.1 The Nature of Brahman

Advaita Vedānta is the only Vedāntic school that holds that Brahman is ultimately devoid of all attributes (*nirguṇa*). According to this school, the personal God (*īśvara*) is the same attributeless Brahman associated with the unreal “limiting adjunct” (*upādhi*) of lordship. Hence, for Advaita Vedāntins, the personal God is real from the empirical (*vyāvahārika*) standpoint but unreal from the ultimate (*pāramārthika*) standpoint.¹¹

All of the other Vedāntic schools are theistic, in that they hold that Brahman is essentially personal and endowed with attributes (*saguṇa*) such as omniscience and omnipotence. It should be noted, however, that these theistic schools of Vedānta sometimes differ in subtle ways regarding *which* precise attributes Brahman possesses. Moreover, many of these theistic Vedāntic schools—including Viśiṣṭādvaita, Mādhva Vedānta, and some Bhedābheda subschools like Acintyabhedābheda and Śuddhādvaita—conceive *saguṇa* Brahman specifically as Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa.

Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Mādhva Vedānta, and many (but not all) schools of Bhedābheda Vedānta maintain that Brahman is *exclusively* personal. The theistic schools of Śuddhādvaita and Acintyabhedābheda are unique in accepting the impersonal (*nirguṇa*) Brahman as a real but minor aspect of the Supreme Person Kṛṣṇa Himself. According to Caitanya’s Acintyabhedābheda school, the impersonal Advaitic Brahman of the Upaniṣads is the “peripheral brilliance” (*tanubhā*) of Kṛṣṇa.¹² Similarly, Vallabha’s Śuddhādvaita holds that the “*akṣara*” Brahman contemplated by *jñānīs* is nothing more than Kṛṣṇa’s “foot” (*caranam*), from which the entire universe emerges.¹³ These schools thereby turn the tables on Advaita Vedānta, which ontologically privileges *nirguṇa* Brahman over the ultimately unreal *īśvara*.

1.1.2 The Ontological Status of the World

Advaita Vedānta is the only Vedāntic school which holds that the world does not exist from the ultimate standpoint. All the other Vedāntic schools take the world to be real, though some of them—such as Bhāskara’s Aupādhika Bhedābheda—consider the world to be, in some sense, *less* real than Brahman.¹⁴ Interestingly, Vallabha’s follower Giridhara was the first to designate Vallabha’s school of Bhedābheda as “Śuddhādvaita” (“pure nondualism”) in polemical contrast to what he perceived to be the *incomplete*

nondualism of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, which—he claimed—compromised the nonduality of Brahman by positing *māyā*, the source of this unreal world appearance, as a power *apart* from Brahman.¹⁵

I.1.3 The Relation Between Brahman and the World

All Vedāntic *sampradāyas* grapple in various ways with the problem of explaining how the perfect, pure, and infinite Brahman can relate to an imperfect, impure, and ever-changing world. Advaita Vedānta is unique among Vedāntic traditions in explaining Brahman's relation to the world by appealing to a dual-standpoint ontology. From the empirical standpoint, both *īśvara* and the world are real, and *īśvara* is both the material (*upādāna*) and the efficient (*nimitta*) cause of the world. However, from the ultimate standpoint, nondual Brahman alone exists, so there *is* no world and, hence, no relation whatsoever between Brahman and the (nonexistent) world. Accordingly, Advaitins subscribe to *vivartavāda*, the doctrine that the world is an illusory appearance (*vivarta*) of Brahman.

In contrast to Advaita Vedānta, both Viśiṣṭādvaita and Bhedābheda subscribe to *pariṇāmavāda*, the doctrine that Brahman, or some aspect of Brahman, actually transforms into the world. Viśiṣṭādvaita and all the various schools of Bhedābheda agree that Brahman is both the efficient and material cause of the world. However, each Vedāntic school explains the precise relationship between Brahman and the world in a subtly different way. For instance, according to Viśiṣṭādvaita, Brahman stands to the world as the soul (*śarīrī*) to the body (*śarīra*), with the latter being entirely dependent for its continued existence on the former. According to Bhedābheda Vedānta, Brahman is both different and non-different from the world. The Śuddhādvaita subschool of Bhedābheda upholds the paradoxical doctrine of *avikṛta-pariṇāma*, the view that Brahman transforms into the world while somehow still remaining unchanged (*avikṛta*). According to Acintyābheda, the world is a transformation of Kṛṣṇa's energy (*śakti*), which is both different and non-different from him.¹⁶

Mādhva Vedānta is the only theistic school of Vedānta that rejects *pariṇāmavāda*. According to Mādhva Vedāntins, there is an ontological difference (*bheda*) between Brahman and the world, and Brahman is the efficient but *not* the material cause of the world. Brahman alone is independent (*svatantra*), while the world is entirely dependent upon Brahman for its existence and preservation.

I.1.4 The Relation Between Brahman and the Individual Soul

Advaita Vedānta holds that the individual soul (*jīva*) is absolutely identical with Brahman but *appears* to be a limited entity apart from Brahman because it is associated with an unreal limiting adjunct (*upādhi*). All schools of Bhedābheda maintain that Brahman is both different *and* non-different from individual souls. Bhedābheda-vādins explain the relation between Brahman and individual souls as the relation of a whole and its parts, invoking analogies like fire and its sparks and the ocean and its waves. Interestingly, the Aupādhika Bhedābheda-vādin Bhāskara appears to come close to Śaṅkara in maintaining that the individual soul is, in its essence, identical with

Brahman but is limited and subject to suffering when it is associated with limiting adjuncts (*upādhis*). Crucially, however, while Śaṅkara takes these *upādhis* to be unreal, Bhāskara takes them to be real and, hence, holds that the individual soul is *actually* subject to suffering and bondage until its *upādhis* are removed.

In Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, individual souls, like the world, relate to Brahman as the body stands to the soul, with the former being intimately connected with, yet entirely dependent on, the latter. Mādhva Vedānta holds that individual souls are “reflections” (*pratibimbās*) of Brahman in that they depend entirely on Brahman for their existence and remain eternally different from Him.

1.1.5 The State of Salvation

Most Vedāntic schools agree that our salvation consists in attaining liberation (*mukti*) from the suffering-filled cycle of birth and death. However, followers of Acintyābheda hold that the supreme salvation is not *mukti* but *bhakti*, the supreme love of Kṛṣṇa, which nonetheless entails *mukti* as an “incidental by-product” (*tuccha-phala*) (Nelson 2004: 349). Vedāntic schools often differ on two key soteriological questions. First, what is the precise nature of salvation? Second, is it possible to attain *jīvanmukti*, the state of liberation while living?

Regarding the first question, there are only two schools of Vedānta—namely, Advaita Vedānta and Aupādhika Bhedaḥveda—that hold that no sense of individuality remains in the liberated state. According to Advaita Vedānta, liberation consists in knowledge of our identity with nondual Brahman, which entails that our sense of being an individual—which is itself a product of ignorance—does not remain in the state of liberation. According to the Aupādhika Bhedaḥveda of Bhāskara, Brahman becomes individual souls through *upādhis*, and since liberation consists in the total eradication of these *upādhis*, the liberated soul would be one with Brahman and no longer an individual. Again, it should be noted that the key difference between Advaita Vedānta and Aupādhika Bhedaḥveda on this issue is that the latter, but not the former, takes *upādhis* to be real.

All the other Vedāntic schools hold that individuality remains in the liberated state. For most theistic schools of Vedānta, the highest salvation for an individual soul consists in residing eternally in a superterrestrial realm—conceived variously as *Vaikuṅṭhaloka*, *Viṣṇuloka*, or *Goloka*—with a nonphysical body, blissfully serving, and communing with, the personal God (Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa). While Mādhva Vedānta maintains that the liberated soul remains eternally distinct from God, other theistic schools of Vedānta posit a more intimate relationship between the liberated soul and God. Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedāntins, for instance, hold that the liberated soul becomes “one with God in knowledge and bliss but not in power” (Tapasyānanda 1990: 59).

We can now briefly consider the second question regarding the possibility of *jīvanmukti*. Advaita Vedānta is well known for accepting the state of *jīvanmukti*. For Advaitins, all that is necessary for liberation is knowledge of our identity with nondual Brahman, which seems to be compatible with bodily existence. Nonetheless, as Lance E. Nelson (1996) and Klara Hedling (Chapter 10 in this volume) have shown, the metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta makes it difficult, if not impossible, to accept fully the

possibility of *jīvanmukti*. Since this world and our embodied existence are a product of ignorance, the liberating knowledge of Brahman—which is tantamount to the removal of ignorance—seems to be logically incompatible with continued bodily existence. Hence, many post-Śaṅkara Advaitins hold that even the *jīvanmukta* has a “trace of ignorance” (*avidyā-leśa*), which is responsible for the *prārabdha-karma* (the *karma* that has not yet fructified) that sustains his physical body.

Non-Advaitic schools of Vedānta adopt a variety of stances toward *jīvanmukti*. For instance, Viśiṣṭādvaitins as well as followers of Nimbārka’s Svābhāvika Bhedābheda reject outright the possibility of *jīvanmukti*. Nonetheless, Viśiṣṭādvaitins do accept the possibility of attaining the high spiritual state of a *sthītaprajña* (a person of settled knowledge) while still in the body, and they maintain that complete liberation is assured for the *sthītaprajña* after death. Similarly, Madhva rejects the possibility of *jīvanmukti* but accepts the possibility of attaining the direct and immediate knowledge of God (*aparokṣa-jñāna*) while still in the body, which is a precondition for full liberation after death. The later Mādhva thinker Vyāsātīrtha complicates matters, however, by explicitly equating *aparokṣa-jñāna* with *jīvanmukti* (Sheridan 1996: 107). Meanwhile, followers of Caitanya’s Acintyābheda fully accept the possibility of *jīvanmukti*. A key source text in this tradition is Rūpa Gosvāmī’s *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* 1.2.187, which defines the “*jīvanmukta*” as “one whose activities are performed with body, mind and speech in servitude to Hari” (Gosvāmin 2003: 59).

I.1.6 Scheme of Spiritual Practices

Since the various schools of Vedānta hold differing conceptions of both Brahman and salvation, they naturally differ on which spiritual practices lead to salvation and the relative priority of these practices. It is also important to note that while many Vedāntic schools use the same terms to refer to certain types of spiritual practice—especially the terms *bhakti-yoga* (the practice of devotion), *karma-yoga* (the practice of unattached action), *jñāna-yoga* (the practice of knowledge), and *dhyāna-yoga* or simply *yoga* (the practice of meditation)—these schools often characterize these practices quite differently. For instance, while Advaita Vedāntins understand *jñāna-yoga* as a practice involving reflection and meditation on Upaniṣadic statements about the identity of the individual soul with nondual Brahman, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedāntins understand *jñāna-yoga* as the practice of meditating on one’s own eternal individual soul and discriminating between the soul and the body-mind complex.

According to Advaita Vedānta, *jñāna-yoga* is the only direct path to liberation. Nonetheless, *karma-yoga* and *bhakti-yoga* may lead *indirectly* to liberation by purifying and concentrating the mind, thereby making one eligible to practice *jñāna-yoga*, which alone leads to liberation. For Advaitins, then, *karma-yoga* and *jñāna-yoga* cannot be practiced at the same time, since they are meant for different grades of spiritual aspirant.

Other schools of Vedānta—including many Bhedābheda schools and Viśiṣṭādvaita—reject this Advaitic position, advocating a *combination* of *jñāna-yoga* and *karma-yoga* (*jñāna-karma-samuccaya*). Within the Bhedābheda tradition, there is a considerable diversity of views regarding spiritual practice. For instance, while

Bhāskara's Aupādhika Bhedābheda gives no importance at all to *bhakti-yoga*, Caitanya's Acintyabhedābheda maintains that *bhakti-yoga* is the highest spiritual practice. According to Acintyabhedābheda, *bhakti-yoga* alone leads to the highest salvation, while other practices like *jñāna-yoga* and *karma-yoga* may be helpful at a preliminary stage but are by no means necessary (Kapoor 1976: 178–9).

According to Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, the simultaneous practice of *karma-yoga* and *jñāna-yoga* in a devotional spirit eventually culminates in the spiritual realization of one's eternal soul and its utter dependence on God (*ātmāvalokanam*), which in turn makes one eligible to practice *bhakti-yoga*—that is, constant meditative recollection of God—which, by God's grace, leads directly to salvation.¹⁷

Within the Vedāntic tradition, there is also a wide range of views concerning the question of whether, and the extent to which, God's grace is necessary for salvation. Devotional schools of Vedānta like Viśiṣṭādvaita, Śuddhādvaita, Acintyabhedābheda, and Mādhva Vedānta strongly insist on the necessity of God's grace for attaining salvation. Other Vedāntic schools, such as Bhāskara's Aupādhika Bhedābheda, do not emphasize God's grace at all. While it is often assumed that Advaita Vedānta accords no importance to God's grace, Malkovsky (2001) has shown that Śaṅkara, at numerous places in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*, explicitly states that the grace of *īśvara* is necessary for liberation.

It should also be noted that Vedāntic schools are by no means monolithic, and it is often the case that different thinkers and traditions *within* a particular Vedāntic school hold differing views on a variety of issues. For instance, in medieval India, two subschools emerged within Viśiṣṭādvaita—namely, the Teṅkalai and the Vaḍagalai—which took different stands on the “grace versus works” question, with the Teṅkalai school arguing that God's grace alone is sufficient for salvation, and the Vaḍagalai school arguing that God's grace must be combined with self-effort (Mumme 1988).

I.2 Vedāntic Doxographies in Medieval India

It would be misleading to suggest that sectarian polemics among the various Vedāntic *sampradāyas* was restricted to an early period in India's history. In fact, such polemical disputation among Vedāntins has continued unabated even up to the present, especially among traditionally trained Indian pundits belonging to different Vedāntic lineages. However, during India's medieval period, a new doxographic methodology emerged within Vedāntic thought—one that played a decisive role in paving the way for modern formations of “Hinduism” and “Vedānta” as broad, syncretic worldviews encompassing and harmonizing innumerable philosophical and theological systems (Nicholson 2010: 144–65; Halbfass [1981] 1988: 349–68; Barua, Chapter 9 in this volume).

Vedāntic doxographers, instead of rejecting outright philosophical traditions other than their own, reconceived these traditions as inferior stages in elaborate hierarchical schemas culminating in their own preferred Vedāntic system. Most of these medieval Vedāntic doxographies were developed by Advaitins such as Mādhva and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī. Non-Advaitic medieval doxographies include the