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THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MEDITATION

An Advaita approach

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1 The parameters for a dialogue between Advaita and phenomenology

In this chapter, I focus on phenomenological reduction and reflective meditation in the Advaita Vedānta system. Many Advaita Vedānta traditions and texts guide meditation, but here I discuss only one 14th-century text, the *Dṛgdṛśyaviveka*: *An Inquiry into the Nature of the 'Seer' and the 'Seen'* (Vidyāraṇya 1931), hereafter "DDV", primarily because it gives a clear summary of the traditional approach within Advaita Vedānta and facilitates the intended dialogue. The objective is not to explore the scope of phenomenology, nor to address meditative techniques and philosophical arguments in Advaita Vedānta, but to develop a conversation between phenomenology and Advaita Vedānta.

Phenomenological reduction was introduced by Husserl and later discussed by Fink, to liberate one from dogmatic convictions, to discover the essence as it is. This is a method of returning to 'the thing as such', free from conceptual parameters. For Husserl, scientific inquiry demands an investigator bracket all the imposed factors to be isolated from the pure world or 'things themselves' (1998). This process is one of going back to the world free of contamination by assumptions and methods, whether scientific or psychological. Significant to this are the moments of *epoché* or abstention, and of the reduction proper, a process that brings the inquiry back to consciousness. Husserl sought here to overcome the chasm between consciousness (subject) and world (object), without requiring this to be mediated by categories, as with Kantian epistemology. The process culminates in exposing the state where no distinction remains between consciousness and object, *noesis* and *noema*.

This erasure of the gap led some to equate systems like Advaita and Yoga with phenomenology. Our openness to comparing the systems stems from the conviction that even when philosophies differ, their scientific methods can overlap, and sometimes, a comparative approach makes exploring the nuances easier. Though systems remain separate, dialogue among them is promising for future philosophy. Just as there are objections to phenomenological methods being unable to serve as a bridge and remaining Cartesian, similar objections can be made to Advaita taking arguments too far, to solipsism and subjective illusionism.

The scope of this paper, again, is to explore the philosophy of meditation as championed by Husserl and Śaṅkara (8th-century CE India), relying on a secondary text, DDV, to synthesize the system of Śaṅkara, who may be considered the Classical Indian period equivalent of Greek

philosophers of the caliber of Plato and Aristotle. Considerations of space preclude our wandering deep into the woods of Advaita Vedānta and phenomenology, so we must limit attention to what we can glimpse in a snapshot that affords us a vantage point to initiate the dialogue. However, a few words on the basic premise of Advaita are in order before we proceed,[1] as well as on Śaṅkara as the main and most authoritative exponent of Advaita, to place the Indian side of this conversation in its broader context.

According to this Classical Indian philosophy of nondualism, Advaita, based on the later Vedas, the Upaniṣads, the ultimate reality of the many, the manifold world, is Brahman, the One. Advaita asserts that the *ātman* (self) really just is Brahman, there being no ultimate difference within the pure consciousness pervading the one reality. One simplistic metaphor used to guide intuition about how this model could be coherent compares the individual soul with a wave and Brahman with the ocean: The ocean is waving, so to speak, not separate from its waves. Śaṅkarācārya (an honorific of 'Śaṅkara' as an *ācārya* or [great] teacher) systematized Advaita by linking metaphysics, epistemology, and language, uniting original methods of philosophical pedagogy and contemplative practices intended to lead the practitioner to gnosis, direct experience of nonduality, construed in many Indian traditions as *mokṣa* (liberation) (Dalal 2021).

Returning to the task at hand, then, reduction in Advaita culminates with an identification of being (*sat*) with consciousness (*cit*). In Advaita, what exists is not distinct from consciousness. However, Advaita reaches this conclusion not by integrating what is phenomenally given with pure sensation, but rather by means of bracketing everything superimposed on pure being. The state of actualization differs in this account from that of everyday convention, where the latter is fabricated over the former, and a closer observation or meditation can help return the gaze to the former. Borrowing from Brentano, Husserl maintains that all consciousness is consciousness *of* something – that is, consciousness is intentional (1998). While this claim remains broadly valid, intentionality has become a subject of complex exegesis.

For Advaita phenomenology to be correctly mapped, we need to emphasize that the self-awareness embedded within consciousness as its intrinsic nature is grasping itself in its most pristine form, having nothing external as its intentional object. But this twist would not satisfy Husserl's project of accessing *the thing as such* as something out there, external to consciousness. For, if all that remains to consciousness in its most elemental form is self-awareness, consciousness may never reveal an object, terminating the scientific project to know the thing itself. We cannot sideline these objections in our enthusiasm to engage phenomenology in relation to Advaita metaphysics. These objections, however, do not limit our efforts to apply phenomenological methods in meditative practice and learn from the literature on meditation for advancing the scientific approach of phenomenological reduction. What matters in utilizing both systems is that we seek what really *is* the case, and that both systems stem from the conviction that what is given pre-reflexively is an amalgam of convictions, beliefs, concepts, and language, while there is something original that consciousness reveals in its manifestation.

Before we evaluate the applicability of one system to reach the objectives outlined by the other, we need to define parameters, and note that a discourse on the philosophy of meditation is about praxis. Taking either as a mere theory discredits both, as does surrendering to a dogmatic understanding of philosophy as theory. Pure theorizing can be helpful, but definitions and analyses can take us only so far, from the vantage of Advaita. (Hereafter, unless explicitly referring to phenomenology, my assertion of claims should all be taken to be prefaced implicitly by some phrase denoting, e.g., 'in Advaita'.)

Meditation functions as action in two ways: first, by active manipulation of mental contents and, second, by metacognitive actions enabling subjects to witness mental events. The negation or systemic bracketing of thoughts, central to meditative practice, is an action. For instance, a

meditator creates an inverted paradigm, engaging in fabricated mental states, even if the fabrication is of emptiness, a blissful state, or resting in zero experience.

What is anticipated from this practice is freedom from one's fabrications – all that consciousness constitutes after the event of encountering the thing as it is. By 'mental event' I mean an immediate mode of experience. After this event, consciousness is translated into subjective experience, appropriated by language and culture, mediated by somatic mechanisms that further translate the experience based on epigenetic and enduring memories and instincts. The 'event' is not therefore dualistic, that of a subject accessing the object. It is the moment that initiates the process for consciousness to bifurcate into dualistic categories.

Within these parameters, there are at least two domains to engage phenomenology: fabricated/fantasy consciousness and the mechanism of reduction. A big part of meditation involves playing with fantastic images, and not always bracketing them. I only discuss the bracketing aspect; I have addressed the fantasy aspect elsewhere.[2] Here, analyzing the witness consciousness (*sākṣin*) in Advaita, by returning the gaze to its source, resembles the phenomenological examination of the I' in "I am", what Husserl identifies as 'returning back' (1998). Husserl's meditative task, returning the gaze and scrutinizing what is given at the event moment, is identical in Advaita.

Unlike Descartes and Husserl, to confront "I am" is not the same in Advaita: This is where they diverge. Historical factors condition this divide: Husserl is revolting against naturalism; Advaita makes no attempt to rescue the ego, contra Husserl. Analyzing Advaita, if being and consciousness are identical, nature and subjectivity cannot stand apart, from the perspective of the onlooker with his gaze to emptiness. Advaita aspires not to reach to the thing itself, bracketed from subjectivity: Subject and object are limitations imposed upon boundless consciousness unified with being. This undermines viewing Advaita as a philosophy that helps return consciousness to subjectivity.

The premise grounding Advaita is the nondual field, pure being equated with pure consciousness, supporting the polarity on which subject and object emerge. We cannot overlook these parameters in a dialogue between Advaita and phenomenology. And the centrality of returning the gaze from its superimposed convictions makes both systems compatible.

I have focused on Advaita as a scientific method of praxis; likewise, for phenomenology. This requires a shift in how we approach these subjects. The task for a phenomenologist, in this paradigm, is not to introduce categories or define axioms. Engaging phenomenology as practice becomes a meditative process of gazing upon the ego, which demands a return of our gaze from its natural external thrust. Though there is a deconstruction of the ego, both systems rely on the 'I' within the "I am" in reduction, and so are not Humean. These counter-Humean elements resemble counter-Buddhist arguments in Advaita. Meditation, for phenomenologists and Advaitins, is closer to Cartesian meditation.

A phenomenological 'investigator' is a 'subject seeking freedom' (*mumukṣu*) in Advaita. The requirement for being a *mumukṣu* is openness to question apparent reality, the objective world, and one's self-experience. An Advaitin walks very closely with a skeptic, but their roads separate when Advaita leads to direct exposure to the basis of all experience. Liberation is not a hazy mystical concept, if we read Advaita honestly, for it demands bracketing appearance while questioning the conditions that determine one's subjective horizon. Importantly, phenomenological reduction works by bracketing 'thetic existential positings of things in the framework of space, time, causality, etc.' and 'psychic faculties'.

Phenomenology calls into question everything including one's own subjective horizon, but rests on the assumption that there are mind-independent essences that need to be known of

their own accord, by bracketing our projections. Advaita demands that we not initiate investigation with the assumption of mind-independent things. The subject of investigation in Advaita is neither out there nor in here, but not aimless mental gymnastics. Advaita seeks to discover neither pure subject nor pure object, but directs investigation to the core of consciousness, the basis that constitutes the poles of subject and object.[3]

Husserl claims phenomenological investigation is directed "toward that which consciousness itself 'is' according to its essence in all its distinguishable forms" (1998, p. 89). There is no difference with Advaita here. Both systems insist investigation needs to direct the focus of attention beyond appearance. The premise of Advaita, however, is not to expose the thing as it is, objectively. In Advaita, objectivity is construed in the event mode of experiencing, and Advaita undertakes to explore this basis, this foundation. Objectivity is enmeshed with *nāma rūpa* (Sanskrit: name [and] form – concept and object conceptualized). The subject bestows objectivity upon the object.

Instead of negating the basis for the rise of objectivity, Advaita maintains that this basis is postulated, derived by reasoning. The recognition of the constituted nature of objects is not to preclude their objectivity. This is another misnomer: A recognition of objectivity includes the extent to which subject plays a constitutive role in objectification. The investigation of *what consciousness means*, a phenomenological process, is consistent with the Advaita project of reflection on the nature of self-experience, wherein the self is equated with consciousness. The realized perspective – the Advaita 'view from nowhere' – expunges the subject outside the investigation, ever evaluating its subjective horizons infused in the mechanism of constituting objective reality.

The recognition of the objective as having the subjective infusion is not to discredit the apparent, but to affirm it as it is. Recognition of the apparent reality at the conventional level, therefore, is not to reject the reality as such, but rather, it is the affirmation of the objective as the absolute reality in the conventional (*vyāvahārika*) mode. It would therefore be misreading Advaita if we were to derive the conclusion that Advaita denies common-sense reality. For, Advaita confirms that common-sense reality is absolutely real as conventional. For example, a five-dollar bill is absolutely real as a five-dollar bill as far as our convention is concerned. But its reality as paper is not negated when being affirmed as a five-dollar bill. Neither is this reality absolute, as the government can cancel its validity and the economy can alter its value. Our socio-political and economic realities are conventional, as are other cultural realities. These structures are real for social transactions.

The ultimate reality of dream entities is restricted to dreaming – not to deny them as real, but as belonging to dreaming. This analysis of what is given to consciousness at the event of experiencing is equally a phenomenological and Advaitin project. The difference is this: What Advaita concludes to be the true 'entity' is not what phenomenology confirms. Bracketing both subject and object from what is given is not to reject scientific knowledge, but to recognize the parameters in which scientific knowledge is framed. There is no problem in accepting that there is nothing that is given *a priori*, and that both subjective and objective are interdependent.

Recognition of the extent to which concepts have shaped our experience of an entity, or the way we believe the entity is given to consciousness, is neither denying experience nor denying the object, but determining limitations for its manifestation. To recognize the parameters of conventional or dream experience as such is not to discredit either, but to confirm *the way they are*. The being of the phenomenal lies in its phenomenality, and this phenomenality of the phenomenal is real as such.

2 The reductionist approach of Vidyāraṇya

Again, Advaita aspires to train insight so we can differentiate the phenomenal from the absolute. For economy of space, I borrow examples of methods from the DDV. To glimpse how reduction works in Vidyāraṇya's phenomenology, consider the first verse:

> Form is the object of perception and the eyes, the subject. The eyes are the objects of perception while the mind is the subject. The modes of the mind are the objects of perception and the witnessing consciousness is the subject. But this is the subject alone, as it never is an object of perception.
>
> *(1931, p. 1)*

The schema of threefold subjectivity is at the core of Vidyāraṇya's reduction to pure consciousness. The bodily subject directly engages with objects, or processes information; the mind performs second-order processing; and the subject evaluates and makes judgments. This 'I' of Vidyāraṇya that evaluates mental events is not the Cartesian 'I', as this 'I' also evaluates the ego or the phenomenal subject. Most importantly, this is the very pure being and consciousness bereft of subjectivity, when there is nothing to objectify. The central thrust of this meditative process is that, rather than reaching to the thing 'out there', it aims to reach the pristine form of the subject before being conditioned by bodily and mental factors. Accordingly, the self-affirmation of consciousness makes it possible to confirm the validity of what it reveals. That which manifests as object to consciousness, the next verse suggests, is a synthesis of the appearance of the manifold: "Forms are manifold due to difference as blue and yellow or gross and subtle or short and long, but the eyes perceive them as one" (Vidyāraṇya 1931, p. 2).

Realization that what is given to consciousness is a synthetic manifold already processed through sensory faculties, however, does not preclude scientific investigations. The recognition of the conventional as real, on the contrary, makes it possible to recognize the way things in themselves are. And this realization makes it possible to accept that consciousness of objective reality is not a single presentation, but a re-presentation with multiple drafts. A common mistake here is to surmise that all we can access is merely representations. The event reveals the basis, whereas the object is a presentation of the manifold. This object, then, is not external or internal to consciousness, as both externality and internality are modes in which the field determines itself at the event mode. The manifold constituted upon the field is processed multiple times where the very first step relates to sensory processing, resulting in constituting a bare object. And this synthesis is not merely about the objects being presented, but also our conditions, e.g., sensory abilities, as exemplified with the sense that infiltrates what is being processed.

Following Vidyāraṇya, there is no qualitative difference regarding the mechanisms of synthesis between sensory and psychological abstractions. Just like the manifold of the given is homogenized in sensation, sensory processing is not free from internal limitations and conditions. Vidyāraṇya explains that even the image processed by the sensory faculty to the mind is varied, depending on the state of the processing organ, as the blindness, sharpness, or dullness of the eyes constitute different 'objects' upon the same field. The mind homogenizes inputs, constituting the singularity of the given. This is how recognition of a homogeneous entity becomes possible when what we are, subject to subject, across time, varies: The object means the same whether determined by a subject with sharp or dull eyes (1931, p. 3).

Likewise with the mind, which filters and infuses aspects from the given, interpreting the event moment based on psychological preconditions. The mind infuses the object with mental

properties such as desire, zeal, or doubt, or emotions such as fear. This also infuses what is given with concepts and beliefs. In spite of this diversity, subject consciousness constitutes the object as a singular entity (*id.*, p. 4). The exalted consciousness that we return to by means of analysis of what is produced in this process, according to Vidyāraṇya, is not a product of these mechanisms but is the basis. This consciousness is what I have identified as the field wherein we project everyday reality. Vidyāraṇya argues: "[This consciousness] neither emerges nor dissolves, nor grows or decays. It manifests on its own itself and also the others without any instruments" (*id.*, p. 5).

What Vidyāraṇya and Husserl understand by consciousness is not always identical. The consciousness of Vidyāraṇya is not fulfilled with an actualization of objects; the inverse gaze in Vidyāraṇya's case does not aim to discover an exalted object. This divergence does not affect our investigation, as within Advaita, our openness in investigation anticipates freedom from all impositions, including 'externality' and 'objectivity'. The premise of Advaita is that Advaita is not the beginning, but the conclusion of investigation: Even the return of consciousness to its basis is not a prescribed course, but the result of thorough investigation. Otherwise Advaita would be a dogma.

The return to things in their real nature is not the premise for initiating analysis, but the conclusion one reaches. Thus, Vidyāraṇya begins his investigation with sensory data. The analysis of the given at the event of consciousness takes him to the above conclusion that consciousness is not what emerges or dissolves. The analysis of the manifold reveals what is consistent in the appearance of the manifold, and entails that the pure aspect of sensing – the awareness given in every mode of manifestation, whether or not consciousness of an object is conditioned by sensory modalities or mind – is not transitory, not a product of the event of conscious experience, but the *a priori* being of consciousness that makes the conscious event possible.

Vidyāraṇya distinguishes between consciousness and mind, arguing that mind is not visible to itself. Mind is part of the physical mechanism that makes it possible for consciousness to reflect, but is not conscious. The self *qua* consciousness that is self-aware is categorically different from mind. Thus, the processing mechanisms attributed to sensory faculties and mind are blind; there is no conscious choice or reflective gaze upon what is being processed. In spite of the agencies bestowed upon the body and the mind, the real agency or the absolute subjectivity lies in the ego that receives information processed through two intervening blind mechanisms. The grasping of objects by mind is a borrowed faculty Vidyāraṇya explains in terms of the coloring or shadow of consciousness, bestowing upon the mind the sense of being aware. This is where he explains that what makes the mind as mind and the ego as ego rests on mind being colored by consciousness and divided as such. He explains: "Due to the coloring [lit. shadow] of consciousness, there is sentience in the mind and this mind is twofold. One is the ego and the other is the internal cognitive faculty [or the mind]" (*id.*, p. 6).

The ego revealed in 'I' is not an absolute in Vidyāraṇya's metaphysics. Neither is mind, wherein sentience manifests in itself reliable ground, as sentience is superimposed and not inherent. This recognition of the constructed nature of the ego, however, does not preclude recognizing the absolute nature of the relative reality as relative. Vidyāraṇya explicitly outlines the parameters of these two realities:

A subject of conventional reality considers his conventional world as absolutely real. However, the self in the absolute state considers this [otherwise conceived as real] as composed due to superimposition.

*(*id.*, p. 41)*

This method is not demanding the subject discredit what is apparent, but asking it to acknowledge the constructed nature of what is given to consciousness. And this acknowledgment does not end with a mere analysis of what appears to be an object of consciousness, but also demands equal scrutiny of subjectivity.

When the subject confirms its subjectivity as a projection of transparent consciousness upon the mind which lacks self-awareness, this process assists in constraining the ego's power of coloring what is exposed at the level of the conscious event. Similarly, mind becomes mind by its borrowed power of reflection, allowing the ego to be aware that what is revealed by mind is the reflection of ground consciousness, and the objects manifest there are processed twice by blind mechanisms. Though this fails to give direct exposure to what is out there, the process makes it clear that there is nothing 'out there' to be grasped, nor is 'in here' one grasping outside of cognitive mechanisms.

Vidyāraṇya's bodily subjectivity rests on consciousness transference, a mechanism better known in terms of 'superimposition': The transparency or self-givenness of consciousness is imposed on mind, giving it the sense of awareness, and this ego is imposed on the body, giving rise to the sense of bodily subjectivity (*id.*, p. 7). Vidyāraṇya's reduction reveals a deeper stratum beneath what is superimposed, manifest in bodily subjectivity and the apparently transparent ego. From the absolute reductionist perspective, there is no categorial difference between the body and the ego as far as the lack of awareness is concerned, as these both enjoy the quality of consciousness imposed on them. We cannot not notice the semblance of Cartesian arguments, but at the same time, the difference in methods is equally pertinent. Vidyāraṇya identifies three reasons for this transference: inborn, action-driven, and grounded on error (*id.*, p. 8). We can apply these for phenomenological reduction.

First, our embodiment underscores inborn conditions. The way we experience the environment, interpret psycho-somatic experiences as pleasant or painful, or map our reality by using metaphors or metonymy, are all embodied. But this does not mean that we cannot transcend bodily limitations to discover the basis projecting our everyday reality. This is where the Advaita concept of onlooker or disinterested witness (*sākṣin*) becomes relevant, as the view presented by this onlooker is not the view from one vantage point. This is not only the 'view from nowhere', but the view of 'nobody': *Sākṣin* demands emancipation from our subjective horizon. In Vidyāraṇya's metaphysics, the 'superimposition based on action' (*karmaja*) explains habits and instincts. The other, 'born of error' (*bhrāntija*), describes cognitive limitations, including language translating experience.

The ego is a modification of the basis or pure consciousness, what makes it possible for us to have experiences. With the power of fantasy, ego can constitute dream reality while giving rise to 'objects' as 'out there', as given in common-sense experience. Vidyāraṇya explains this double-imposition in terms that meticulously describe dual-imposition:

> The modes [that define] the mind, when combined with the image consciousness, constitutes [sic] the mental images (*vāsanā*, lit. "perfuming") while in a dream, and while in the waking state, it constitutes by means of the sensory faculties the objects out there.
>
> (*id., p. 11*)

The basis upon which ego emerges is reached by postulation (*arthāpatti*). But the application of negation as a method should not be misconstrued as having no basis for everyday experience. It is only that the object as external, given to everyday experience, is mixed with fantasy. What this is, then, is *being as such* or being not distinct from pristine consciousness. This is why reality is self-revealing: Being exposes itself and is the event of consciousness confirming itself.

Vidyāraṇya adopts a dual mechanism to explain fantasy consciousness. Relying on an indeterminable or open-horizon potency intrinsic to being, Vidyāraṇya explains that *māyā* (illusion) has two aspects: covering and projecting (*id.*, p. 13). By covering, the indeterminate horizon of being and consciousness finds its horizon: Being self-negates and consciousness forgets itself – being *qua* consciousness shrouds itself from its all-encompassing transparency. This is where the potency of projection comes into play, giving rise to ego and object, inside and outside, the determinate horizons. In Advaita, being is not inherently dynamic. The dynamism in this paradigm is equated with the world, as the term *jagat*' can be explained, both as 'world' and as something 'dynamic'. This dynamism is the construction of the projecting potency, '*māyā*'.

The negative epistemology of Advaita has misled scholars to assume that this schema adopts subjective illusionism and negates world experiences. Vidyāraṇya's following statement helps to illuminate what is being negated in negating the world:

> The word "creation" refers to the extension of name and form in the Brahman, the being as such (*vastu*) of the character of being, consciousness, and bliss, just like foam etc., in the ocean.
>
> *(Vidyāraṇya 1931, p. 14)*

Recall my earlier remark about the metaphor of ocean and wave to explain the nonduality between them in Advaita, which Vidyāraṇya here explains is not meant to deny the reality of the waves, or, in his version of the metaphor, the foam. Rather, he is pointing to their constructed nature as such, not to their non-reality.

Regarding construction, creation, or projection, we constitute, and superimpose names and forms onto, the foundation that is pure being identical with non-directional consciousness. Whether we consider the form as a *gestalt* or an object of the synthesis of all horizons, double syntheses by means of the sensory faculties and the mind are what mediate our common-sense experience. If we reduce projection to the thing as such, we reach the foundational being inseparable from consciousness. This is the foundation of Advaita phenomenology.

This analysis does not begin with the premise of separation of being and consciousness. Because being and consciousness are not different, no category is required to bridge them. Concepts and language, however, are not mere products of projection, as there is a systemic covering, and this 'covering' relates to an aspect of *māyā* (*id.*, p. 15). This covering does not function in merely suspending the encounter of being as such, as this also facilitates the emergence of ego, bracketing absolute being (*id.*, p. 17). Ego enjoys both worlds, as the basis whereupon projected reality manifests, but it also is the subject whenever the gaze is outward, accessing and evaluating objects.

It is the same event wherein the absolute is encountered and the world manifests. If we remove all that is superimposed, every mode of experience is the experience of being and consciousness itself – no need for a separate event for realization of the absolute. Vidyāraṇya explains:

> Among the five parts of being, manifesting, being desirable, as well as having name and form, the first three are the aspects of the absolute and the last two are that of the world.
>
> *(id., p. 20)*

Advaita reduction is not in negation of the world, but differentiating what is phenomenally constructed, so that what is out there is given as it is, uncolored by cognitive mechanisms or limitations due to cognitive capacities.

3 Meditation: The Advaita way

The above suggests meditation in Advaita is scientific, knowledge-based, but its popular iteration is shrouded in esoteric conceptions. Advaita-based meditation develops an analytic gaze that brackets or reduces, to reach the true nature of what is given to consciousness. This differs from Patañjali's *dhyāna*, the trance state of localized consciousness fixed on an object.[4] There are some similarities in reduction, in stages of *samādhi* (absorption). Vidyāraṇya outlines Advaita meditation: "By discarding name and form, [one should] dedicate to being, consciousness, and bliss and be in *samādhi*, whether within the heart or outside" (*id.*, p. 22). When consciousness encounters an object, it discovers its own objectivity, but reveals not just name and form. Beneath these lies the thing as such – being, as it is. In cognitive space we encounter names, shapes, properties, and spatial attributes. Does an entity have its own being undetermined by its name and structure? For Advaitins, what manifests is indeterminable as being or non-being, but what lies on this ground is not an object of determination, as it lacks name and form. Sometimes Advaitins use '*ānanda*', 'bliss', to describe this foundational being, an evaluative mode despite being inseparable from consciousness.

Advaita meditation is a meticulous investigation of whether modes of consciousness are active. Vidyāraṇya remarks about the scope of Advaita meditation as follows:

> Meditation (*samādhi*) is twofold, comprised of conceptualization and devoid of conceptualization. The one with conceptualization is itself twofold with it either being pregnant with the object of perception or the names [describing the object].
>
> *(*id.*, p. 23)*

Reductive abstraction begins with an entity's dimensions and topological structure given to consciousness. When we bracket its manifest aspects to determine the thing independent of the qualities that mediate subject and object, what arises first is its designation. Vidyāraṇya differentiates two modes of concept-embedded meditation:

> That belonging to the mind such as passion are the objects of perception and the subject should meditate on oneself as being the witness of the contents of the mind (*tat*). This is the concept-laden meditation that is pregnant with the objects of perception. The meditation impregnated with word is [the focus on the ego] having the character of "I am" (*asmi*), [where the self is] devoid of duality, free of contact [with the externals], self-aware, and of the character of being, consciousness and bliss.
>
> *(*id.*, pp. 24–5)*

Even though we confront both internal and external objects, Vidyāraṇya limits the scope to mental objects, for in the process of encountering internals we confront subjectivity directly. Regarding meditation containing speech, Vidyāraṇya describes it as attending to the pure ego through the verbal recognition of "I am".

The objective of Advaita meditation, again, is to actualize the essential nature of the self. Thus, Vidyāraṇya uses two types of meditation to confront the ego: observing mental contents or

reflecting on self-awareness as "I am". Is this reduction of ego? Consider the meditation devoid of concepts. In Advaita, the only true knowledge is what is revealed in the highest meditative absorption devoid of concepts. Consciousness mediated by concepts does not encounter itself as it is, but as a projection upon reality that is the basis for fantasy consciousness. Vidyāraṇya defines the meditative state of directly encountering reality as follows:

> The meditative state (*samādhi*) having indifference from both the object of perception and its verbalization due to entering into the blissful state of self-experience is the absorption devoid of conceptualization. It is like a lamp kept in a place free from wind.
>
> (*id., p. 26*)

The Advaitin self is neither Humean nor Cartesian, as they are not deconstructed by bracketing name and form. Neither is it the ego directly encountered as the "I am". This is merely the foundation for the ego and what it grasps, as internal or external. Some mistake it as a process of refining what is given in the "I am", but it is the foundation for both the 'I' and 'this', *dṛg* and *dṛśya*, so what is accessed is the basis whereupon these polarities manifest.

> Just like in the heart, in any object in the external plains, the first mode of meditation [having an object of perception mediating consciousness] refers to the separation of the name and the form from pure being .
>
> (*Vidyāraṇya 1931, p. 27*)

Vidyāraṇya is not suggesting suspension of sensory faculties or of mind, but instructing that meditation occurs when attentive to the being of an entity, rather than its name and form.

This meditative state is the first step towards merging into the pure being, indistinguishable from pure consciousness. Vidyāraṇya describes the second step of meditation: "The intermediate stage meditation is the mode of thinking without any interruption that the singular constant entity is of the character of being, consciousness, and bliss" (*id.*, p. 28). There is no negation or bracketing here: The only content is being, as such, in its modes of self-presence and self-contentment. Regarding the third stage of meditation, Vidyāraṇya describes it as being still, due to savoring self-awareness (*id.*, p. 29). Vidyāraṇya outlines six progressive meditative states:

i)   the state having an external object,
ii) the state of reflecting upon speech manifesting the ego,
iii) the state lacking both externality and verbalization,
iv) the initial act of observing the external while bracketing their externality and encountering pure being, awareness, and bliss,
v)   the stage of the direct exposure of pure being, awareness, and bliss without interruption, and
vi) the state of final absorption or total stillness, lacking any external horizon of consciousness (*id.*, pp. 29–30).

Vidyāraṇya concludes: "If bodily self-identity is dissolved and the absolute self is realized, wherever the mind goes there is the meditative state [of *samādhi*]" (*id.*, p. 30). Vidyāraṇya is not negating the body, but bracketing self-consciousness from bodily subjectivity, nor rejecting the mind, evident in the above quote.[5]

4 Vidyāraṇya's meditation: Phenomenological reflections

Advaita is a system of meditation upon the nature and scope of consciousness, analyzing its structure from its worldly appearance to what it is at the event of consciousness: a systemic bracketing of what is superimposed, to reach the field, the basis. Vidyāraṇya's method and the phenomenological methods, I argue, rest on similar premises. Fink (1995, p. 41) outlines two basic moments of phenomenological reduction in terms of *epoché* and the act of the reduction proper, each required for and conditioning the other. These are not gradually progressive, as they are mutually facilitating. The steps of bracketing externals and attending to pure being identified with pure consciousness are not gradual moments in Advaita, though conceptually distinguishable for analysis. Both Advaita meditation and phenomenology are metacognitive processes that ask us to question what we take for granted: embodiment, language, culture, etc.

Epoché is a procedure to interrogate what is apparent, forcing the subject to reflect upon reality behind the apparent. When we reflect back, the task for a *sākṣin* (witness) is the same as what phenomenology demands, to "come to see ourselves as no longer of *this* world, where 'this world' means to capture *all* that we currently accept" (Cogan 2021, 5.a.1). Both systems have been criticized for the wrong reason: that suspension of belief in the world – conventionally taken for granted – amounts to denial of the world. Advaita epistemology identifies projection – upon which consciousness reveals, in the initial moment, by means of *māyā*, the covering of the thing as such, by means of *avidyā* (ignorance) – to explain everyday experience. This is neither the denial of everyday experience nor what lies beneath it, but a project to investigate the basis for everyday experience, demanding a thorough suspension of beliefs.

Just as *epoché* scrutinizes what we take for granted in everyday experience, reduction proper is a gaze from outside, a transcendental vision recognizing acceptance as an acceptance. This compares with recognizing the absolute reality of the conventional as conventional. To read Advaita epistemology as rejecting common-sense experience is to fail to recognize the difference between absolute and conventional. To suggest that conventional reality is only conventionally real – a claim one sometimes encounters in certain forms of Buddhism – would amount to rejecting the reality of the conventional.

Again, a dollar bill is not conventional at the conventional level – it is real at that level, or else anybody could reject monetary transactions. What is conventional? It is whatever our body allows us to experience and interpret, and what language and culture allow us to rationalize and appropriate. Even modes of rationality and epistemic systems are conditioned and framed within these parameters. That we cannot see ultraviolet light is not to deny its existence, but an affirmation of our limitations in seeing the way things are. The bracketing of the apparent in both systems is to liberate investigators from dogmatism, calling into question both the object investigated and the investigating subject. Cogen summarizes the two phenomenological categories, where:

> epoché is the "moment" in which we abandon the acceptedness of the world that holds us captive and the reduction proper which indicates the "moment" when we come to the transcendental insight that the acceptedness of the world *is* an acceptedness and not an absolute.
>
> *(2021, 5.a.2)*

What Cogan says in the next paragraph is all the more essential: "it is by means of the epoché and reduction proper that the human I becomes distinguished from the constituting I"

(*id.*, 5.a.2). This touches the heart of Advaita: recognizing the constructed nature of ego, urging dissociation from its fabricated self-identity constituting its reality as it desires.

Dialogue between Advaita and phenomenology is not new (Gupta 1998), but if the methods of Advaita are not taken seriously, we cannot universalize them for scientific investigation. Colonialist over-mystification of Indian philosophy has precluded some of the finest theories from entering the global philosophical inquiry. Global philosophical inquiry is not what has turned philosophy from the non-West into a sub-section of the history of philosophy. A sincere dialogue presupposes underlying difference. Thus, Husserl employs scientific investigation to understand how consciousness contacts an object intuitively given without its conscious affirmation. Advaita meditation investigates whether there is an intuitively given object, or any objectivity to be expunged of consciousness. Reduction here leads to the field, pure being, equated with consciousness as the substrate wherein both the subjective and objective are construed. Thus, Advaita continues interrogating what is given, even after the phenomenological reduction to the 'I' of the "I am", and finds a ground wherein subjectivity and objectivity rest.

The problem with Advaita reduction is that – while searching for what is immediately given to consciousness exposes the very consciousness reflectively affirming itself due to its 'self-aware' (*svaprakāśa*) nature – it fails to become an instrument for confirming the 'pure given' in Husserl's terminology (1998); i.e., the 'pure given' does not exist. Or, the absolute nature of the 'pure given' lies in its conventionality. With this in mind, we can suspend questioning any of the progressive steps. Just because Advaita leads to the foundation of appearance does not mean it precludes us from seeing what is apparent. Advaita meditations assist us not just in confronting the phenomenal, but in recognizing the processes and mechanisms involved in the constitution of the object as an object of consciousness. Though Advaita differs from phenomenology over affirming the thing in itself, Advaita remains committed to discover the foundation that allows the phenomenal to appear as it does.

Advaita does not culminate with the encounter of the given as it is, but it does maintain its intentionality, entailing that there is possibly something intended in every intentional act. The objective of Advaita meditation differs when it guides the subject to liberate from its constant thrust for intentionality, in a general sense of wanting or willing to be or have. It is not that consciousness as the ground lacks potential intentionality, but that in its final mode it does not have anything to intend, nor any urge to intend. Hence the nonduality of being, consciousness, and *bliss*, and hence those three English terms being united in Advaita: *satchitānanda* (*sat*: being; *chit*: consciousness; *ānanda*: bliss).

Fulfilment in Advaita lies not in everyday acquisition of objects but in interrogating the acquisitive process, bracketing consciousness further, and reaching the basis – the potential not just for constituting intentionality, but for determining the horizons of subject and object. Reading Advaita methodology free from convictions is to read it as a scientific endeavor to scrutinize the given, examine the constructed nature of everyday reality, and explore the basis for the apparent. For Advaitins, an effort must be made to liberate the discipline of self-realization from dogmatism, allowing meditation research to be a part of philosophical investigation, not a supernatural quest.

At the heart of this interrogation lies its philosophy of meditation. To meditate within Advaita parameters is *not* to (a) channel one thought in any particular location, (b) visualize and manipulate images, or (c) suspend reflection. Rather, it requires: (a) sustained analysis of the "I am", (b) gradual and systemic bracketing of sensory and mental stimuli from consciousness itself, and (c) close observation of the process of the constitution of the ego and its horizons.

Regarding reflecting back to the self, Fink defines the parameters of phenomenology similarly: "the theory of method is, therefore, nothing other than the process of that subject's self-

objectification. The transcendental onlooker directs himself upon himself cognitively, and enters into the attitude of reflection." (1995, p. 13)

The process of confronting self-awareness and examining its constitutive nature, eventually transcending determined ego, bears great resemblance to Advaita and phenomenology. When we reflect back to the ground, the basis for what our apparent experience of our being in the world is about, both introspective methods are productive. Whether Advaita meditation or the *meditative practice* [*Besinnung*] in phenomenology, both systems converge insofar as 'laying the ground' and not 'thinking through axioms' are concerned, yet both have distinct goals: Advaita focuses on the foundation of experience; phenomenology focuses on understanding the world separate from the spirit. With a presupposition, "phenomenological experience does not refer at all, as we know, to something existent, but to the *constitutive becoming of what is existent*" (1995, p. 125), Fink argues that "the self-reflection of the phenomenological reduction is not a radicality that is within human reach, it does not lie at all within the horizon of human possibilities" (*id.*, p. 32).

Advaita remains a method as long as there is an onlooker, something to be observed, but ceases without an agent of meditation. Then, the horizons of subject and object collapse and what manifests is mere reflexive consciousness. Advaita seeks to implement what is gained through the meditative gaze – to derive its deepest meditation-generated insights – to alter our habits, afflictions, and attitudes toward the world in everyday life. Philosophy here is not about theory, but about actualizing and living it.

Divergent paths can lead to the same conclusion. Advaita seeks to expunge objective content from the ego, phenomenology to expunge subjectivity from pure essence. At the conventional level, both produce the same outcome, and demand we bracket convictions, so there is no methodological divide. Advaita stresses an observation of the parameters that constitute the ego, inverting the gaze. This is what the onlooker/witness exercise of being in the mode of *sākṣin* demands – again, disengaged engagement, not lack of engagement, but about evaluating, or bearing the capacity to evaluate, the world experience on its own accord, as if bracketing the self.

Thus, Advaita is a scientific approach to directly confront experience and reduce its content until nothing remains to be reduced. But this reduction demands reducing the objectivity of an object and the subjectivity of the ego. What remains as the ground is merely the nondual consciousness that lacks an external horizon, with its intentionality delimited to self-awareness.

Regarding interrogating the very knowledge or mechanisms by means of which the thing is given, Advaita and phenomenology converge. Both methods demand we liberate ourselves from presuppositions. Which system lives up to its promise? The liberation of the self in Advaita is its totalizing freedom from presuppositions and misconceptions. Both philosophies seek the 'ground-experience', but it is recognized differently in each.

We often mistakenly read a system on the basis of its conclusion. Reading Advaita from the standpoint of pure consciousness is counterintuitive, as this attitude discredits the entire mechanism involved in reaching it. Advaitins come to this conclusion guided by reasoning and analytic/contemplative investigation, not blind faith. A correct approach would be to relinquish our gaze determined as subjective and accept our role as a dispassionate onlooker. This demands that we remain open to what lies there as foundational. This is what Advaita demands.

5 Conclusion

I argued that phenomenological *epoché* and Advaita meditation have important elements in common, despite important differences. For considerations of space and scope, I restricted focus to Vidyāraṇya's *Dṛgdṛśyaviveka* and key fragments of Husserl and Fink. The point was to provide one among many possible measures on which to assess the philosophical validity of Advaita

meditation, by revealing what it has in common with phenomenology, a methodology long recognized in the West as a philosophically valid approach.

Notes

1 Because there are two major forms of Vedānta ('the end of the Veda': The Vedas are the orthodox Indian scriptures, and the Upaniṣads are the later ones), i.e., Advaita (nondualist) Vedānta and Dvaita (dualist) Vedānta, hereafter I will simply use 'Advaita' to refer to Advaita Vedānta.
2 See, e.g., Timalsina (2013a, 2013b, 2015a, 2015b, 2020).
3 See Fasching (this *Handbook*, Chapter 9) and Segall (this *Handbook*, Chapter 19) for similar arguments, but not based on Advaita.
4 See, e.g., Patañjali's passage, "*tatra pratyayaikatānatā dhyānam*" (Bryant 2009, III.2), which may be under-stood to mean one-pointed absorption of the mind in the object of concentration.
5 See Letheby (this *Handbook*, Chapter 13), and MacKenzie (this *Handbook*, Chapter 14), for empirical research on nondual meditative states in which the somatic sense is attenuated.

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