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Riddles of Vedānta and the Revival of Kotta Satchidananda Murty: A Discourse between Liberal & Traditional Standpoints

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Abstract: What is the central philosophy of the Upanishads? Is it theistic, monistic, polytheistic, panpsychistic, or something else? Are the world and God real or unreal? Such questions have been a riddle for ancient sages and modern scholars of the Vedāntic tradition, alike. Interestingly, if any thinker has made this discourse more puzzling, it is none other than Śaṅkarācārya (c. 7th–9th centuries CE); through his famous dictum, *Brahma satyam jagat-mithya jivo brahmaiva naparah* ("Brahman alone is real, the world is unreal. Jiva is not other than Brahman"), he almost changed the entire Vedāntic paradigm, akin to Nietzsche in Western thought with his "God is Dead" dictum. Now, before any thinker embarks on the Vedāntic path, they must first encounter Śaṅkarācārya's thesis in one way or another, as only then can one engage with notions including ethics, aesthetics, *bhakti*, karma, and others. Following the same line of inquiry, this review article investigates Professor K. Satchidananda Murty's distinctive discourse on Vedānta and his engagement with Śaṅkarācārya's philosophy, as portrayed in a recent edition of some of his works, titled *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā: The Unpublished Writings of K. Satchidananda Murty*, proficiently compiled by Professor Ashok Vohra and Kotta Ramesh.[1]

Keywords: K. S. Murty, Śaṅkarācārya, Ashok Vohra, Kotta Ramesh, Maya, Reality

> *Again if we look at World-Existence rather in its relation to the self-delight of eternally existent being, we may regard, describe and realize it as Lila, the play, the child's joy, the poet's joy, the actor's joy, the mechanician's joy of the Soul of things eternally young, perpetually inexhaustible, creating and re-creating Himself in Himself for the sheer bliss of that self-creation, of that self-representation, — Himself the play, Himself the player, Himself the playground.*
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> – Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*[2]

Among contemporary Indian thinkers, Professor K. Satchidananda Murty (1924–2011), also known as Satchidananda, KSM, Murty, stands out as a unique philosophical figure. It is now well-known that Murty's writings range across Indian and western philosophy, covering ethics, religious studies, social and political thought, culture, peace studies, philosophy of education, and Indian foreign

1. Acknowledgements: First of all, I am sincerely thankful to the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, and my teachers there, where I received my primary training in Indian philosophy. Specifically, I am grateful to Prof. Ananda Mishra, who once asked me to review a book on Murty, and Prof. S. P. Pandey, who taught me the philosophy of Vedanta during my master's. Thus, all wisdom belongs to my teachers, and any shortcomings are solely my own. Last but not least, this composition would not have been possible without the kindest help of Dr. Shaun Retallick, School of Religious Studies, McGill University, who guided me throughout the process, including providing invaluable guidance on many points.

2. Sri Aurobindo, "The Life Divine," in *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 21 (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2005), bk. I, ch. XII.

policy. With reference to Indian philosophy in particular, by combining heterodox thinking with a critical adherence to tradition, he displayed a distinctive approach. His scrutiny of Advaita Vedānta in *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedanta* (1959) marked a departure from the norm, while his later work, *Advaitic Notion* (1985), offered an exceptionally appreciative exploration of the same philosophy.

Beyond his engagement with Advaita Vedānta, Murty's interdisciplinary contributions to Indian culture, his involvement in peace studies, and his groundbreaking work, *Far Eastern Philosophies* (1976), showcase a wealth of original ideas, critical insights, and illuminating comparisons. Following the success of earlier remarkable works on the philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty, Ashok Vohra has once again revitalized the exploration of Murty's philosophy. This time, Professor Vohra, along with Kotta Ramesh, has complied many works of Murty in a book titled *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā: The Unpublished Writings of K. Satchidananda Murty* (2023),[3] which will be the focus of our present review. The unpublished writings of Murty in this volume span from approximately 1958 to 2000. These lectures, addresses, research papers, and articles were discovered by Murty's youngest son, Kotta Ramesh, one of the editors of the present volume, in various folders left in a bag after Murty's demise. All these manuscripts were either handwritten or typed by K. Satchidananda Murty, himself.

This volume, as we shall see, presents numerous distinct standpoints on fundamental Vedāntic philosophy, offering fresh perspectives on traditional views and particularly on Śaṅkarācārya's philosophy. It addresses questions regarding the nature of the Veda, their modern interpretations, accessibility to Vedic studies, and the possibility of *bhakti* and karma within the domain of Mayavada (Advaitvada), among others. These issues are highly contested and require careful study. In our analysis, we aim to present a balanced portrayal of this discourse, considering both the liberal standpoint of K. Satchidananda Murty and the perspectives of traditionalists.[4] To make this task more concise, this review has four sections, including this preamble, which serves as the first section. In the second section, we will present Murty's perspective on Vedānta. Following that, in the third section, we will delve into his interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Finally, in the fourth section, we will conclude, and offer a critique based on available scholarship.

Vedānta: The Liberal Standpoint of K. S. Murty

In the excellent compilation of Professor K. Satchidananda Murty's unpublished papers on Vedānta and *Bhagavadgītā*, various themes are explored across nine chapters, apart from the introduction. Beginning with reflections on the significance of the Veda in understanding transcendental means for attaining desirable outcomes, Murty delves into the Vedāntic vision, emphasizing the unity of the Self with all existence. He argues that, while the Self transcends reason, subtle reasoning is crucial for its perception. The chapter also explores various aspects related to the Veda, such as their definition, significance, preservation, dissemination, and contemporary relevance. It further discusses different interpretations of the Veda, including ritualistic, polytheistic, and monotheistic perspectives,[5] and addresses a very sensitive issue – access to Vedic study – advocating for its universal availability, regardless of caste or gender, to make the Veda relevant to modern society. Yet, Murty also emphasizes the importance of understanding the

3. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā: The Unpublished Writings of K. Satchidananda Murty*, ed. Ashok Vohra and K. Ramesh (New Delhi: Routledge, 2023), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003425625.
4. For further discourse on this issue, see C. D. Sebastian, "The Heterodox Insider K. Satchidananda Murty: A Critique of His *The Indian Spirit*," *Journal of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 34.1 (2017): 33–49.
5. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 4–6.

meaning of Vedic texts alongside traditional recitation practices.[6] Now, it would be interesting to see how trained Vedic scholars practicing tradition would take Murty's view on universal access and how the follower of Murty's philosophy would respond. Because, as far as history is concerned, the question of who should have access to Vedic literature has been a matter of great contention.

Murty is very well aware of this dispute. As noted above, he holds a liberal point of view: he thinks that the wisdom of the Veda should be available to everyone. However, the message of Vedic literature is not straightforward; it requires extensive hermeneutical practice. For instance, a whole school of thought, namely Mīmāṁsā Darśana, is dedicated to it. Convincing scholars on this point, however, is very hard, as prohibitions on studying sacred texts do not seem to be present in other major religions of the world. That said, classical Vedic scholarship necessitates certain qualifications and learning, including whether one has practiced the *sādhanā-catuṣṭaya* and has sufficient knowledge of Sanskrit, to decide whether one is an *adhikārī* (eligible/fit aspirant), whether one has gained *dīkṣā* (proper education), and many other cultural and spiritual necessities.[7] Metaphorically, just as a scientific laboratory cannot be opened to everyone, but only those individuals who have attained the necessary education, similarly, Vedic scholars traditionally believe that access to the Veda should be granted based on specific qualifications (otherwise, their interpretation would not be given priority). This perspective is sensitive but holds significant value for contemporary scholarship.

The second chapter delves into the Vedāntic vision, drawing upon passages from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and interpretations of scholars like Śaṅkarācārya. One important passage considered is, "He who meditates upon each of these things singly does not know, for in that way it is incomplete, being fragmented, each fragment possessing a single characteristic. So, the Self alone is to be meditated upon, for there all become one. Among all these, this Self alone should be realized, for one knows all these through it."[8] This passage emphasizes the centrality of self-realization and explores the interconnectedness of consciousness with the fabric of reality. Through a mystical lens, it explains concepts, such as the non-objectivity of the Self, the distinction between empirical and absolute reality, and the role of knowledge in dispelling ignorance. Murty also discusses the relevance of Vedānta in modern times, particularly in light of quantum physics, highlighting correlations between consciousness and the fundamental nature of reality.[9] While acknowledging resonances between Vedāntic principles and certain interpretations of quantum mechanics by physicists like Schrödinger, Heisenberg, and Bohm, Murty also acknowledges divergences concerning concepts like karma and the rejection of multiplicity.[10] This task delves deeper into Murty's lifelong project of constructing a scientific theology and modernizing religious pursuit, which are intriguing and courageous, but not immune to criticism, as we shall explore in the concluding section.

In the third chapter, Murty explores the role of reason in Vedāntic philosophy, arguing that while the Self transcends reason, it can only be perceived through "refined (or pure or penetrating) and subtle reason – *Dṛśyate agryayā buddhyā sūkṣmayā*."[11] He emphasizes the necessity of *brahma vicāra* (discussion and contemplation) for knowledge of Brahman, highlighting the nuanced understanding of reason in different contexts within Vedāntic texts. Yet, Murty rejects the notion that reason must be transcended or

6. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 7–10.
7. See S. Yogīndra, *The Vedanta-sara* (London: Christian Literature Society for India, 1898).
8. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.7, cited p. 14.
9. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 18–25.
10. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 18–22.
11. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 24.

abandoned in the pursuit of spiritual insight, instead asserting that reason, guided by scriptural teachings and ethical training, is the means to attain the supreme reality. Thoroughly citing and drawing from Śaṅkarācārya's interpretations and Upaniṣhadic insights, Murty underscores the significance of reason in grasping the essence of the real and the unreal.[12] Interestingly, he also makes a bold claim in this chapter, arguing that while Vedānta acknowledges the limitations of reason, it also maintains that reason is essential for discernment and discrimination on the path to self-realization.[13] Subsequently, Murty refutes the idea of a discontinuity between reason and insight, arguing that they are intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

However, a risk inherent in Murty's view is that he appears to be romanticized by Hegelian ideology, which also claims to comprehend reality through reason: that the "real is rational and the rational is real." Of course, Murty has cited sufficient resources to illustrate the role of reason in Vedānta, but what about the alternative and supremely important resource, which is nothing but the *śrutis*, known even by early-phase Vedantists?[14] Murty is motivated by science and modernity, and is popularly known for his scientific theology, but he fails to adhere to self-criticism, such as Karl Popper's principle that mere confirmation is not enough; there has to be a role for falsification and refutation instead of mere conjectures, which Murty did not incorporate into his methodology.[15] Furthermore, Murty's concept of scientific theology is not very clear. On the one hand, he tries to show the proximity of modern science (quantum physics) to Vedāntic metaphysics of consciousness.[16] On the other hand, he affirms and asserts that, while the Veda address *dharma* and *mokṣa*, they do not convey empirical knowledge; therefore, science neither supports nor contradicts Vedānta, aligning with Śaṅkarācārya's view that empirical knowledge does not confirm nor negate Advaitin truth.[17]

Progressing further, the discussion then moves on from reason to vision in Vedānta, with the fourth chapter investigating the fundamental principles of Advaita Vedānta, in particular. It begins by asserting Brahman as the sole reality and highlights the indefinability of the world of differences.[18] Murty delves into the profound understanding of consciousness (*vijñāna*) within the framework of Advaita Vedāntic philosophy, highlighting its inherent luminosity and self-proven nature.[19] He asserts that consciousness, by its very essence, shines forth on its own, requiring no external validation. Moreover, consciousness transcends attributes, rendering it indescribable by conventional means. Instead, it can only be figuratively alluded to through terms like "eternal" and "non-dual," as it exists beyond the constraints of time, space, and characteristics. Central to this discourse is the role of scripture (*śruti*) as a valid means of knowledge in revealing consciousness indirectly. While *śruti* hints at the essence of *vijñāna*, it does not directly involve consciousness in the relationship between words and their meanings. This underscores the ineffable nature of consciousness, which cannot be fully captured by language or conceptualization.

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12. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 24.
13. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 25–26.
14. See A. Vohra, ed., *Reason, Revelation, and Peace: Evaluations of the Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research and Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Ltd., 2020), 36; and P. Bilimoria, *Śabdapramāṇa: Word and Knowledge as Testimony in Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2008).
15. Rajan, "In Search of Purely Scientific Culture: A Normative Critique of Scientism, Karl Popper, and Thomas Kuhn's Dispositions," *The Digital Scholar: Philosopher's Lab* 6.3 (2023): 37–56.
16. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 19–23; 38–39.
17. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 40.
18. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 34.
19. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 34.

Murty then navigates through the nuanced perspective of the Advaita school regarding the perceived illusion of the world, cautioning against oversimplified interpretations and emphasizing the need for a thorough understanding.[20] He elucidates the distinction between sublation (*bādha*) and opposition (*virodha*), where sublation involves the removal of ignorance and its effects, leading to the realization of non-duality. The empirical world, although not wholly unreal like a mirage, is considered false (*mithyā*) due to its perceptibility, materiality, and limitation, akin to phenomena like shell-silver.[21] Furthermore, Murty investigates the ontological status of the world, asserting that its falsity arises from its inherent perceptibility and limitations, which are negated by the knowledge of unity provided by scripture. This knowledge, obtained through valid means, unveils the absolute reality, while rendering the empirical world relative and ultimately false. But Murty concludes this section in a very contesting manner, which is worth noting:

> It may be asked, is the falsity of the world false or not? The Advaitins answer thus: In negating the world in Brahman perceptibility is the limiting factor (*avacchedaka*) of negation (i.e., all that is perceptible is negated). So, the falsity (*mithyātva*), the world and its existence, which is seen, are all negated because of their perceptibility. So, neither the world nor its falsity is absolutely real.[22]

Afterwards, one significant argument made by Murty is the distinction between *śruti* (scriptures), especially the *mahāvākyas*, as the true means of knowledge of Brahman, and empirical knowledge.[23] Advaita Vedānta posits the Upanishadic statements as the primary means of valid knowledge regarding Brahman, relegating other *pramāṇas* to subsidiary roles. *Mahāvākyas*, like "That Thou Art," are considered the essence of Upanishadic teachings, serving as direct pointers to the realization of Brahman.[24] While secondary scriptures, like the *Bhagavadgītā*, may summarize Vedic teachings, the Upanishads remain paramount. Likewise, Murty argues that, while science may find unity amidst diversity, it fails to address the ontological status of that unity or the relation between diversity and unity.[25] Therefore, it neither supports nor contradicts Advaita Vedānta. In this chapter, Murty draws upon classical sources and dialecticians, like Śaṅkarācārya, Śrī Harṣa, and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī. They highlight the importance of Vedāntic thinking in one's life and underscore the ultimate goal of realizing unity of the Self; a standpoint that makes sense if Advaita Vedānta is understood to contain a life affirming philosophy. Indeed, Murty explores the ethical and socio-political implications of Advaita Vedānta, emphasizing its promotion of universal kinship and empathy through the realization of non-duality. He argues for a society founded on egalitarian principles, rejecting privileges based on birth or social status.[26] Murty also advocates the integration of Advaitic philosophy into daily life, stressing the inseparability of theory and practice. The relationship between action and knowledge is discussed, suggesting that worldly engagement is permissible when rooted in firm awareness of ultimate reality.

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20. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 36.
21. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 36.
22. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 37.
23. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 38–41.
24. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 37–38.
25. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 40.
26. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 42.

Proceeding further, if we follow discourses found throughout the Vedāntic tradition,[27] the central concern of the majority of schools lies in determining the ontic stance of the Self, World, and Brahman; whether they are one or different, dependent, or whatever. In line with this classic Vedāntic issue, in the fifth chapter, Murty expounds the Advaitic doctrine of the relationships between Brahman and God, Brahman and the individual self, Brahman and the world, as well as between God and the world and between God and the individual self, utilizing the key notions of *māyā* and *avidyā*. The liberal outcome of the discussion is that only from the empirical point of view is Brahman viewed as God. Thus, Brahman can be worshipped as God in temples, and one can even obtain benefits from such worship.[28] To make sense of these themes, Murty starts with the distinction between the perceiver (subject) and the perceived (object) based on experiential knowledge. He explores how the subject, defined by consciousness, often mistakenly identifies with object attributes, leading to suffering, termed *avidyā* or ignorance. This confusion arises from the mind's residual impressions, but right knowledge dispels erroneous perceptions (like when one realizes that a rope is not, in fact, a snake), liberating one from the cycle of transmigration.

Much like classical Advaita, Murty's discourse also implies that the material world (including individual selves) is seen as a superimposition on the eternal, immutable Consciousness (Brahman), comparable to a snake appearing as a rope. While the world is deemed false from an absolute perspective, it serves to generate right knowledge. The fifth chapter then outlines the relationship between Brahman (God) and individual selves, emphasizing their essential unity beyond empirical distinctions.[29] Despite Brahman's attributeless nature and while scriptures depict God both as the creator, sustainer, and controller of the universe, and as formless and transcendent, various forms of worship aid spiritual realization. Ultimately, liberation arises from realizing the identity of the individual self with Brahman through right knowledge, negating inherent agency or "enjoyership" attributed to ignorance. Further exploration into the relationship between the individual and God within Vedāntic philosophy involves analogies to elucidate their intrinsic connection, akin to the relationship between a part and a whole. The concept of *māyā*, the illusory power of Brahman, is discussed in terms of the perception of the world, and the individual's journey toward realizing their true nature as Brahman.[30] Murty's liberal interpretation of Advaita concludes by affirming that, while ethical injunctions and religious practices have their place at the empirical level, true knowledge transcends them, allowing the individual to recognize their identity with Brahman.[31]

The Advaita school of thought has had many great *acharyas*, but worldwide, the most revered figure is Adi Śaṅkarācārya. The sixth chapter revolves around his historical context and philosophical legacy. It begins with debates over the dates of his birth and activities, shedding light on western interpretations of his life and teachings.[32] Various historical sources are cited to establish Śaṅkarācārya's timeline, with differing views on the authenticity of his works and discipleship. Moving beyond historical scrutiny, the discourse examines the philosophical landscape of Śaṅkarācārya's time, situating his Advaita Vedānta within broader socio-political contexts. The narrative presents a nuanced portrayal of societal structures,

27. E.g., Bhedābheda or Dvaitādvaita (difference and non-difference), Advaita (non-dualism), Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualism), Tattvavāda (Dvaita) (dualism), Śuddhādvaita (pure non-dualism), and Acintya-Bhedābheda (inconceivable difference and non-difference). See P. Nagaraja Rao, *The Schools of Vedānta* (Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1943).
28. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 47.
29. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 48.
30. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 54.
31. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 57.
32. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 61–63.

religious diversity, and intellectual ferment, challenging simplistic interpretations of Advaita's impact on Indian society. Furthermore, Murty's discourse addresses criticisms of Śaṅkarācārya's philosophy, particularly regarding its alleged influence on India's intellectual stagnation. Refuting claims of Vedānta's detrimental effects on scientific inquiry and socio-economic development, it underscores the dynamic nature of Indian civilization during and after Śaṅkarācārya's time.

Murty's discourse, moreover, clarifies misconceptions about Śaṅkarācārya's ethical stance, stressing his emphasis on moral conduct as integral to spiritual realization.[33] It elucidates the ethical foundation of Vedāntic pursuit, emphasizing the synthesis of ethical living, meditative practice, and experiential wisdom in attaining knowledge of Brahman. This narrative challenges reductionist interpretations of Vedānta as purely metaphysical, advocating for a holistic understanding that integrates ethical principles with spiritual realization. Finally, the discourse explores contemporary perspectives on the convergence of science and Vedāntic truth, highlighting parallels drawn between modern scientific inquiry and ancient philosophical insights. It acknowledges diverse interpretations of scientific progress, ranging from Islamic and Buddhist perspectives to a perceived alignment with Advaita Vedānta. Overall, Murty shows that Śaṅkarācārya's philosophy was not "unprogressive" and that the post-Śaṅkarācārya period was not stagnant. In fact, the circumstances were conducive, but such cannot be attributed to Śaṅkarācārya's philosophy.

In chapter seven, Murty delves into Śaṅkarācārya's reconciliation of Advaitic principles with traditional religious practices, such as *jnana*, *bhakti*, and meditation. He illustrates how Śaṅkarācārya integrates *bhakti* into *jnana*, underscoring their complementary roles in spiritual evolution. While Śaṅkarācārya primarily emphasizes the path of knowledge (*jnana*) or rational inquiry into Brahman (*brahma vicāra*), he acknowledges the validity of *bhakti* (devotion) and various forms of God worship. He aligns *bhakti* with Advantix *jnana* by equating higher forms of devotion with profound spiritual insight, portraying them as complementary paths leading to the realization of the Self as Brahman. In this chapter, it is intriguing to note that Murty outlines the role of *bhakti* in liberation, with Śaṅkarācārya distinguishing between lower and higher forms of spiritual practices, advocating unwavering belief in the unity between the individual soul and God. Various worship forms described in scriptures signify spiritual stages, with external ritualistic worship considered the lowest and meditation on Brahman deemed the highest.

Murty transitions from discussing *bhakti* to karma in Advaita, underscoring the importance of fulfilling duties and nurturing mental purity as foundational steps toward realizing one's identity with Brahman. Śaṅkarācārya's perspective on the stages of religious life emphasizes duty, mental purity, and worship as integral to spiritual enlightenment and liberation. Likewise, Śaṅkarācārya emphasizes dutifully fulfilling obligations and cultivating inner qualities, like serenity and freedom from negativity. *Upasana*, or worship, is portrayed as essential for dispelling ignorance and guiding practitioners towards liberation, involving continuous meditation on prescribed objects from scripture to attain non-dual knowledge. Murty's interpretation highlights Śaṅkarācārya's conception of religious life, emphasizing humanity's unique position and discernment between the eternal and ephemeral. This discourse also hints towards the human capacity to distinguish between good and bad, eternal and fleeting, and directs the fulfillment of duties toward cultivating a purified and inquisitive mind. Overall, the essence of this section can be grasped in the following summary from the volume's editors:

33. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 67.

Murty explores the timeless relevance of Vedic and Vedantic traditions. He asserts that the Vedas guide ethical and spiritual living, advocating for universal access to their wisdom, which complements rather than contradicts empirical science. Drawing from Śaṅkarācārya and the Upaniṣads, he highlights Vedanta's view of the Self as the ultimate reality, aligning it with modern quantum theory's emphasis on consciousness. He explains that understanding Brahman requires transcending reason through refined contemplation. He elucidates Advaita Vedanta's core tenet that only Brahman is real, with the world being a relative reality. He discusses the relationships between Brahman, God, and the individual self, emphasizing worship's empirical benefits and the equality of all beings. Addressing Śaṅkarācārya's authorship and historical context, Murty defends the progressive nature of his philosophy. Lastly, he examines how Śaṅkarācārya integrates traditional religious practices into the pursuit of Brahman realization, ultimately transcending them through rational inquiry.[34]

Bhagavadgītā Vivecana: The Analytical K. S. Murty

The humanistic and ethical discussion from the previous chapters leads the reader to the domain of "*Gītā Bhāsyatraya Vivecana*: Reflections on the Three Bhāsyas of the *Gītā*," which is the eighth chapter of the book under review. Within this chapter, Murty scrutinizes the commentaries of three eminent Vedāntic teachers – Śaṅkarācārya, Rāmānujācārya, and Madhvācārya – on various aspects of the *Gītā*.[35] These aspects include their perspectives on liberation, the three yogas (especially *niṣkāma karma* yoga), *varṇāśrama dharma*, and differing interpretations of the *Gītā*'s final verse. Through this examination, Murty aims to uncover the essence of the *Gītā* with reference to texts, such as the "Naranārāyaṇiyaṃ" and "Anugītā" of the *Mahābhārata*, the "Māhātmya" of *Varāhapurāṇa*, and the "Karadinyāsa." The chapter culminates in reflections on the Nara–Nārāyaṇa relationship, and the enigmatic nature of divine birth and action.[36] Murty initially discusses Śaṅkarācārya's delineation of *dharma* into two categories, emphasizing their significance in sustaining the world and fostering the welfare of living beings. However, Murty deviates from Śaṅkarācārya's perspective by challenging the idea that Krishna merely reiterated Vedic teachings. Instead, Murty suggests that the *Gītā* introduces innovative insights surpassing traditional Vedic thought. Additionally, he critiques the emphasis on the caste system and life stages, arguing that these concepts may not be universally applicable or central to the *Gītā*'s teachings. Despite these criticisms, Murty acknowledges Śaṅkarācārya's inclusive vision, which reconciles diverse interpretations and underscores the unity of purpose in both active and contemplative forms of *dharma* within the *Gītā*.

Moving forward, Murty explores Rāmānujācārya's introduction to his *bhāṣya* on the *Bhagavadgītā*. Rāmānujācārya portrays Nārāyaṇa as the Absolute Being and the Supreme Person, embodying infinite knowledge and bliss. He highlights Nārāyaṇa's divine play of creation, maintenance, and dissolution of the universe, emphasizing his boundless mercy and generosity. Rāmānujācārya particularly emphasizes Nārāyaṇa's descent to earth, where he assumed a mortal form to aid Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, revealing the path of *bhakti* yoga as the means to liberation. In contrast, Madhvācārya begins his *bhāṣya* by highlighting the compassionate descent of Bhagavān Vyāsa in response to the decline of *dharma* and knowledge, especially affecting marginalized groups. He extols the Mahābhārata as the fifth Veda, superior to others and authored exclusively by Bhagavān Vishnu. Madhvācārya asserts that the Mahābhārata encompasses both Vedic truths and additional insights, surpassing the Veda in greatness.

34. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 2–3.
35. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 84–91.
36. See *Gītā*, IV.9.

Throughout the discussion, interpretations of the *Gītā*'s final verse (*sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śharaṇaṁ vraja ahaṁ tvāṁ sarva-pāpebhyo mokṣhayiṣhyāmi mā śhuchaḥ*[37]) as posed by Śaṅkarācārya, Rāmānuja, and Madhva reflect divergent approaches to the *Gītā*'s metaphysics and the path to liberation. This multiplicity of interpretations underscores the profundity of the *Gītā*, challenging singular doctrinal confinements and inviting diverse perspectives. Ultimately, according to traditional commentators like Venkaṭanātha–Vedāntadeśika, the essence of the *Bhagavadgītā* lies in surrendering to Bhagavān as the ultimate refuge, transcending doctrinal differences and affirming the universality of its message.[38]

After an extensive exploration of Vedānta and the *Bhagavadgītā*, the volume transitions to its final chapter, chapter nine, titled '"Here" (*Iha*) and "There" (*Amutra*), "The Excellent" (*Śreya*), and "The Pleasant" (*Preya*).' Those who are intrigued by Maharishi Kanada's call, "Dharma is that from which results the accomplishment of Exaltation and of the Supreme Good" (*yato'bhyudayaniḥśreyasasiddhiḥ sa dharmaḥ*),[39] will find lots of insights in this chapter. Likewise, Murty draws a clear distinction between the domain of empirical knowledge and transcendental wisdom while examining the historical context of Indian science and ancient scientific perspectives. He argues that ancient scientists utilized empirical and rational methodologies in their investigations, alongside acknowledging the role of spiritual pursuits and the teachings of the *śāstras* in shaping human life.[40] Despite the emphasis on rationality in constructing philosophical systems and arguments, Murty contends that the fundamental essence of philosophy aligns with that of religion and spirituality. And, according to him, there is no inherent contradiction between empirical and rational approaches, whether in philosophy or in the realms of science and spirituality, as they all converge towards the pursuit of transcendental wisdom and esoteric truth.

Murty, in the very beginning of this chapter, also introduces the notion of *ātmaupamya* or self-analogy as a criterion for rationality, emphasizing a standard that applies internally without relying on external factors.[41] He underscores the importance of applying reason to discern what is good or bad, right or wrong, as advocated in classical Indian scriptures like the *Mahābhārata* and *Śrīmad Bhāgavata*. Furthermore, he contrasts individualistic and selfish behavior with spiritual pursuit, advocating for the pursuit of excellence (*śreyas*) over mere pleasure (*preyas*). This spiritual pursuit is framed as a fulfillment of life, involving self-sacrifice and dedication to excellence in all aspects, consistent with the teachings of various Indian religious texts. The distinction between "Here" (*Iha*) and "There" (*Amutra*), as well as between the pursuit of excellence and mere pleasure, is drawn from both Indian and western philosophical traditions, highlighting the importance of aspiring towards higher ideals rather than immediate gratification, which is seen as paradoxical and illusory. Likewise, Murty concludes this chapter in a typical theistic sense:

> "Science," "philosophy," "religion," etc. do not wholly contain immutable and certain knowledge. The content of faith, while not certain, is "The Absolute is consciousness (*vijñāna*) and (*ānanda*)." "The Ultimate Reality is wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*)." "God is love." These are different expressions of spiritual truth. Blessed is he who appreciates it and lives by it.[42]

37. *Gītā*, XVIII.66.
38. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 95–96.
39. *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* 1.1.2.
40. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 103.
41. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 97.
42. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 106.

Conclusion and Critique: Hypothetical Interactions with K. S. Murty

After a thorough examination of Murty's perspectives regarding Vedānta and *Bhagavadgītā*, it becomes evident that he believed in the principle that the present cannot be lived for the past. Attempting to adhere forcefully to past paradigms only leads to unnecessary complexity. However, Murty also emphasized the importance of learning from both the insights and mistakes of the past. This comprehensive stance allows him to navigate between tradition and modernity, advocating for the harmonious integration of rationality and spirituality. He encourages traditionalists to open their hearts and share the cultural treasures of the Veda, Upanishads, and other scriptures with everyone, without any reservation, to prevent experiential injustices. Likewise, Murty suggests reinterpreting the *Bhagavadgītā* in a manner that emancipates individuals from all forms of confinement, whether based on gender, caste, religion, or any other categorization. However, it is important to recall that, while keeping pragmatic goals in mind as a social scientist is one aspect, striving for esoteric truth is another. The liberal approach that Murty holds towards Hindu philosophy as a whole, and Shankaracharya's views in particular, must undergo several tests.

In this regard, we may also seek insights from Ananda Mishra's critique of Murty in his paper titled, "Murty's Critique of Advaita," featured in Professor Vohra's volume, *Reason, Revelation, and Peace: Evaluations of the Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty*.[43] Mishra's close reading of Murty's works suggests that Murty finds the Advaitic conception of Nirguṇa Brahman untenable, and that he criticizes the doctrine of *māyā*, aligning closely with the perspectives of the Viśiṣṭādvaitins. Mishra is of the view that, like the Dvaitins, "Murty believes that God is God, and man is man, and that a *jīva* can never be God. God is personal, and the best way to reach him is through personal relations."[44] The idea of revelation has been the center point of dispute in his philosophy. Like a typical monotheist, Murty argues that revelation cannot be possible without a revealer and revealed, and, hence, the Advaitic notion of revelation is unjustifiable.[45] This perspective, along with the same major themes and standpoint of Murty's central philosophy in *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, persists throughout the present volume as well. He undertakes to address the incompatibility between *māyavāda* and *iśwarvāda*, yet the logical rigor and textual support it requires are not fully present in his work. Murty has attempted to balance reason and vision, as discussed in chapters three and four, but the dots still remain to be connected. His affection for reason (chapter three) still seems somewhat vague, which does not seem to resonate with the tradition referred to here as vision (chapter four).

Ananda Mishra challenges Murty's understanding of Advaita Vedānta from a traditionalist standpoint. Embracing revisionary metaphysics, Mishra's critique is worth appreciating. The main argument is that esoteric experience is founded on the idea of two truths: "empirical reality and transcendent reality."[46] While empirical reality is evident, there exists a transcendent realm beyond it, explored by religion and philosophy. Murty, despite acknowledging the separation of science and theology, emphasizes scientific theology, leading him to conclude that personal theism is the pinnacle of religion and is compatible with Advaita Vedānta. However, this view has been rejected outright by traditional pundits of Advaita. Moreover, Murty's stance overlooks religions like Buddhism and Jainism, which do not advocate

43. A. Mishra, "Murty's Critique of Advaita," in *Reason, Revelation and Peace: Evaluations of the Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty*, ed. Ashok Vohra (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research and Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2020), 13–35.
44. Mishra, "Murty's Critique of Advaita," 26.
45. K. S. Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), 241.
46. Mishra, "Murty's Critique of Advaita," 14.

a personal God. So, when Murty argues for a personal and responsive God to secure devotees' faith, he fails to address whose faith should be prioritized. In the words of Mishra:

> Where did Murty's failure lie? He failed to understand that Advaita, too, is a religion and Advaitins too talk about revelation. As each revelation is absolute to its receivers according to Murty, Advaita too is absolutely true for Advaitins. But Murty would not agree to accord Advaita a status of revelation. Advaita for Murty is neither a science nor a religion but a metaphysics. Now this Advaitic metaphysics is not true according to Murty. But Advaita is not merely a hermeneutics or metaphysics. It is religion as well. For Advaita is primarily meant for realization of one's own true self. I think Murty's unsympathetic attitude towards Advaita is due to his understanding of Advaita as metaphysics and not as religion. He failed to understand that it is religion of all religions.[47]

Like Ananda Mishra, P. R. Bhat argues in the same volume that Murty did not pay sufficiently critical attention to Advaitic philosophy, because he did not go beyond its received presentation and interpretation.[48] As a consequence, he offered only expected criticisms of the system. Bhatt analyses the four *mahāvākyas* to show that they are identity statements; the identity is between Ātman or its substitute, and Brahman or its substitute. He also demonstrates that, for Murty, *śruti*, which in the tradition is treated as self-valid, cannot give us eternal truth, since language is not eternal but rather natural. In his earlier works, moreover, Bhat argues that Murty is of the view that *śrutis* are not *Apaurusheya* (authorless) but the creation of God and compilation of seers, again giving space to his theory of personal theism.[49] And finally, Bhat thinks that, for Murty, natural language is incapable of describing indescribable Brahman. To be precise, these views of Murty are quite controversial, and any traditional Vedānta scholar would find them difficult to embrace. Likewise, Murty's view of liberating Vedic literature from traditional methodology or making it available for everyone might seem appealing, but these views should be approached through a dialectic involving traditional pundits and modern scholars. Daya Krishna attempted such a project; though appreciated, it remained largely incomplete.[50] Of equal importance, whether all of the above arguments or nuanced positions held by Murty in his earlier works and critiqued by Mishra and Bhat are still prevalent in the present book is not very clear, nor has it been clarified by the editor, "leaving the discourse open-ended."[51] However, after reviewing the work, it can confidently be argued that Murty's position, as found in the works of this volume, is much more inclined toward traditional scholarship of the Advaitic tradition, as evidenced by his honest presentation of the three planes of reality according to classical Advaita Vedānta (first four chapters): the plane of absolute existence (*pāramārthika sattā*), the plane of worldly existence (*vyavahārika sattā*), which includes this world and the heavenly world, and the plane of illusory existence (*pratibhāsika sattā*). He then explains the functioning of the different worldviews – whether scientific, theistic, or socio-cultural – based on the level of reality one is experiencing.

This having been said, dialectics hold immense importance in philosophy, offering a framework for comprehending change and development, resolving contradictions, fostering critical thinking, adopting

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47. Mishra, "Murty's Critique of Advaita," 34.
48. See P. R. Bhat, "Murty on Language and Reality in Advaita Vedānta," in *Reason, Revelation and Peace: Evaluations of the Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty*, ed. Ashok Vohra (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research and Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Ltd., 2020), 36–58.
49. Bhat, "Murty on Language and Reality in Advaita Vedānta," 37.
50. See D. Krishna, ed., *Saṃvāda, a Dialogue Between Two Philosophical Traditions* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1991).
51. Murty, *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā*, 1.

a holistic perspective, analyzing social phenomena, and conducting philosophical inquiry. Likewise, we should not forget that in philosophy, it does not matter what we say, but how we say it and whether we have sufficient reason for our proposals. In other words, we should not forget that a traditionalist can be as romantic as a modern thinker. Reflecting on the efforts of Murty, as seen in the present book, we can affirm that he has provided opportunities for dialogue. With these nuanced points, it is now the responsibility of modern researchers to advance their views and engage in debates with traditionalists. It is, indeed, a great pleasure that Murty has found his due place in academia, and undoubtedly, this credit equally goes to Professor Ashok Vohra, who initiated this project in the early nineteen-nineties. He continues his efforts to establish the recognition Murty deserves. For this, we congratulate Professor Vohra for his early project on Murty, in general, and the present volume, in particular. We also extend our congratulations to Professor Ramesh Kotta, the son of Professor K. S. Murty, who is assisting Professor Vohra in bringing forth such intriguing work, which otherwise might have been lost, like many other great works in the history of humanity.

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