



January 1998

Infinity and the Logic of Non-Dualism

Joseph A. Bracken

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bracken, Joseph A. (1998) "Infinity and the Logic of Non-Dualism," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 11, Article 10.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1183>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Infinity and the Logic of Non-Dualism

Joseph A. Bracken, S.J.
Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio

WHETHER ULTIMATE REALITY is to be conceived as a personal God or an impersonal principle somehow at work in the world is an issue which tends to divide the major world religions into opposing camps. Furthermore, even within a given religion philosophers and theologians may differ on how God or Ultimate Reality is to be conceived. Within Vedantic Hinduism, for example, Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja are clearly in opposition on this point even though they share the same basic world view in so many other respects. Likewise, Christian philosophers and theologians have through the centuries disagreed over this issue (e.g., the deeper reality of God in the thought of Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart). At least one of the underlying philosophical issues, moreover, seems to be the question of infinity. If Ultimate Reality is truly transcendent or infinite, i.e., beyond human comprehension, then it cannot simultaneously be personal. For, to be a person would seem to involve being a relational and thus finite reality, one whose identity is fixed by relation to other persons. Ultimate Reality may indeed take on the appearance of personhood for the religious devotee. But in itself it must be beyond the personal in order to remain infinite, in the words of the Chāndogya Upanishad, "one without a second".¹

In this article I will first review the rival positions of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja on this point and then pass to a consideration of the thought of two contemporary Christian theologians, Robert Neville and myself, in recently published books. I will indicate how Neville's position bears some limited resemblance to that of Śaṅkara just as mine

more closely resembles that of Rāmānuja. In any event, my deeper purpose here will be first to illuminate the problem of attributing infinity to God or whatever else is considered to be Ultimate Reality and then, in setting forth my own position, to indicate how one might be able to resolve that problem by reconceiving infinity as a non-dual reality in a special sense, namely, as an immanent activity within entities rather than as some kind of entity in its own right. For, thus understood, it can be represented as something that is necessarily both itself and not itself at the same time.

To begin, then, if one accepts the idea that *Brahman* is infinite, that is, numerically "one without a second", then Śaṅkara appears to be right in maintaining that there must be two distinct standpoints with respect to knowledge of *Brahman*, namely, the absolute and the relative. "The supreme truth is that *Brahman* is non-dual and relationless. It alone is; there is nothing real beside it. But from our standpoint, which is the empirical, relative standpoint, *Brahman* appears as God, the cause of the world."² Logically, nothing else can be the case if *Brahman* is infinite in this sense. All multiplicity must be an illusion. For, if anything else besides *Brahman* really exists, by that very fact it renders *Brahman* finite, less than infinite. It is no longer "one without a second". The fact that this other entity is absolutely dependent upon *Brahman* for its existence and activity, as in Madhva's understanding of the God-world relationship,³ does not alter the fact that it nevertheless exists apart from *Brahman* and thereby limits the alleged infinity of *Brahman*. It is something that *Brahman* is not.

Rāmānuja's qualified non-dualism, to be sure, offers a response precisely to this line of argument. Rāmānuja, it will be remembered, argues that creatures really exist but only as part of *Brahman*, as the "body" of *Brahman*.⁴ Hence, their only reality is to be various finite manifestations of *Brahman*; in this sense, *Brahman* can still be regarded as "one without a second". Cogent as Rāmānuja's argument may be at first reading, it still seems to me that there are logical problems associated with this soul-body analogy for the God-world relationship. For, on the one hand, if *Brahman* is the Inner Self or *antaryāmi* of every created entity such that the entity is totally under the control of *Brahman*, then it would appear that that entity has no ontological independence of *Brahman*, no reality apart from *Brahman*. Rāmānuja, for example, has the following definition of a body in his commentary on the *Brahmā-Sūtras*: "Any entity that a sentient being is able completely to control and support for its own purpose, and the essential nature of which is entirely subservient to that self, is its body".⁵ But, given such a definition, the independent reality of the created entity is quite ambiguous. It appears to be simply a "mode" (*prakāra*) of the divine being; its only meaning or value is to be a finite manifestation of the transcendent reality of *Brahman*.⁶

On the other hand, if one argues that the created entity, e.g., an individual self, is sufficiently independent of *Brahman* to make its own decision in line with its specific *karma* or fate, albeit with the "permission" of *Brahman*,⁷ then the reality or ontological independence of the created entity is assured but *Brahman* is no longer "one without a second". It is rather one among many. Even though it is clearly the Highest Self, it is not the Absolute Self. For it shares existence with finite selves who likewise, at least to some extent, control their own existence and activity. Admittedly, these other entities are dependent upon *Brahman* for that same existence and activity in that they constitute

Brahman's "body." But, just as the human body and soul together make up the composite reality of an organism, so *Brahman* would seem to be only a part, though admittedly the controlling part, of the composite reality which is *Brahman* plus the world of Nature and of individual selves.

It would seem, then, that, given the conventional understanding of *Brahman* as infinite, Śāṅkara presents the more logical case. All appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there can be only one reality. Everything is *Brahman*; and *Brahman* itself is transpersonal, beyond the personal. For personhood is a relational concept. That is, as Martin Buber pointed out in his celebrated work *I and Thou*, I become a person in saying Thou to you as another person. Without a Thou, there is no personal I.⁸ But this once again would imply that *Brahman* is not infinite, "one without a second". Relation to another "I" would render *Brahman* finite.

One may counterargue, to be sure, that infinity when applied to the Hindu notion of *Brahman* or Western notions of God should be understood qualitatively not quantitatively. That is, *Brahman* or God implies the qualitative fullness of being rather than a single all-comprehensive entity. Yet, even if *Brahman*, for example, is conventionally described as *saccidānanda* (being, consciousness, bliss), i.e. more as a state of being than an entity, such a perfect state of being must somehow really exist; it must be the de facto experience of *Ātman* or the Supreme Self. Otherwise, the claim that *saccidānanda* really exists could readily be dismissed as illusory, pure wish-fulfilment on the part of unhappy human beings. Similarly within the Christian tradition, while God is no doubt qualitatively superior to creatures, it does not follow that God is for that same reason infinite in the sense discussed above. For, as long as creatures exist who subjectively exercise some of the perfections objectively possessed by God, then God must be said to share existence

with these creatures and thus is not "one without a second". By their very existence, creatures limit the infinity of God even though they exist only as reflections of the divine being and perfection.

Thus the distinction between qualitative and quantitative understandings of the infinite cannot be sustained under careful scrutiny. Logically, the qualitative understanding of the infinite has to be grounded in a quantitative understanding of the infinite as numerically "one without a second". What is presupposed here, of course, is that the Infinite is somehow an entity: for Śāṅkara, the Absolute Self; for Rāmānuja, the Highest Self; for Christian theologians, God as the Supreme Being. On the other hand, if the infinity of God or *Brahman* were rethought in strictly non-entitative terms, namely, as the reality of an all-comprehensive activity, then the relationship between *Brahman* (or God) and finite entities might well be established on a new basis.

What do I mean, however, by the term "an all-comprehensive activity"? My supposition is that entities exist both in themselves and in dynamic relation to one another only by virtue of an underlying activity which serves as the ontological ground for their existence and activity.⁹ Every entity, accordingly, is dual-dimensional. There is its underlying ontological ground and its existence as an entity in virtue of that same ground.¹⁰ As I see it, this could well be the basis for a new understanding of the much controverted notion of non-duality in the Vedānta tradition. That is, non-duality does not exist in the first place between an infinite entity and finite entities, but rather between the grounding activity at work within an entity and the entity itself as an existing reality. For they are not simply identical; the grounding activity is not an entity, and the entity is other than the grounding activity. At the same time they are not-two since only together, namely, as grounding activity and that which exists in virtue of the grounding

activity, are they one concrete reality.

This grounding activity, moreover, is infinite because it serves as the ontological ground for literally everything that exists. It is, accordingly, not limited by its activity in any single entity. Rather, it transcends them all since it is their common ground or source of existence and activity. Whereas entities are inevitably limited or defined by their relations to one another, this grounding activity is strictly unlimited and therefore infinite since it has no rival. In the words of the Chandogya Upanishad, it is "one without a second". But it is "one without a second" as an activity rather than as an entity. An infinite entity by definition eliminates the possibility of other entities besides itself which really exist. An infinite activity, on the contrary, only makes sense in terms of many entities in dynamic interrelation. The only reason for an infinite activity to exist is, in other words, to empower entities to exist both in themselves and in relation to one another as members of a common world.¹¹

What I am arguing here, accordingly, is that a distinction should be made between *Brahman* and *Ātman* within the Vedantic tradition and between the act of being and God in the Christian tradition. *Brahman* and its counterpart in the Christian tradition, the act of being, are to be considered infinite because they are two names for one and the same ontological reality, namely, an underlying activity which brings into existence and relates to one another all the entities (both divine and creaturely) that exist. *Ātman*, on the other hand, and the personal God of Christian belief represent the Supreme Being, that which possesses this activity by nature and which somehow shares it with all other beings. Thus, as I argue in *The Divine Matrix*, one can and should distinguish in the Vedantic tradition between the cosmic Self or supreme *Ātman*, the *atman* of the individual finite self and *Brahman* as the underlying ontological activity common to them both which links them in an I-Thou relationship.¹²

Similarly, in the Christian tradition, one should distinguish between God, the individual creature, and the act of being common to them both which links them as Creator and creature within a common world.

In *The Divine Matrix*, I devoted a chapter to an analysis of the "Great Sayings" in the Upanishads and to a somewhat more detailed analysis of the writings of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, all in the light of this new understanding of the Infinite as an underlying activity rather than as a transcendent entity.¹³ In the remaining pages of this article, accordingly, I will focus on the writings of two contemporary Christian theologians, namely, Robert Neville of Boston University and myself, in which this notion of the Infinite as an underlying activity rather than as a transcendent entity comes to the fore in the analysis of the God-world relationship from a Christian perspective. I will offer a brief summary of our two positions and then indicate how in a curious way we reflect the different stances taken by Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja on the reality of *Brahman/Ātman*.

In *Behind the Masks of God*, Neville argues that every entity is a "harmony" of essential and conditional features, i.e., of features which distinguish it from other entities and of features which link it to other entities.¹⁴ He then adds: Given the existence of two such entities, each with its own harmony of essential and conditional features,

there must be an ontological ground of mutual togetherness in which each with both essential and conditional features faces the other with both essential and conditional features. I propose that this ground is ontological creativity, creativity of the very being of all things insofar as they are together in any sense whatever.¹⁵

Finally, he also notes that ontological creativity "is the presence of the wholly transcendent God beyond God creating the determinate creatures of the earth but

without determinate character of divinity apart from creating."¹⁶

This somewhat cryptic reference to God Neville spells out in a later book in the following manner. The doctrine of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) has three components; the creative source, the creative act, and the created product. The created product is not only the world of finite entities but the determinate reality of God as their creator. God, in other words, moves from pure indeterminacy to determinate reality in creating the world. The creative act is the ontological creativity referred to above. Finally, the creative source is God as wholly indeterminate apart from creation. Neville's reasoning here is that, if God were a determinate reality apart from creation, then one would have to postulate still another reality beyond God which would provide the ontological reason for God's determinateness apart from creation. Ultimate reality, in other words, must be intrinsically indeterminate; for otherwise one is always faced with the question how it became determinate.¹⁷

Neville's conception of the God-world relationship is, accordingly, in some ways close to that of Śaṅkara. Neville argues that God as creative source is purely indeterminate; in that respect, God as creative source is akin to Śaṅkara's notion of *Brahman*. Likewise, Neville argues that God is creator or a determinate reality only through interaction with creatures, somewhat the way that Śaṅkara argues that *Brahman* is manifest as *Īśvara* (Lord) only in interaction with human beings in search of an explanation for the origin of reality. On the other hand, unlike Śaṅkara, Neville postulates the real existence of finite entities apart from *Brahman* as the indeterminate source of reality and, above all, the real existence of a universal grounding activity which he calls ontological creativity (as opposed to Śaṅkara's more ambivalent position on the status and function of *māyā*).

My own position is certainly more in line with orthodox Christian theology and

possibly more in line with the personalistic theism of Rāmānuja. For I argue that the ontological creativity or grounding activity at work within and among the entities of this world does not emanate from a totally unknown source as Neville claims but from God in terms of the divine nature, that which makes God to be God, even apart from creation. Even God as a personal being or entitative reality, in other words, requires a grounding activity in order to exist; but this grounding activity, as I see it, is the divine nature. It is, so to speak, the hidden dimension of God just as the grounding activity is the hidden dimension of the being or entitative reality of every created entity. Thus, while Neville is correct in saying that only something indeterminate can explain what is determinate, that indeterminate reality is not completely unknown. It can be identified as the divine nature, that which, first of all, makes God to be God and then secondly, through the act of creation, that which makes all creatures both to be themselves and to exist in relation to one another and to God.¹⁸

The possible affinity of my scheme with the thought of Rāmānuja consists in the fact that we both seem to be aiming at a panentheistic understanding of the God-world relationship. That is, we both believe that finite entities exist in God and through the power of God. This is what Rāmānuja evidently had in mind with the metaphor of the world as the “body” of God. Likewise, this is what I have in mind with the argument that creatures exist in and through participation in the divine nature or divine act of being. Where we differ, of course, is that for Rāmānuja finite entities, at least from one perspective, have no reality except as “modes” or finite manifestations of *Brahman* or *Viṣṇu*; for me, on the other hand, finite entities unambiguously have their own real existence and activity apart from God as a transcendent entity even as they depend on the divine nature for that same existence and activity. In my scheme, accordingly, finite

entities are less the “body” of God than co-existent members of a cosmic society with God. The unity of the cosmic society, moreover, is not the unity of God as its transcendent member but the dynamic unity brought about by the divine nature as the underlying principle of existence and activity for all the members, God included. It is the unity of a specifically social reality rather than the unity of an individual entity as in Rāmānuja’s scheme.

To sum up, then, the relationship between the Infinite and the finite would seem to be necessarily non-dual; somehow the Infinite must encompass the finite or it is not really infinite. This would seem to be the enduring insight which a Westerner like myself should gain from pondering the “Great Sayings” out of the Upanishads and the writings of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. What this paper, on the other hand, has argued is that there are two distinct options for what one means here by the Infinite. If the Infinite is understood in quasi-entitative terms, then the position of Śaṅkara would seem to be logically more consistent than that of either Rāmānuja or various Christian theologians like Neville or myself. Because, if an infinite entity is truly “one without a second”, then multiplicity is an illusion. All appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, only *Brahman* really exists.

But, if the Infinite is understood to be an all-comprehensive activity such as Neville and I have urged, then finite entities really exist and, at least within my scheme, a personal God in dynamic interaction with these finite entities really exists. The governing idea here is that there is a non-dual relationship between a universal grounding activity called creativity and the entities which it thereby empowers to exist. Both the grounding activity and the entities really exist unlike the non-dual relationship, first, within Śaṅkara’s scheme between the Absolute Self and finite entities in which finite entities ultimately do not exist and then within Rāmānuja’s scheme in which the relation of finite entities to *Brahman* or

Viṣṇu remains somewhat ambiguous. One can, in other words, equivalently “have one’s cake and eat it too”. Both the Infinite and the finite can be seen as real without logical contradiction. Neither is ultimately illusory.¹⁹

Notes

1. Chāndogya Upanishad, VI, 2, 1-2: in *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, trans. Robert Ernest Hume, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 241.
2. Arvind Sharma, *The Philosophy of Religion and Advaita Vedānta: A Comparative Study in Religion and Reason* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), p. 2. Reference is to T. M. P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism* (1960; reprint, Bombay: Chetna, 1971), p. 147.
3. Eric Lott, *Vedantic Approaches to God* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1980), pp. 109-15. Madhva’s position here is actually quite close to that of classical Western philosophers and theologians like Thomas Aquinas.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50. Cf. also Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 vols. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988): III, 156.
7. Lott, *Vedantic Approaches to God*, p. 108; cf. also Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, III, 159-60.
8. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner’s, 1970), pp. 54, 62.
9. Cf. my recently published book *The Divine Matrix: Creativity as Link between East and West* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 2-3, 52-69.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-51, for a discussion of this notion of ground and existent in the mystical writings of Meister Eckhart and in the philosophy of Friedrich Schelling and Martin Heidegger.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-37, where I establish this idea in terms of the concept of the act of being within the theology of Thomas Aquinas.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-92.
14. Robert Cummings Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay toward Comparative Theology* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 62.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
17. Robert Cummings Neville, *Eternity and Time’s Flow* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 154-55.
18. Cf. *The Divine Matrix*, pp. 52-68, where I provide a process-oriented, trinitarian understanding of this hypothesis.
19. In a recent article, the physicist/theologian Robert John Russell took note of the existence of mathematical infinities in terms of transfinite numbers (e.g., the set of all even numbers *ad infinitum*) and the possible existence of an infinite (i.e., an open or continually expanding) universe (cf. Robert John Russell, “The God Who Infinitely Transcends Infinity: Insights from Cosmology and Mathematics into the Greatness of God”, *The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences Bulletin* 16, n. 4 (Fall, 1996). Hence, if infinity is to be used of God, then God must be understood as the Absolute Infinity which is unknown in itself but yet manifest in and through what God creates (much as the mathematician Georg Cantor postulated an Absolute Infinity as the logical ground of all sets of transfinite numbers). Russell concludes: “Thus the infinity of the universe in terms of space and time reveals something of the God who is their source, while at the same time hiding God, leaving God as unknown and incomprehensible” (10). My suggestion to Russell would be to give further specification to this insight by employing the scheme developed above. That is, God is revealed in creatures because the divine nature is the simultaneously immanent and transcendent ground of their existence and activity. Every creature is thus a genuine reflection of the divine being. Yet God is at the same time incomprehensible to human minds because God’s own entitative reality (i.e., God as simultaneously three and one) “infinitely” exceeds our capacity to understand it.