



January 2001

### Heirarchies in the Nature of God? Questioning The "Saguna-Nirguna" Distinction in Advaita Vedanta

Anantanand Rambachan

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



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Rambachan, Anantanand (2001) "Heirarchies in the Nature of God? Questioning The "Saguna-Nirguna" Distinction in Advaita Vedanta," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 14, Article 7.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1250>

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](mailto:cbauman@butler.edu). For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

# Hierarchies in the Nature of God? Questioning The *Saguna-Nirguna* Distinction in Advaita Vedanta

Anantanand Rambachan  
Saint Olaf College

**THE** Advaita tradition has not merely been the focus of my scholarly work; my personal world-view has been shaped by its insights and I continue to be deeply influenced by its understanding of human existence. One cannot, however, ignore the challenges of claims which are different from one's own and my encounter with other Hindu traditions and other religions has led to a re-evaluation of many aspects of my Advaita heritage. I have chosen, in what follows, to reflect on how my original understanding is being transformed by encounters with other traditions by focusing on the Advaita representation of *brahman* as *nirguna* and *saguna*. A more detailed treatment, both of the problems of this doctrine and the implications, for Advaita, of an alternative expression of the nature of *brahman*, exceeds the limits of this study and is the focus of my current scholarly project. In this study I must be content with sharing some of the specific questions I have asked, selective elements of my critique, and the general direction of my re-assessment of the Advaita doctrine of God.

Contemporary commentators on the Advaita Vedanta tradition commonly distinguish between two orders or levels of the absolute (*brahman*) and propose a hierarchy between these. One is *para* or higher *brahman* and the other is *apara* or lower *brahman*.<sup>1</sup> The higher *brahman* is referred to as *nirguna brahman*, the absolute non-dual *brahman*, transcending time, space, causation and relations. It is beyond all action and change and free from any

multiplicity. *Nirguna brahman*, so characterized, is not responsible for the world-creation, since it is presented as being beyond activity and causation.

On the one hand there is *brahman* which is One only, which is formless, attributeless and actionless. On the other, there is the world of perceivable objects, diverse in name and form. This is the phenomenal world, the world of the many. *Brahman* is one; the world is many, *brahman* is attributeless, *nirguna*; objects are qualified by attributes, they are *saguna*. *Brahman* has no name or form; objects have different forms and names. *Brahman* is inactive and permanent; the objects of the world are active and subject to change. What is the link between the two? What is the *modus operandi* of the transition of the One into the many?<sup>2</sup>

The *modus operandi* or connecting principles between *nirguna brahman* and the world, according to this viewpoint, is *maya*. Without *maya*, *nirguna brahman* cannot make the transition from impersonal consciousness to personal creator.<sup>3</sup> It is *brahman* associated with *maya* which is the origin and source of the world and which is referred to as *saguna brahman*. *Saguna brahman* is also equated with *isvara*, the lord of the creation.<sup>4</sup> *Saguna brahman* is regarded by Advaita interpreters as lower (*apara*) because, among things, it is conditioned and related to the world. "*Saguna brahman* is God as appearance and

## 14 Anantanand Rambachan

not as reality.”<sup>5</sup> *Isvara* is related to the world and defined through that relationship, whereas *nirguna brahman* is *brahman*-in-itself and beyond all definitions. It is higher (*para*) because it is neither cause nor effect.

*Brahman*-in-itself is neither the cause nor the effect of anything. If it is the effect of something else, then it has a beginning, and whatever has a beginning must have an end. It means that it will cease to be eternal. If it is the cause of anything, then it becomes relational. In that case, it is not better than the things of the world which are relational.<sup>6</sup>

The same writer adds that the association of *brahman* with *maya* represents a climb down in the status of *brahman*. Whereas there is no distinction between substance and attributes in *nirguna brahman*, *saguna brahman* possesses attributes (*gunas*) and this is another reason for characterizing *saguna brahman* as lower.<sup>7</sup>

The distinction between a higher and lower *brahman* is not just a mode of speaking about the absolute which is internal to the Advaita tradition. It is applied outside Advaita to evaluate the doctrine of God in other Hindu traditions as well as in other religions. It may not surprise one to note that the God of other Hindu traditions and other religions is generally equated with lower *brahman*. The language is often arrogant and supercilious.

It is *Saguna-Brahman* that men (*sic*) worship under different names and forms, such as Jaweh, Allah, Jesus, Rama Krishna, Siva and a myriad others. It is God as *Saguna-Brahman* that is endowed with such qualities as love, kindness, mercy, and justice. In brief, *Saguna-Brahman* is personal God.<sup>8</sup>

This description of *brahman* as *nirguna* and *saguna* is not without problems and, in spite of its prevalence in Advaita rhetoric, deserves reconsideration. It suggests a bifurcation in the nature of *brahman* which

is inconsistent with its non-dual nature. Such a distinction becomes particularly problematic when there is a hierarchical ordering and one is considered higher (*para*) and the other lower (*apara*). Surely, the nature of *brahman* does not admit of distinctions of any kind and the necessity and purpose of these must be queried and assessed. Is it, for example, a part of *isvara*'s self-consciousness to regard *brahman* as having two levels of being, one higher and the other lower and to identify with the lower? The distinction also, as noted above, has implications for the Advaita understanding of and relationship with other traditions.

It seems to me that the main purpose of the Advaita interpreters, in proposing a higher and lower *brahman*, is to account for the origin of the universe in a sentient and intelligent cause, while, at the same time, “protecting” *brahman* from what the tradition sees to be the drawbacks and limitations of ascribing creatorship and a relationship with the world to *brahman*. Creatorship, and all that it implies in Advaita, is thus attributed to *saguna brahman* while *nirguna brahman* is seen as entirely free from all involvements in the world process except as the ground or substratum (*adhisthana*) of the creative process. Is the Advaita concern about the so-called defects and limitations of ascribing creatorship to *brahman* valid? Is it necessary to address this concern by proposing that *brahman* possesses a two-fold nature, one higher and the other lower?

Let us begin by considering the issue of change and activity. Since the act of creation appears to imply change and activity and *brahman*, by definition, is free from all change and activity, *brahman*, it is so argued, cannot be directly involved in the world process. Such involvement is for the lower or *saguna brahman*. What is most interesting here is that the Advaita tradition which is particularly concerned, in the doctrine of *nirguna brahman*, with deconstructing anthropomorphic understandings of *brahman* raises a problem which is created by the anthropomorphic

imagination. When the human being, limited by space and time engages in action, such action necessarily implies change. The same, however, ought not to be assumed for *brahman* who is the origin of space and time and who brings forth the world without any loss or change of self-nature (*svarupa*). It is not necessary, in other words, to suggest a hierarchical bifurcation in the nature of *brahman*, in order to preserve *brahman*'s nature, since the creative act does not alter or diminish this nature. Advaita interpreters are responding to a problem which, in fact, only arises from understanding the creative act of *brahman* on the analogy of finite human activity.

If we turn to the Upanisads, the primary authoritative sources of the Advaita tradition, we see that the many analogies used to discuss the relationship between *brahman* and the world, such as clay and clay-pots or gold and gold-ornaments, make a similar point.<sup>9</sup> The world does not emerge from *brahman* in the same manner that gold ornaments are manufactured from gold. Gold, is after all, a finite object. The point of the analogy is that the fundamental nature of gold remains the same in spite of the production of multiple ornaments. Since gold is always gold, even with various ornaments, there is no need to propose a distinction in the nature of gold for the purpose of preserving its original nature. In a similar way, since the creation of the world, from *brahman*, does not deplete or alter its nature, an explanation which involves the suggestion of a dual nature is unnecessary.

There are several passages in the Upanisads suggesting that the activity of *brahman* is non-pareil. It is activity without change, as we normally construe it, or loss of nature. Isa Upanisad (4-5) describes the activity of *brahman* in a series of paradoxes.

(The spirit) is unmoving, one, swifter than the mind. The senses do not reach It as It is ever ahead of them. Though Itself standing still, It outstrips those who run. In It, the all intelligent air supports the activities of all beings.

It moves and it moves not; It is far and It is near; It is within all this and It is also outside all this.<sup>10</sup>

"Sitting," says the Katha Upanisad (I.2.21), "he moves far; lying he goes everywhere." In a well-known sequence of verses in the Bhagavadgita (13:15-17), Kṛṣṇa enunciates the mystery of *brahman* as both immanent and transcendent, involved in the world-process and free from its finitude and limits.

Shining by the functions of the senses, yet freed from all the senses, unattached yet maintaining all, free from the qualities yet experiencing the qualities.

Outside and inside beings, those that are moving and not moving, because of its subtlety This is not comprehended. This is far away and also near.

Undivided yet remaining as if divided in all beings. This is to be known as the sustainer of beings, their devourer and creator.<sup>11</sup>

There is a very clear concern in the Upanisads to establish that *brahman* can be related to the world while at the same time not be limited by such relations. Katha Upanisad (II.2.11), for example, uses the analogy of the sun, which, though helping the eyes to see, is not tainted by the defects of the eye or of any other object. The text establishes *brahman* to be in all things and yet be free from the characteristics of the objects of the world. It is thus difficult to agree with the argument, cited above by the well-known Advaita commentator, R. Balasubramanian, that if *brahman* is the cause of anything it becomes relational and, because of such relations, it is no better than things of the world. *Brahman*, as I am contending, can be both intelligent (*nimitta*) and material (*upadana*) cause of the world does not imply limits of the kind alluded to by Balasubramanian. Its relationship to the world, numerous Upanisadic texts emphasize, does not reduce it to a worldly object. Advaita commentators seem to assume, unnecessarily and unfortunately, that the fact of having a relationship with the

world is problematic and find a need, therefore, to propose a lower *brahman* related to the world and a higher *brahman* unrelated to the world. The unique immanent-transcendent nature of the *brahman*-world relationship appears to have been overlooked.

Another reason commonly advanced for distinguishing between *brahman* as *saguna* and *nirguna* and for granting a lower status to *saguna brahman* is the argument that whereas there is no distinction between substance and attributes (*gunas*) in *nirguna brahman*, *saguna brahman* possesses attributes and there exists a distinction of substance and attributes. This contention also requires careful scrutiny since it further underlines the questionable dichotomy in the nature of *brahman*.

*Brahman* is consistently described in the Upanisads as one only and non-dual.<sup>12</sup> This is interpreted in Advaita to mean that *brahman* is free from limitations and distinctions of all kinds. Since *brahman* is all-pervasive, it is free from spatial limitation (*desa pariccheda*) which characterizes created objects. As an entity which has existed and will exist without any loss of nature, *brahman* not subject to time limitation (*kala pariccheda*). Since it constitutes the essential nature of everything that exists, *brahman* is free from the limitation of being one object (*vastu pariccheda*) separate and distinguishable from every other object. It is infinite (*ananta*) in all senses of the term.

The non-dual nature of *brahman* is also understood to mean that *brahman* is free from distinctions (*bheda*) of all kinds. In Advaita, three such distinctions are particularly highlighted. First, there is the distinction obtaining among objects belonging to different species (*vijatiya bheda*) such as plants and animals. *Brahman* is free from distinctions of this kind since there is no object which enjoys a separate ontological nature and existence from *brahman*. In this sense, *brahman* constitutes the essential nature of all that exists. Second, there is the distinction existing among different objects belonging to the same

species (*svajātiya bheda*). *Brahman*, however, is not the name of a species and there are no objects similar to but different from *brahman*. Distinctions of this kind therefore, do not apply. Third, there is the distinction obtaining within a single object comprised of different parts and possessing different characteristics. A cow, for example, has legs, a tail, ears and a head. It also has color, shape and size. It is, in other words, internally differentiated. *Brahman*, on the other hand, has no internal distinctions. It is not a compound of diverse parts and natures and transcends distinctions such as those obtaining between substance and attributes or whole and parts. *Brahman* is indivisible and partless and beyond all definitions which are based on distinctions.

It is in the context of denying differences and distinctions of the kinds described above that we ought to understand the use of the term *nirguna* (lit. without qualities). While this term emphasizes the uniqueness of *brahman* and reminds us that *brahman* cannot be thought of or defined in the manner of limited objects, it does not refute the possibility of the world originating from *brahman*. *Nirguna* particularly denies the distinction of substance and attribute in *brahman*. This does not mean that one should regard *brahman* as a substance with no attributes. It means that *brahman* transcends the categories of both substance and attribute as well as the conventional distinction obtaining between these. *Nirguna* affirms the uniqueness of *brahman's* nature, but does not speak of the possibility of *brahman* as world-creator. To argue, as some Advaita commentators have done, that *nirguna brahman* cannot be the author of creation is to misconstrue the significance of the term.

*Nirguna* is also a potent reminder about the limits of conventional language in describing *brahman*. Words, according to the Advaita commentator, Śāṅkara, define objects in four ways. They do so through categories denoting genus, actions, quality and relation. Words such as *cow* and *horse*, refer to genus, *cook* and *teacher* suggest actions, *red* and *blue* indicate qualities, and

*householder* and *cattleowner* point to a relation or possession.<sup>13</sup> *Brahman* does not belong to a species, and, as already suggested, transcends the distinction of substance and attribute. While it is the source of the world, it does not undergo a change of nature or become related to the world in ways that are limiting or non-transcendent. Since activity and relation generally imply a change of nature, conventional words have to be used cautiously in speaking about *brahman*. The term *nirguna* ought not to be used to disconnect *brahman* from the world and to present it as a bland and static reality incapable, unless conjoined with *maya*, of bringing forth the creation. The essential point is that just as *brahman* can create from itself without suffering a loss of nature or being limited by the world, the creative act does not also affect the essential unity of *brahman's* being which remains free from distinctions of every kind. This is the truth which must be emphasized and which eliminates the need for any hierarchical distinctions in the nature of *brahman*.

The Upanisads clearly distinguish between the mental concepts and images which we have about *brahman* and the reality of *brahman's* nature. The Taittirīya Upanisad twice describes *brahman* as that from which all words, with the mind return, having failed to reach.<sup>14</sup> The Vedas, in speaking about *brahman*, are constrained to use conventional language derived from everyday usage and, since these emerge from our experience of finitude, can never directly signify *brahman*. Words are mere pointers to that which is beyond the meaning of all words and definitions. The concern to differentiate between a lower and higher nature in *brahman* betrays this significant Upanisadic insight about the limits of language in relation to *brahman*.

*Nirguna brahman*, it is argued, transcends the distinction between substance and attribute and is higher, whereas *saguna brahman* possesses attributes and is lower. The point, however, is that if the unity of *brahman's* nature precludes distinctions of all kinds, including, as we have seen, the

distinction of substance and quality, the act of creation does not introduce any distinctions in *brahman*. The nature of *brahman* is the same before and after creation. In relation to creation, we must rightly speak of *brahman* as creator, lord, support, and as omniscient and omnipotent. These are indeed relational definitions of *brahman*. Surely, they must not be construed as implying a transformation in the nature of *brahman* or a "climb down in the status of *brahman*." Creation does not introduce hitherto non-existent distinctions in the nature of *brahman*, including the distinction of reality and appearance.

The problem and limits of language, it must be remembered, are also valid with reference to *brahman* as creator and in relation to the world. Here also, we must be conscious of the difference between the nature of *brahman* and our human metaphorical ways of speaking about *brahman*. Human speech about *brahman*, even when such speech, because of the limits of language, appears to imply divisions in *brahman's* nature does not, in actuality, imply any divisions. To posit omnipotence as an attribute of *brahman* does not mean that *brahman* possesses the attribute of omnipotence in the same way that a lotus has the color blue as its attribute. The act of creation and being in relation to the creation does not alter the unity of *brahman*. The need to distinguish between a higher and lower *brahman* incorrectly underlines this fear.

If the nature of *brahman* is not dual and does not become dual as a result of the creation of the world, we must also question the distinction made between what is intrinsic or essential in the nature of *brahman* (*svarupalaksana*) and what is extrinsic or non-essential (*tatasthalaksana*).<sup>15</sup> Essential or intrinsic is equated with *nirguna* and non-essential and extrinsic with *saguna*. Creatorship and being in relation to the world are regarded as constituting the non-essential nature of *brahman*. The terminology of essential and non-essential is as unfortunate and as unnecessary as higher and lower since it

## 18 Anantanand Rambachan

introduces another distinction in the nature of *brahman*. The need for it also arises from the concern, identified earlier, that creatorship is limiting and defective. How could *brahman* possess non-essential characteristics if the basic distinction between substance and quality does not obtain?

The most unfortunate consequence of the distinction between a higher and lower *brahman* is the reduction in the significance of the world and human existence within it. The value of the world is surely diminished if it is associated with *brahman's* lower nature and if any kind of involvement of *brahman* in the world process is understood as a "climb down" on the part of *brahman*. The same devaluation ensues when the world is regarded as the result of non-essential character of *brahman*. This is an issue which deserves further analysis. The many problems in the hierarchical and supersessionist use of *nirguna* and *saguna* may be avoided by emphasis on the absence of distinctions in *brahman* before and after creation. While we must speak in our limited language about *brahman* in relation to the world, neither our world nor our language compromises the unity and fullness of *brahman*. We may see *nirguna* and *saguna* as complementary and necessary rather than exclusive and hierarchical. These terms point to *brahman* as both immanent and transcendent, as involved in the world-process and unlimited by it. In this view, one does not have to deny creatorship to *brahman* or to bifurcate *brahman* in order to preserve *brahman's* non-duality and transcendence. *Saguna* and *nirguna* are necessary poles in the paradoxical language without which one cannot speak of *brahman*.

## Notes

1. See, for example, R. Puligandla, *Fundamentals of Indian Philosophy*

- (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), pp. 225-226.
2. P. Sandaranarayanan, *What is Advaita?* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1988), p. 46.
3. The significance of *maya* and its relationship to *brahman* and creation in Advaita is a subject which requires critical consideration. Such a discussion, however, is beyond the scope of this study.
4. The word "God" is more appropriately used for *saguna* and not *nirguna brahman*.
5. R. Puligandla, *Fundamentals of Indian Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 225.
6. R. Balasubramanian, "The Absolute and God," in R. Balasubramanian ed., *The Tradition of Advaita* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1994), p. 36.
7. See swami Satprakashananda, *The Universe, God and God-Realization* (St. Louis: The Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1977), p. 77.
8. R. Puligandla, *Jnana-Yoga: The Way of Knowledge* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985), p. 91.
9. See Chandogya Upanisad, Chapter 6 in S. Radhakrishnan ed., and trans., *The Principal Upanisads* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953).
10. Radhakrishnan's translation.
11. The Bhagavadgita, trans. Winthrop Sargeant (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
12. See, for example, Aitareya Upanisad (I.1) and Chandogya Upanisad (VI.2.1).
13. See *The Bhagavadgita with the commentary of Sankara*, trans. A. M. Sastry (Madras: Samata Books, 1979), 13:12.
14. *yato vaco nivartante aprapya manasa saha*.
15. For a discussion of this distinction see Karl H. Potter, *The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: Advaita Vedanta up to Sankara and His Pupils* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), pp. 73-76.