Anirvacanīya-Khyāti and the Ontology of Error: A Conceptual Analysis

Kritika Mishra

Department of CSE, GLA University, Mathura
Corresponding author: mkritika620@gmail.com
Available at https://omniscientmjprujournal.com

Abstract

The problem of perceptual error is indeed fundamental to any theory of knowledge because it presents a dilemma of how cognition can be both a means to truth and a means to illusion. This problem was also faced by ancient Indian philosophers, and they addressed that in theories collectively known as khyātivāda. Among these theories is the most distinct solution proposed by Advaita Vedanta in terms of anirvacanīya-khyāti and how this theory offers what amounts to a "third category" ontology of appearance that undermines traditional notions of truth and falsehood as irreversible facts. A conceptual analysis of anirvacanīya-khyāti will be provided in this paper, along with the demonstration of how this theory offers insights about appearance in general by setting this theory within the Indian tradition in relationship with more recent debates surrounding virtual reality.

Keywords: Khyātivāda, Anirvacanīya-khyāti, Adhyāsa, Ontological dependence, Advaita Vedānta, Virtual Reality.

Introduction

It does not necessarily mean that human thinking is accurate. In many cases, people have a wrong vision, they confuse the appearance and the reality, and make true convictions which are later proved to be false. The question then poses as to how cognition can be true and false and what is the status of that which is perceived to be false in such situations. When one sees a snake in a narrow passage and then later on gets to realize that it was actually a rope, then it is an ontological question that has been brought up. Is the snake something real as it is being perceived? Alternatively, because the experience of fear was physical, why was the nothingness of the snake enough to evoke the fear response? Moreover, the rope, as it was nothingness, why should it be perceived at all? Western philosophy has traditionally approached this problem with a two-fold ontological paradigm, in accordance with which things exist or non-exist. In this paradigm, the error can be both misperception of the existent or a hallucination of the non-existent. Nevertheless, this dichotomy does not explain the givenness of the illusory object.

The more fined-out response of classical Indian philosophy for the same comes in the form of khyativada. The doctrine of anirvacaniya-khyati of Advaita Vedanta is notable in its rejection of the possibility of categorizing the illusory object as being or non-being. This paper will

discuss this doctrine in greater detail, elaborate on its logical mechanics and its application to modern philosophy.

To understand this 'givenness' in a modern context, one might look at the parallels between ancient metaphysics and computational science. As Sharma (2020) notes, 'The Adi Shankra narrates the world as a Non-Dual (Unique) or Maya,' where 'The Maya depicts world as an unreal, illusionary and magic since Rig-Veda period'. This is comparable to how 'Virtual Reality is the simulation of real world by the machine'. Just as a computer integrates sensor data, human cognition involves sensory parts that 'perceive the information and after processing information become reality'. Thus, the human is essentially 'a machine like a computer with higher intelligence' where the brain processes information into a perceived reality.

Significance of the Study

The contemporary usage of this study can be traced back to the dynamically shifting concept of the term "reality" in the digital age. With the onset of a world of full immersion of virtual reality, the boundaries of the real and imaginary start to blend. The standard binary ontologies have problems with classifying a digital object that has causal efficacy (it can influence the emotions and choices of a user) but does not have any physical substance. The conceptual framework of advaita offers a very sound analytical approach to negotiating these borderline phenomena as archetyped by anirvacanīya. The logic of the middle-finding will also lead us to comprehend the nature of these non-physical things, altering the debate on whether "Is it real?" to "How does it depend?"

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the logical basis of the Anirvacanīya-khyāti by using some primary texts of Advaitism.

2. To provide a comparative critique of competing Khyātivāda to highlight Advaita's dialectical strength.

3. To apply the "Indeterminable" framework to the modern-day "Virtual Realism".

4. To address internal philosophical objections to the Anirvacanīya position.

Methodology and Delimitation

The research methodology is qualitative conceptual analysis based on hermeneutics, working from Sanskrit primary texts. The texts considered for this research are Śaṅkara's Brahma Sūtra Bhashya and Vedāntaparibhāsā of Dharmaraja Adhvarin. The study is limited to the epistemological and ontological aspects of error and does not go so far as to learn about the

psychological and neurobiological processes of visual processing, rather concentrating on the "status of the object" post-perception.

Theoretical Framework: The Levels of Being

Advaita Vedānta operates within a three-tier ontological hierarchy (*Sattātraya*).

1. **Pāramārthika Sattā (Absolute):** Non-dual consciousness (*Brahman*), which is never sublated.

2. **Vyāvahārika Sattā (Empirical):** The world of space-time and causality, which is real for all practical interactions until the realization of the Absolute.

3. **Prātibhāsika Sattā (Apparent): (**Dharmarāja Adhvarindra's *Vedāntaparibhāṣā)*. The level of illusions and dreams. These objects are "private" and exist only as long as the specific cognitive error lasts.

In this framework, the "rope" belongs to the *Vyāvahārika* level, while the "snake" is *Prātibhāsika*. The error consists of superimposing the lower level (*Prātibhāsika*) onto the higher level (*Vyāvahārika*).

Analysis and Discussion

1. The Mechanism of Adhyāsa (Superimposition)

Adhyāsa is the foundation theory of Advait. Śaṅkara (8th century CE) defines this in his *Adhyāsa-Bhāṣya* :

"Smṛtirūpaḥ paratra pūrvadṛṣṭāvabhāsaḥ" which means Superimposition is the appearance of something previously seen, which is of the nature of memory, in something else.

For Śaṅkara, error is not a lack of perception, but rather a 'mis-perception' which is a coupling of the real and the unreal. The "Is-ness" or existence of the rope is real, but the "Snake-ness" is a false projection. This is the reason the illusion is not a total void. It has a "backbone" of reality in the form of the rope. Without the rope, there would be no illusion but without the mental projection there would be no snake. This intersection is what gives the unique status of the illusory object. As Amma (2013) clarifies, "According to Sri Sankara, the world is only relatively real. He advocates Vivartavada or the theory of appearance or superimposition. Just as a snake is superimposed on the rope in twilight, the world is superimposed on Brahman. If we get the knowledge of the rope the illusion of snake in the rope will vanish".

2. The Dialectic of Anirvacanīyatvam

Advaita employs "negative dialectic" for establishing the status of the illusory object. The object is neither Sat (Real), nor Asat (Unreal). As S. Mishra (2023) explains: "The Anirvacaniya-Khyātivāda theory of the Indescribable is an Advaita philosophy that proposes

that an object is neither existent nor non-existent, but rather indescribable. The illusory object is a result of ignorance about the underlying reality, and the error is caused by Maya, which is also indescribable". However, this ontology has been called a "strange thesis" by critics like Srinivasa Rao (2011), who argues that Advaitins hold that when ropes are mistaken for snakes, "there are indeed snakes there, but only illusory ones". Rao challenges this by noting the obvious facts that after realizing the illusion, no one believes there was a snake of any kind, and it was just the rope itself that was seen as a snake.

A. Rejection of the Unreal (*Asat*): In Indian logic by Asat is meant what is totally non-existent, like a "sky-flower." A sky-flower can never be an object of immediate perception. However, the snake is likened to Furthermore, Asat is unable to generate causal effects. Since the perceived snake causes real fear and the beating of a heart, it must not be purely Asat. Hence, as it is perceived, it is not non-existent.

B. Rejection of the Real (*Sat*): Reality is simply that which is never contradicted. Since the snake disappears when light is brought to the rope, the snake is sublated. Therefore, it cannot be Sat.

"Bādhitatvāt na sat" (Because it is sublated, it is not real).

Consequently, the object is **Sadasadvilakṣaṇa** (different from both). This is the "Third Category" that breaks the binary of the Law of Excluded Middle.

3. Comparative Critique of Competing Theories

Advaita's position is strengthened when contrasted with other *khyātivādas*:

- **Anyathākhyāti (Nyāya):** The Naiyāyikas (the school of logics) argue that the "snake" is a real snake existing in a forest, perceived here due to a memory-complication. Advaita says with a strong argumentative power: If the snake is there in the forest, then it cannot be the object of an "immediate" (aparokṣa) visual perception here. My eyes are not in contact with the forest; they are in contact with the rope. Therefore, the "forest snake" theory does not explain the immediacy of the error. Advaita instead assumes the formation of a temporary, apparent snake.

- **Ātmakhyāti (Yogācāra):** The Idealists argue the snake is a mental idea projected outward. But the experience is "This is a snake." The "This" (Idam) indicates a locus external to the mind, a locus which the mind cannot just make up without any substratum.

4. Counter-Objection and Reply

The Objection: A critic (probably from the Nyaya school) may say: "If the snake is 'indeterminable', then your theory is only an admission of ignorance." A thing either exists or

it does not exist. It is a logical fallacy to say it is 'neither.' B.K. Matilal (1986) notes that for a Realist, error is not a new creation but a mis-apprehension or **Anyathākhyāti**, where a real object is wrongly related to a real locus.

The Advaitic Reply: Advaita replies by saying that "indeterminability" is not a failure of the philosopher, but an exact characterization of the object's nature. Logic must be the consequence of experience, and not the other way round. If we experience the existence of an object which is perceived (not unreal) but disappearing (not real), the most "logically mature" stance is to allow it a special ontological position. Advaita argues that the binary logic of the critic is too rigid to capture the "fluid" nature of the power of illusion (Maya).

5. Dialogue with Contemporary Digital Ontology

This "fluid" ontology is perfectly suited for Virtual Reality (VR). In his work Reality+ (2022), David Chalmers does something like a "grand tour" of the biggest ideas in philosophy (from the nature of God to the relation between mind and body) by using virtual reality as his primary lens. Chalmers major project is to present a novel perspective on old philosophical questions: How do we know there is an external world? What is the nature of reality?

Using the logic of Anirvacanīya-khyāti on Chalmers' mind-bending analysis, we can twist our understanding of digital being. Chalmers suggests that virtual reality technology doesn't simply entertain us; it throws light on the very structure of our universe. When we examine an object of VR like a sword on the basis of Advaitic frame of knowledge, we get a perfect match:

- The VR Sword is not "Real" (Na Sat): As per Advaitic definition, a real object must be uncontradicted in all the time. In the context of Chalmers "nature of reality" inquiry a VR sword does not pass this test. It cannot have physical wood-cuts in the external world; its "reality" is limited. As the simulation is switched off, the sword disappears. Thus, it is not Vyāvahika (empirical reality).

- The VR Sword is not "Unreal" (Na Asat): However, as Chalmers explores in his tour of big ideas, virtual objects are not "nothing." They possess what Advaita refers to as arthakriyā-kāritva (causal efficacy). In the simulation, the sword functions as a sword. It generates a psychological and "behavioral" reality for the user. It is experienced direct, that is, it cannot be dismissed as a total non-entity like a "sky-flower."

This creates the "Indeterminable" status. Advaita provides "sophisticated nuance" that adds value to Chalmers' opinion. While Chalmers uses VR to ask the question "How do we know there is an external world?", Advaita answers that the "external world" itself might be a higher-level simulation (Maya) superimposed on the ultimate substratum of consciousness. By

identifying the VR sword as Pratibhasika, we can accept the rich experience of digital worlds - an answer to Chalmers' question of how to live a "good life" or have meaningful experiences in a simulation - without making the "ontological error" of regarding these digital objects as independent, absolute realities. The digital object is "ontologically dependent" on the underlying code and hardware just as the illusory snake is dependent on the rope.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Anirvacanīya-khyāti is a sophisticated and balanced account of perceptual error which carefully avoids the pitfalls on either side of the choice between extreme realism or subjective idealism. While realism has difficulty explaining why an illusion is even perceived at all, and idealism has difficulty explaining the external 'givenness' of the error, Advaita Vedanta is able to do so because it does not attempt to fit the experience into a narrow binary. By adding this third ontological category, it provides a framework that is uniquely capable of meeting the epistemological puzzles of an ancient past as well as the digital paradoxes of the modern age.

This perspective acknowledges that the human mind tends to generate appearances that are simply experienced as strongly compelling and functionally "real" to the observer in question, but are still dependent for their ontology on something deeper lying behind. It recognizes that an experience can be very strong and powerful and not necessarily true in the final outcome. As we live in a time of simulations, virtual environments and digitally mediated reality this ancient framework is a remarkably "honest" and practical maps of the human condition. It gives us the logical weapons to appreciate our immediate experiences and not lose the wisdom to look beyond them to the ultimate truth.

References

Adhvarindra, D. (1942). *Vedāntaparibhāṣā* (S. Madhavananda, Trans.). Advaita Ashrama. (Original work published 17th Century).

Amma, K. R. (2013). Concept of Adhyāsa in Sankara's Philosophy. *Journal of Research in Sanskrit*, *5-7*(1), 19–25. https://informaticsjournals.co.in/index.php/sadvidyasanskrit/article/download/46021/30495/95492

Chalmers, David J. *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*.

Matilal, B. K. (1986). *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.

Mishra, Sanjay. (2023). Theory of Error and Perceived Reality in Indian Philosophy Theory of Error and Perceived Reality in Indian Philosophy. 23. 405-415. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369782895_Theory_of_Error_and_Perceived_Reality_in_Indian_Philosophy_Theory_of_Error_and_Perceived_Reality_in_Indian_Philosophy

Rao, Srinivasa, 'Chapter 4 Rope-Snake Illusion', *Advaita: A Contemporary*

Critique (Delhi, 2011; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Sept. 2012), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198079811.003.0004, accessed 2 Jan. 2026.

Shankaracharya. (8th century CE). *Brahma-Sūtra Bhāṣya* (G. Thibaut, Trans.).

SHARMA, VIVEK. (2020). Advaita versus Virtual Reality. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342260103_Advaita_versus_Virtual_Reality