

“This behaviour has for its material cause an unreal nescience and man resorts to it by mixing up reality with unreality as a result of superimposing the things themselves or their attributes on each other.”

Here we have large blocks of ideas being introduced such as ‘material cause’ and ‘unreal nescience’. First we must get the general purport of the sentence and then how the blocks of meaning move within it. Essentially what Sankara is saying is that we have a limited understanding of reality and suppose that it is complete. We accept perception as a fact and go no further to enquire as to how it is possible. Perception has already been presented as superimposition of the inert on the conscious and the conscious on the inert. Simply sticking at that we are left at the stage where we take the gulf between subject and object to be fixed and final. It is our ignorance of the reality of the unity of being and consciousness, an ignorance exacerbated by the material conditions of perception such as location, ambient conditions, presence etc that make us accept a narrow view of the self. I take material conditions to be what Sankara means by ‘material cause’. It is an extension of the base concept of being made out of something or arising out of something.

The text:

“If it be asked; “what is it that is called superimposition?” - the answer is: It is an awareness, similar in nature to memory, that arises on a different (foreign) basis as a result of some past experience.”

He now finds it necessary to give his account of the place superimposition has to play in Advaita. Here I must say that I have found the extensive discussion of the various sorts of confusion, illusion and delusion to be excessive and contrary to the purport of Sankara’s basic use of it. He uses confusion as an analogy for the way in which the object comes to be in the consciousness of the subject and also for the way that the consciousness of the subject ‘covers’ the inert object. He later makes it clear that confusion is not a parallel for superimposition i.e. that all sorts of superimposition must conform to the example of confusion. In fact it is taking an analogy as an example that is the problem. An analogy is like that which it seeks to clarify in one fixed facet only and not in a global way. The facet that is focused on is the coming to be in the mind of an object. That the object in the case of confusion is not really there is not a relevant consideration. It is not the purport of the analogy. Many generations of overinterpretation have befogged this.

Sankara goes on to make it clear, to me at least, that this is his intent.

The text:

“But others assert that wherever a superimposition on anything occurs, there is in evidence only a confusion arising from the absence of discrimination between them. Others say that the superimposition of anything on any other substratum consists in fancying some opposite attributes on that very basis. From every point of view, however, there is no difference as regards the appearance of one thing as something else. And in accord with this, we find in common experience that the nacre appears as silver and a single moon appears as two.”

What we have there is a swift review of all the theories of confusion which were an important topic for the philosophers of the day in their discussion of error. The paradigm or central case of error is taking something to be that which it is not. That is a very interesting discussion in its own right, but what Sankara is using the phenomenon of error for, is to bring out is the notion of the mutual transference of attributes i.e. superimposition. He is not interested in the minutiae of the mechanics of confusion.

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