

# Analytic Panpsychism and the Metaphysics of Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta

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## ABSTRACT

Analytic Panpsychism has been brought into contact with Indian philosophy primarily through an examination of the Advaita Vedānta tradition and the Yogācāra tradition. In this work I explore the relation between Rāmānuja, the 12th century father of the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta tradition, and analytic panpsychism. I argue that Rāmānuja's philosophy inspires a more world affirming form of cosmopsychism where there are different kinds of reality, rather than one fundamental reality of pure consciousness and an ordinary world that is illusory from the perspective of fundamental reality.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Analytic panpsychism* is a contemporary branch of panpsychist research within the analytical tradition of Western philosophy. Within Western philosophy *panpsychism*, literally *psyche* is *everywhere*, is often described as the view that mentality is fundamental and ubiquitous in the natural world.<sup>1</sup> There are two variants of analytic panpsychism: *micropsychism* and *cosmopsychism*. Micropsychism is an atomistic approach to the metaphysics of consciousness. The constitutive version of it holds that facts about non-fundamental macroconscious subjects, such as humans, are to be explained by, and are constituted by, fundamental microconscious entities. Cosmopsychism, by contrast, is a monistic approach to the metaphysics of consciousness. The constitutive version of it holds that facts about non-fundamental macroconscious subjects, such as humans, are to be explained by, and are constituted by, a fundamental cosmic consciousness. The fundamental cosmic conscious substratum is related in some way to each non-fundamental macroconscious subject.

While there are similarities between analytic panpsychism and classical and contemporary forms of Indian panpsychism, there is one main difference. Within Indian philosophy it is common to take the *psyche* in *panpsychism* to be about *consciousness* (*cit*) or *the soul* (*ātman*, *jīva*), and not about *mentality* (*manas*, *buddhi*) as a general kind that covers mental capacities such as memory, rationality, sensation, perception, and judgment. While the mind-body problem is prominent in Western philosophy of mind after Descartes, in Indian philosophy the primary problem is over how

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consciousness is related to the mind-body complex, since the mind (*manas, buddhi*) is often taken to be inert and part of nature (*prakṛti*).<sup>2</sup>

Over the past decade cross-cultural philosophers have begun examining Indian theories of panpsychism in relation to analytic panpsychism. Douglas Duckworth (2017) has explored Buddhist Yogācāra. Miri Albahari (2018, 2020), Luca Gasparri (2019), and Srinivas Siddharth (2020) have explored Hindu Advaita Vedānta. And Ayon Maharaj (2020) has articulated and defended a version of Vivekanand's cosmopsychism. In my (2019) I offered a general account of the Vedānta tradition in relation to analytic panpsychism. I argued that while it is important to consider Advaita in relation to analytic panpsychism, it is also important to investigate other Vedāntic traditions. The purpose of this essay is to bring Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita into conversation with analytic panpsychism because unlike Śāṅkara's Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita does not hold that the ordinary world and individual subjects, qua individual subjects, are illusory. Rather, it holds that conscious finite selves are dependent on fundamental reality, but are nevertheless equally real and distinct from it.<sup>3</sup> Viśiṣṭādvaita offers a world-affirming cosmopsychism, which leads to a more plausible ground for moral orientation.

Rāmānuja (12th century C.E.) was an Indian philosopher and the founder of the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta school of Indian Philosophy. He articulated and argued for a metaphysical system often described as *qualified nondualism*. Viśiṣṭādvaita is a form of realism set against the backdrop of a form of cosmopsychism. On this view there is an internal relation of inseparability (*aprthak siddhi*) between each conscious finite self and the supreme person who is consciousness and has consciousness. The metaphysics of his qualified nondualism is distinct from Descartes's (17th century C.E.) *substance dualism*, which posits two distinct kinds of substances, mind and matter; Spinoza's (17th century C.E.) *dual aspect monism*, which posits an infinite number of aspects, only two of which humans have access to—thought and extension; and Leibniz's (17th century C.E.) *monad pluralism*, which holds that there is a plurality of simple substances that can enter into composite relations.

In §2, using the work of Albahari, I show how Śāṅkara's Advaita intersects with debates in analytic panpsychism. In §3, I show how Rāmānuja criticizes Śāṅkara's epistemology, I argue that his critique gives us reason to depart from Śāṅkara's nondual metaphysics. In §4, I present Rāmānuja's metaphysics in contrast to Śāṅkara's. In §5, I show how the metaphysics of Viśiṣṭādvaita intersects with analytic cosmopsychism. *On my view the advantage* of Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita over Śāṅkara's Advaita is that the former is more realist. Rāmānuja preserves the reality of the ordinary world as experienced by humans instead of explaining it away as an illusion from the perspective of fundamental nondual reality. His view is more plausible because the reality of the ordinary world that humans experience is a necessary condition for knowing about any other reality, be it more fundamental or not, and for explaining the very possibility of illusory experience in the first place. If all of what is experienced at the human level is an illusion, and the self is an illusion as well, then there is neither a path nor a pivot upon which we can come to know any reality, be it more fundamental or not. Rāmānuja's metaphysics provides a foundation for a more complex relation between different kinds of reality and the reality that

embodied humans inhabit. It is superior to Śaṅkara's view that the ordinary world is an illusion because pure nondual consciousness is all that is real.

## 2. THE ADVAITA MODEL AND ANALYTIC COSMOPSYCHISM

Advaita Vedānta is not a monolithic "school" of classical Indian philosophy where every member of it agrees with every other member. Rather, as a school, it consists of a connected chain of thinkers who debated each other over the proper interpretation and understanding of the core doctrine: *reality is fundamentally nondual consciousness*. Central figures in the tradition include: Gauḍapāda (6th century C.E.), Śaṅkara (8th century C.E.), Maṇḍana Miśra (8th century C.E.), Padmapāda (8th century C.E.), Vācaspati Miśra (10th century C.E.), and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (16th century C.E.).<sup>4</sup>

While there are many figures in Advaita with different positions, and many scholarly interpretations of these figures, it is [Albahari's \(2018, 2020\)](#)<sup>5</sup> work that I will be focusing on. First, it is her work more than others that has brought Advaita Vedānta into contact with analytic cosmopsychism in recent times. She aims to show how the metaphysics of the school intersects with the decombination problem and the mind-body problem in Western philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Second, she argues that there are specific benefits of Advaitin metaphysics which offer a route to progress in the philosophy of mind.

Within analytic panpsychism, cosmopsychists face the decombination problem.<sup>7</sup> On my view there are two aspects to the decombination problem.<sup>8</sup> The *modal aspect of the problem* asks: how is it logically, or metaphysically, possible for there to be a cosmic conscious subject where every individual finite mind that is conscious is coherently a part of it? That is: how is it possible for a cosmic consciousness to coherently coexist with and explain individual conscious minds while preserving the reality of individual minds, their subjectivity, their consciousness, and the contents of their consciousness? The *mechanical aspect of the problem* assumes that there is a coherent answer to the modal aspect, and asks: how in fact are individual conscious centers of experience delimited from a cosmic consciousness? That is, given that it is possible for a cosmic consciousness to explain the consciousness of every finite conscious mind, how are those individual minds generated from cosmic consciousness?

Albahari says the following:

[T]he most promising way forward in the mind-body problem—navigating around all the problems to date—is to renounce the pervasive panpsychist supposition that fundamental consciousness must belong to a subject. This extends the reach and scope of consciousness to ground not merely the inner nature of the cosmos, but everything we take to be the world, with its subjects and objects. (2020, 2)

In effect, she is arguing that the modal decombination problem can be avoided by adopting the metaphysics of Śaṅkara's Advaita, according to which two claims hold.

First, nondual consciousness without a subject is fundamental and all that is real. One consequence of the lack of a subject for fundamental consciousness is that

fundamental consciousness is aperspectival, since perspectives attach to subjects, and not to nondual consciousness without a subject. The plausibility of this view depends on arguments or reports from mystics that show that there can be conscious states where there is no subject-object dichotomy as well as thought experiments that show that it is conceivable to have consciousness without a subject, since conceiving of consciousness without a subject doesn't lead to a contradiction in the way that conceiving of a round square does.<sup>9</sup>

Second, all subjects of experience are perspectival, and, as individual subjects, illusory. One consequence of the illusory nature of individual subjects is that their conscious experience, insofar as it attaches to their individual subjectivity, is an illusion. The statement, *Brahman is realized as one's own ātman*,<sup>10</sup> for Śāṅkara's Advaita, means that *there is a nondifference between Brahman and ātman*. Each individual finite self (*ātman*), which inhabits each human subject is nothing other than Brahman consciousness. There is no reality to individual subjects, qua being individuals, and the consciousness that attaches to each of them is nothing other than Brahman consciousness.<sup>11</sup> The reality of human consciousness is nothing other than the reality of Brahman consciousness as nondual consciousness centered on an illusory point in the field of nondual consciousness.

Albahari points out that these two features of Śāṅkara's Advaita, as well as other traditions that fall under Perennial Idealism, offers a way out of contemporary debates about how to solve the modal decombination problem. There are two connected moves. First, *since there is no subject that is conscious at the fundamental level, there is no corresponding need to answer the modal question and show how the one cosmic subject can exist with finite individual subjects*. Nevertheless, there is still the mechanical question, *the illusory subject generation question*: how are illusory subjects generated from what is real—nondual consciousness?<sup>12</sup>

Second, because subjects, qua individuals, are illusory, there is only a demand to account for macroconscious subjects and their subjectivity insofar as it is needed to explain other phenomena, such as perspectival perception. The upshot for contemporary cosmopsychism is that the metaphysics of Advaita avoids the decombination problem, while still holding on to the cosmopsychist assumption of a single unified consciousness as central to explaining consciousness at any non-fundamental level.

However, if one accepts the whole package offered by a specific version of Advaita, Śāṅkara's for example, so as to use its metaphysics to avoid the decombination problem, one must also address the epistemological challenges that the specific version faces. These problems are discussed at length by figures in other Vedāntic schools, such as Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, Dvaitādvaita, Śuddhādvaita, and Acintyabhedābheda.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, non-Advaitic schools of Vedānta also have contributions that could be deployed within the terrain of analytic panpsychism. By considering non-Advaitic schools of Vedānta we can compare the costs and benefits of various systems and how they engage analytic panpsychism.

After reflecting on how Advaitin metaphysics intersects with analytic philosophy of mind, in my (2019) I formulated a question about the metaphysics of the self and consciousness in relation to one another: *which illusion, if any, should we accept?*

**TABLE 1 Symmetric and asymmetric positions regarding illusionism.**

Asymmetric Positions	Symmetric Positions
<i>Type C</i> Illusionism. The self is real, but consciousness is an illusion.	<i>Type D</i> Illusionism. The self and consciousness are an illusion.
<i>Type S</i> Illusionism. Consciousness is real, but the self is an illusion.	<i>Type R</i> Realism. The self and consciousness are both real.

Consider the possible answers in [Table 1](#). Here I shall not discuss illusionism about consciousness, since although it is currently a view defended in some philosophical quarters—e.g., [Dennett \(1988, 1991\)](#) and [Frankish \(2017\)](#)—all Vedāntic schools take consciousness to be real.

Some analytic cosmopsychists, such as [Goff \(2017\)](#), appear to be type R realists. The goal within the analytic cosmopsychist camp is to solve the modal aspect of the decombination problem where cosmic consciousness is a real subject and macroconscious creatures, such as humans, are real subjects. Advaitins hold a version of type S illusionism. The nondual self (*ātman*) is real because it is identical to Brahman, which is the only thing that is real. However, each individual self, qua individual, is an illusion born out of ignorance. Advaitins avoid the modal aspect of the decombination problem. They only need to solve the mechanical illusory subject generation problem. Viśiṣṭādvaitins offer a version of type R realism where there are different kinds of realities, each of which are equally real. Given the advantage that Albahari points to in Śāṅkara's Advaitin metaphysics, what reasons are there for rejecting Śāṅkara's Advaita? <sup>14</sup>

### 3. RĀMĀNUJA'S CRITIQUE OF ŚĀṅKARA'S ADVAITA

Śāṅkara's Advaita holds to an absolute form of idealism: *Brahma satyam jagannmithyā jīvo brahmaiva nā' paraḥ*. Martin [Ganeri \(2015\)](#) provides a nice account of Rāmānuja's understanding of Advaita, which incorporates Śāṅkara, but also includes engagement with later Advaitins.

As Rāmānuja depicts it, Advaita teaches: that ultimate reality, known in Vedānta as Brahman, is pure consciousness, without really distinct attributes (*nirguṇa* or *nirviśeṣa*), immutable and not a real agent; that the finite self (*ātman*) within each human being is strictly identical with Brahman; and that the soteriological goal is to realize this identity as the knowledge that meditation on the Upaniṣadic texts produces. Such realized knowledge liberates the self from the cycle of actions and material birth (*samsāra*). This form of Advaita also maintains that the world, which appears to be comprised of a real multitude of finite and distinct selves, who are agents of knowledge and action, and nonconscious material entities is the product of ignorance and cognitional error (*avidyā*), an illusory manifestation (*vivarta*) of Brahman, and indeterminate in itself as either real or unreal. From the perspective of the liberated self, however, the only thing that is properly real is Brahman itself. ([Ganeri 2015, 7](#))

This absolute form of idealism holds:

- Brahman is the sole reality;
- the world, qua world, is unreal; and
- the individual soul is nondifferent from Brahman.<sup>15</sup>
- The concept of ignorance (*avidyā*) is central to the explanation of how these features hold together consistently. It has six characteristics:<sup>16</sup>
- It is beginningless (*anādi*);
- it can be terminated by knowledge (*jñāna-nivartya*);
- it is a positive entity (*bhāva-rūpa*);
- its ontological status is neither real nor unreal (*anirvacanīya*);
- it has the two powers of concealment and projection (*āvaraṇa* and *vikṣepa-śakti*);<sup>17</sup>
- its locus (*āśraya*) is either *Brahman* or *jīva*.

The Śāṅkaran use of ignorance as an explanatory tool is problematic. Kaplan (2017) goes so far as to say that ignorance is the hard problem for Advaita. On my understanding of Kaplan's use of "the hard problem" he means the following. Just as Chalmers' hard problem of consciousness forces philosophers of mind to face the fact that a coherent theory of consciousness must explain why there is experience at all, the hard problem of ignorance forces Advaitins to face the fact that a coherent theory of how an illusory subject is generated must explain how the ontology of ignorance allows it to function in the epistemic role that Śāṅkara uses it for: explaining the production of individual finite selves as illusory subjects of consciousness.

Through his Seven Great Untenables (*Sapta-vidhā Anupapatti*), Rāmānuja criticizes the Advaitin (Śāṅkara's *Advaita*, hereafter) use of ignorance.

- A. The very nature (*svarūpa*) of *avidyā* is riddled with contradictions.
- B. The description of *avidyā* as inexplicable (*anirvacanīya*) is untenable.
- C. No valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) supports the Advaitin theory of *avidyā*.
- D. The locus (*āśraya*) of *avidyā* can neither be ultimate reality (*Brahman*) nor the soul (*jīva*).
- E. It is unintelligible to claim that *avidyā* can obscure (*tirodhāna*) the nature of *Brahman*.
- F. The removal of *avidyā* by right knowledge (*jñāna-nivartya*) is untenable.
- G. The very conception of the cessation of *avidyā* (*avidyā-nivṛtti*) is absurd.

I will offer a brief exposition of (A)–(D) to show how epistemically incoherent the Advaitin use of ignorance is. While my presentation does not follow Rāmānuja's own order, it provides a coherent story on which one problem leads into another in a series. I begin here with the problem of the locus based on the question: where is the locus of ignorance? This leads into an immediate problem for Śāṅkara's Advaita.

### The problem of the locus of ignorance

1. Ignorance requires a locus, since in the case of a person who is ignorant there is a locus.
2. Either Brahman or a conscious finite self is the locus of ignorance, since there is nothing other than these.
3. A conscious finite self cannot be the locus of ignorance, since it would have to come into existence at the same time as Brahman. A conscious finite self only comes into existence after Brahman is covered with ignorance. Thus, a conscious finite self is the consequence of Brahman's ignorance.<sup>18</sup>
4. Brahman cannot be the locus of ignorance, since self-luminosity is its nature, and ignorance and self-luminosity cannot exist in the same locus just as light and darkness cannot exist in the same locus.<sup>19</sup>
5. So, the Advaitic doctrine of ignorance is incoherent.

Rāmānuja describes the Advaitin position as follows:

*Brahman*, the non-differentiated Consciousness, is the only reality, and all this manifoldness is imagined in It alone and is false. Due to the effect of beginningless ignorance which is unspeakable, this manifoldness is wrongly imagined in the nondual *Brahman*, which is pure consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

In the argument above (1) is true because ignorance is located. For example, when Nitin is ignorant of something Anita knows, we are assigning the reality of ignorance to Nitin and denying it of Anita, both of whom are different loci of knowledge and ignorance. (2) is true because were a conscious finite self to be the locus of ignorance, it would follow that the conscious finite self comes into existence at the same time as Brahman. But Brahman is the cause of a given conscious finite self being ignorant of its true nature. In addition, since Brahman is self-luminous consciousness, Brahman cannot be the locus of ignorance. For were Brahman the locus of ignorance, its self-luminosity would be incoherent. What could self-luminosity be, if Brahman is simultaneously, in virtue of being the locus, ignorant as well as self-luminous?

An Advaitin could respond by emphasizing that ignorance is *unreal*, and thus doesn't require a locus. They can further argue that because each conscious finite self is nondifferent from Brahman, if Brahman is a locus, so too is each finite self.<sup>21</sup>

Whether this response is satisfactory depends on the tenability of the claim that ignorance is unreal. If thinking about how individuals are ignorant is not sufficient for thinking about how Brahman can be the locus of ignorance, then of course the reality of Nitin's ignorance cannot be used to criticize how Brahman could be the locus of ignorance. Nevertheless, for Rāmānuja, the nature of ignorance deployed by Advaitins is contradictory, which leads to a further problem.

### The contradictory nature of ignorance<sup>22</sup>

1. If ignorance is intelligible, then it is either real or unreal.
2. If ignorance is real, then dualism follows, but Advaita is nondualism about Brahman; in addition, if it is real, it exists for all times and cannot be destroyed.
3. If ignorance is unreal, then it must be unreal as either (i) the cognizer (*draṣṭā*), (ii) the object which is cognized (*dr̥śya*), or (iii) the knowledge of the cognition (*dr̥śti*). But it cannot be any of (i)–(iii).
4. Therefore, ignorance is not intelligible.

Rāmānuja defends (3) by pointing to an infinite regress:

The unreal ignorance cannot be the knower, the object known, or the perception connecting the two, for in that case there must be some other ignorance which is the cause of this unreal ignorance even as this first ignorance is the cause of the unreal world. That second ignorance must have a third ignorance which gives rise to the second and so on *ad infinitum*.<sup>23</sup>

The basic idea of Rāmānuja's argument is that first-order ignorance cannot reside in either the knower, the object known, or the perception linking the two. For if it did another unreal ignorance would have to be the cause of the first-order ignorance, and given the similar structure, knower, known, perceptual link, the problem would rearise.

Even though the argument concludes with the claim that ignorance is unintelligible, the debate is not over, since it must further be shown that ignorance being unintelligible is a problem itself. While it is typical in analytic philosophy to accept that the unintelligibility of an explanation is sufficient for rejecting it, this is not sufficient in the dialectic between the Advaitins and the Viśiṣṭādvaitins, since Advaitins hold that ignorance is indescribable (*anirvacanīya*). Rāmānuja finds this to be problematic as well. He argues as follows.<sup>24</sup>

### On knowing what is indescribable

1. Suppose objects are either real (*sat*), unreal (*asat*), or indescribable (*anirvacanīya*).
2. To claim that an object fits under one of these categories is to claim that one can also know that it fits under one of these categories.
3. Suppose ignorance is indescribable.
4. It follows that there would be no way of knowing ignorance.

Within the rules of debate found in Indian philosophy the argument above leads to the question: what is an example of something that is real and known through the subject-object dichotomy expressed in the knower-known relation? For Śāṅkara all that is real is nondual pure consciousness, which is not known through a subject-



object dichotomy because it is nondual. It is common, if not a rule, in cross-traditional debates that an example is admissible only if the example and the relevant ways one can know it are accepted by both schools. So, what is an example of something that is real and known through the subject-object dichotomy that Rāmānuja can provide to an Advaitin? Brahman is an example that could be tried. However, while Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja both accept that it is real, their understanding of Brahman is different. Thus, even Brahman won't work. The remaining issue would be over how one knows that Brahman is real. Brahman as an example of something real would fail to convince an Advaitin, since there is no knowledge of Brahman only knowledge that Brahman, as it is, is nondual consciousness. One doesn't have knowledge of Brahman in the form of the knower-known or subject-object relation. Rather, a conscious finite self is nondifferent from Brahman who is nondual consciousness and knowledge. Knowledge of Brahman does not take the form of the knower-known relation. As a consequence, there are no real things that Rāmānuja and Śāṅkara can agree we know about in the same way.<sup>25</sup>

While I have not shown that Rāmānuja's critique of Śāṅkara's Advaitin epistemology is decisive, I have shown that the use of ignorance within Advaita as a way to explain how illusory subjects are generated is plausibly incoherent.<sup>26</sup> This problem within Śāṅkara's epistemology is a reason to abandon the attendant metaphysics he offers.

#### 4. THE METAPHYSICS OF RĀMĀNUJA'S VIŚIṢṬĀDVAITA IN CONTRAST TO ŚĀṅKARA'S ADVAITA

Rāmānuja offers an alternative interpretation of the Upaniṣads from what Śāṅkara provides. [Martin Ganeri \(2015\)](#) succinctly presents the core of Rāmānuja's view.

Rāmānuja argues instead that the Upaniṣads teach that Brahman is the personal God or Lord of theistic religion (Īśvara), of whom a number of distinct attributes can be predicated positively (*saḡuṇa* or *saviśeṣa*). The world made up of finite conscious and nonconscious entities is real and forms the body of Brahman, though these entities are wholly dependent on Brahman for their existence and activities at all times. The soteriological goal is the realization of the finite self's proper relationship with Brahman as a dependent entity independent of any connection with a material body and of the blissful experience of an eternal communion of knowledge and love with Brahman. ([Ganeri 2015](#), 7–8)

Both Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja accept that *Brahman is realized as one's own ātman*. However, they interpret it differently.<sup>27</sup> The former uses numerical identity to explain the relation between Brahman and ātman, while the latter uses the internal relation of inseparability (*apr̥thak siddhi*). *Viśiṣṭādvaita* is often translated as *qualified nondualism*. An alternative translation is *the organic unity of the many in the one through individualized embodiment and enlivening*.<sup>28</sup> I prefer the alternative translation because it captures Rāmānuja's use of the internal relation of inseparability as a central feature of his metaphysics.<sup>29</sup> There are several differentia that separate Advaita from Viśiṣṭādvaita.<sup>30</sup>

### Differentia between Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita

- i. There is a distinction between Brahman without attributes (*nirguṇa*) and Brahman with attributes (*saguṇa*). Advaita only accepts Brahman without attributes as being real, any attributes of Brahman are in appearance only. Viśiṣṭādvaita accepts Brahman with attributes.
- ii. Both Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita hold that there is a primordial self (*paramātman*). However, Advaita interprets the primordial self as nondual consciousness. It holds that Brahman is nondual consciousness. Viśiṣṭādvaita interprets the primordial self as the supreme person (*puruṣottama*). It holds that Brahman is Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa who has a body of matchless perfections.<sup>31</sup>
- iii. In Viśiṣṭādvaita the supreme person is (constitution) consciousness and has (possession) consciousness. Consciousness without a self is impossible. In Advaita consciousness without a self is possible, since Brahman is nondual consciousness.
- iv. In classical Indian metaphysics there is a distinction between a mode (*prakāra*) and the mode possessor (*prakārin*). For example, the color of a rose, and the rose that possesses the color. In Viśiṣṭādvaita the kind of metaphysical dependence between a mode and its possessor is used to hold that the supreme person is strictly distinct from each conscious finite self and all nonconscious matter even though they are inseparable from the supreme person. Advaita holds that Brahman is strictly identical to each finite self, and does not make use of the distinction between a mode and its possessor.<sup>32, 33</sup>
- v. Viśiṣṭādvaitins disagree with Advaitins over how the criterion for “real” should be used. For Advaitins everything that passes in time is unreal/illusory. Impermanence is the mark of unreality. For Viśiṣṭādvaitins impermanence does not entail unreality. For example, both material bodies and conscious finite selves are temporally bound and impermanent, qua material bodies and finite selves, yet they are real and inhabit a different kind of reality than what the supreme person inhabits.

I will now develop these points in more detail.

According to Rāmānuja, the primordial self (*paramātman*) is not nondual consciousness without a subject as Śaṅkara holds. Rather, the primordial self is Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, the supreme person (*puruṣottama*) who is consciousness and has consciousness.<sup>34</sup> The supreme person has a layered reality: the supreme person, conscious finite selves, and nonconscious material bodies. Conscious finite selves are differentiated from material bodies by the fact that the latter are subject to mutability and decay while the former are not. The essential nature of a conscious finite self is knowledge (*cit*) and bliss (*ānanda*), neither of those can change. However, the knowledge component of a conscious finite self, in its embodied state within a material body, can expand or contract depending on its karma. For Rāmānuja each conscious finite self in its embodied state is subject to diachronic knowledge change where one and the same finite self is said to have a change in knowledge over time

depending on its karma. The supreme person is ontologically distinct from conscious and nonconscious beings because it is transcendent, even though the latter are inseparable from it.<sup>35</sup> For Rāmānuja there is a dependence relation between the three layers. The hierarchy that obtains in virtue of the dependence relation is with respect to perfections, and not with respect to being more or less real.<sup>36</sup> Table 2 summarizes the kind of entity, its rank in the system, what differentiates it from other things, and what it depends on.

**TABLE 2** Kinds of entities.

Entity	Rank	Differentia	Dependence
Material Body (MB)	Low	Inner and Outer Transformation	Dependent on (FS)
Conscious Finite Self (FS)	Middle	Essential Nature Does Not Change. However, the knowledge of any conscious finite self, in its embodied state, expands or contracts depending on its karma.	Dependent on (SP)
Supreme Person (SP)	High	Transcendent and Immutable	Nondependent

Rāmānuja holds that everything is dependent on the supreme person. The dependence relation is expressed through the Sanskrit term *ādihāra* which means *ground/support*.<sup>37</sup> The supreme person is the ground of each finite self and its material body, as well as the world constituted out of the totality of material bodies and finite selves. The supreme person is the ground of these in a hierarchical relation. The hierarchy holds that there are different kinds of realities where the kinds are equally real. To understand Rāmānuja's view it will be useful to contrast it against Śāṅkara's.

Śāṅkara holds that there are three levels of reality where one reality is more real than another. There is unreality (*prāthibhāsika*), relative reality (*vyāvahārika*), and absolute reality (*pāramārthika*). The first is the most unreal, while the last is the most real. However, Śāṅkara's position, and that of many Advaitins, can be confusing, since they hold that Brahman, understood as nondual consciousness, is fundamental and *all and only that which is real*. So, while Advaitins talk as if there are levels of reality, they ought best to be understood as talking about different levels of illusoriness. The rope-snake illusion goes away as soon as you look away, while the illusion of the material world only passes upon realizing that one's own finite self (*ātman*) is

identical to nondual consciousness (*brahman*). There is only one reality, and levels of illusion. There aren't different kinds of reality that are equally real.

On Rāmānuja's view, the picture is different. Elisa Freschi offers one way of seeing Rāmānuja's view of the nature of reality based on his views about God, knowledge, and intentionality.<sup>38</sup>

1. God is real and one of his essential properties is knowledge.
2. Knowledge is essentially intentional, and cannot be separate from the knower, just as shining cannot be separated from the sun.
3. God's knowledge is of the world, which is his body, and all that it contains, such as conscious finite selves and nonconscious entities.
4. If  $x$  is real,  $x$  has  $p$  as its body, and  $x$  knows  $p$ , then  $p$  must also be real.
5. So, the world, the body of God, and all that it contains is real as well.

Unlike Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja holds that there are different kinds of reality, which are equally real.<sup>39</sup> The kind of reality an entity inhabits is marked by duration. The body passes in time, each conscious finite self as consciousness and bliss does not. The supreme person, of which, each finite self is a part, is itself beyond time.

With respect to grounding (*ādhāra*) the following inference pattern, which Śāṅkara would appear to accept, does not hold for Rāmānuja.

X is the ground of Y.

So, Y is unreal or illusory, but X is real.

Rāmānuja does not hold that each conscious finite self is illusory, qua finite self, and only the supreme person is real. Instead, Rāmānuja endorses the following inference pattern.

X is the ground of Y.

So, Y is a different kind of reality, and equally real to that of X, but not unreal or illusory.

As a consequence:

Each MB is grounded in its corresponding FS in the FS's embodied state.

Each FS is grounded in SP.

So, each MB has a different kind of reality than its corresponding FS, but is equally real.

And FSs inhabit a different kind of reality than SP, although they are equally real.

The core of Rāmānuja's conception of ground is that of a locus and support in an *enlivening emanation* sense where the supreme person sustains the world and its

inhabitants. The conception of ground is not spatial for Rāmānuja. It is not as if each conscious finite self with its material body is spatially supported by the supreme person. Rather, each conscious finite self is metaphysically dependent on the supreme person for emanation and enlivening. The relation that obtains between finite selves and the supreme self is one of sustaining force, emanation, and manifestation.

Let me now clarify the kind of panpsychism that is to be found within Rāmānuja's philosophy based on his conception of God in relation to the world, which is the body of God and contains everything that exists, either animate or inanimate. All entities are dependent on the supreme person. However, inanimate entities don't have souls, and thus they are only sustained by the supreme person. Animate entities, by contrast, do have souls and are animated by them, but are nevertheless dependent on the supreme person. Thus everything, animate or inanimate, is sustained by the supreme person. Nevertheless, finite souls exist as separate entities, which animate the material bodies they are embodied in. They are still parts of the supreme person in a specific sense.

As a consequence, of his overall view of God and the world, which is his body, Rāmānuja does not think that consciousness can occur without a self. He offers the following analogical argument.

### Finite-self to supreme-self analogy

1. The corresponding material body of a conscious finite self is a mode of the finite self in the sense that the finite self is the support, controller, and principal of its corresponding material body, which is its accessory.
2. The material world is to the supreme person as a corresponding material body is to the conscious finite self.
3. So, the material world is a mode of the supreme person in the sense that the supreme person is the support, controller, and principal of the material world.

Rāmānuja's uses a definition of "body" (*śarīr*) and an account of the relation between a mode and a mode possessor to make his argument work.

Rāmānuja holds that "body" means *any substance which a conscious being is capable of completely controlling and supporting for its own purposes*. Thus, "body" refers not only to the material structure of a human being, but more broadly to any substantial entity, whether physical or not, that can be controlled and supported. As a consequence, the relation between the finite self and its material body is homologous to the relation between the supreme person and the material world, which is the body of the supreme person.<sup>40</sup> The material body of a finite self is dependent on the finite self just as a mode is dependent on the possessor of the mode. Thus, by analogy the material world is a mode of the supreme person as its mode possessor.<sup>41</sup>

For Rāmānuja the distinction between a mode and the possessor of the mode has both an ontological and teleological dimension as specified in [Table 3](#).<sup>42</sup>

These two dimensions show how the mode-mode possessor relation explains the material and efficient cause of the world. The supreme person is consciousness and

**TABLE 3 Ontological and teleological aspects.**

Aspect	Mode-Mode Possessor Relation
Ontological	A mode cannot be realized apart from its mode possessor. Thus, the material world is the manifestation of the supreme person, but cannot be realized without the supreme person. The supreme person is the material cause of the material world.
Teleological	Just as an earring's nature is not fully explained without reference to an earring bearer, from whom and for whom earrings exist, the material world is not fully explained without reference to the supreme person, the possessor of the material world, as a mode of it, from whom and for whom, the world exists. The supreme person is the efficient cause of the material world.

has consciousness where each conscious finite self is a mode of the supreme person. The existence of each is explained both ontologically and teleologically.

**5. HOW RĀMĀNUJA'S VIŚIṢṬĀDVAITA, IN CONTRAST TO ŚAṄKARA'S ADVAITA, INTERSECTS WITH ANALYTIC PANPSYCHISM**  
 Recall from §2 that there are two aspects to the decombination problem for cosmopsychists. The *modal aspect of the problem* asks: how is it logically, or metaphysically, possible for there to be a cosmic conscious subject where every individual finite mind that is conscious is coherently a part of it? The *mechanical aspect of the problem* assumes that there is a coherent answer to the modal aspect, and asks: how in fact are individual conscious centers of experience delimited from a cosmic consciousness? The modal question is about possibility, the mechanical question is about generation.

Śaṅkara is an illusionist about the empirical self.<sup>43</sup> His metaphysics avoids the modal decombination problem by eliminating the reality of subjects at both the fundamental and nonfundamental level. As a consequence, Śaṅkara faces the mechanical decombination problem: how are illusory selves at the empirical level generated? As we saw he tries to use ignorance to solve the generation problem.

Rāmānuja is a realist about the self. His metaphysics faces the modal version of the decombination problem by holding that the self at the empirical level is real. As a consequence, he must answer: how is it possible for finite conscious selves to be real and yet explained by a supreme consciousness?

The answer begins with the idea that the supreme person is fundamental reality where the material world, consisting of both conscious and nonconscious matter, is the body of the supreme person; and each finite self is a mode of the supreme person. His answer to the modal question is that each finite self is strictly distinct from the supreme person because it is only a mode of it. The top-down perspective is the

perspective of the supreme person where each conscious finite self is inseparable from the supreme person. The bottom-up perspective is the perspective of a conscious finite self where the material world is seen to be distinct from the supreme person because conscious selves that are non-fundamental are imperfect and finite, while the supreme person, who is fundamental, is perfect and infinite.<sup>44</sup>

A novel feature of Rāmānuja's answer is the doctrine of the internal relation of inseparability (*apṛthak siddhi*). It holds that each finite self is inseparable from Brahman because each one bears an adjectival relationship to Brahman, rather than one of numerical identity. When an adjectival relation holds between two things, one is the possessor of the other, but the two are nonseparable. Each finite self is inseparable from the supreme person, but nevertheless, distinct from it, so that the imperfections of any given finite self do not affect the perfection of the supreme person.<sup>45</sup> In virtue of the real distinction between the supreme person and each finite conscious self, there need not be any *transparency*<sup>46</sup> between the supreme person and any finite conscious self. Individual finite conscious selves are real, separate, and the contents of their consciousness are not transparent to the supreme person. Rather, there is an organic unity between conscious finite selves and the supreme person. The notion of "organic unity" can be further explained through embodiment.

Rāmānuja holds that each finite self is an attribute that is supported by the supreme person because each finite self is a mode of the supreme person who is the mode possessor. The relationship is asymmetric since the supreme person sustains and supports each finite self, but no finite self sustains the supreme person. Because the relation is one of sustaining as opposed to delimitation, we again get the result that it is not necessary that the supreme person has transparent access to the contents of any conscious finite self. While the supreme person provides consciousness, since it both is consciousness and has consciousness, it does not delimit. Rather, it sustains. In addition, the material world, which is constituted out of finite conscious selves and nonconscious material bodies, is not a spatial part of the supreme person. Rather, it is a part in the sense of being possessed by the supreme person. Rāmānuja emphasizes embodiment as a relation between the supreme person and the material world. Each finite self is embodied in the supreme person. Embodiment makes the body an enlivening and sustaining support. For it is possible for  $x$  to support  $y$  without  $y$  being sustained by  $x$ . For Rāmānuja, the supreme person is not a support in a spatial locus sense, rather, the supreme person is a sustainer of each finite self in an enlivening sense. Embodiment and inseparability explain the organic unity between the material world and the supreme person.

Śāṅkara's Advaita drops the assumption that consciousness requires a subject at the fundamental level. He holds that individual subjects, qua individual, are illusory. Brahman is nondual consciousness. Each finite self, qua individual self, is an illusion because it is identical with Brahman. There simply are no real subjects in Śāṅkara's system.

Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita drops the assumption that everything is either fundamentally real or illusory. There are different kinds of reality, yet these different realities are equally real because they are all parts, in a nonspatial sense, of the supreme

person in an organic unity. The supreme person is in a transcendent reality, while each conscious finite self is within temporal reality.

Unlike Śāṅkara's Advaita, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita does face the mechanical *stable-subject individuation problem*.<sup>47</sup> A solution to the stable-subject individuation problem requires showing how each conscious finite self can be sustained by the supreme person as a part of it in a nonspatial manner while retaining the conscious finite self's *stability* over time within the kind of reality it inhabits. The temporal stability of a conscious finite self, as one and the same thing, must be recovered in a way that is consistent with what Rāmānuja thinks can change for it in its embodied state: knowledge.<sup>48</sup>

I concede that Albahari is correct to hold that knowledge of nondual consciousness must come from mystical experience, and that reports from mystics do provide a way for one to move around the modal decombination problem by providing evidence for nondual consciousness.

However, in contrast to her Śāṅkara-Advaitin inspired view, I hold that nondual consciousness is simply one kind of consciousness. It is found in one kind of reality: nondual reality. Arguably, nondual reality cannot support intentionality, since intentionality is dual. Dual consciousness has a subject-object structure. It is suited for another kind of reality. A reality where intentionality, in addition to phenomenal experience, is found. One can simply follow Rāmānuja and hold that these are two distinct kinds of reality where a complex relation holds between them. Furthermore, while it is logically possible for there to be consciousness without a self, it is metaphysically impossible for consciousness to exist without a self with respect to changes in knowledge. The primary reason for this is that epistemic possibility (the modality pertaining to knowledge growth and decay) has to do with what is possible for a subject to know, given what they already know. As a consequence there must be a subject that can expand and contract with respect to knowledge. This subject must exist for longer than a durationless moment, since contraction and expansion of knowledge takes place for a subject as one in the same over time. However, the subject need not be permanent in time.

Finally, to hold that the individual self, qua individual, is an illusion and the world that it experiences an illusion is not acceptable to me. At least one reason is that this view requires a radical departure from ordinary metaphysics. It is a high revision of our ordinary understanding of the nature of reality embedded in the metaphysics of everyday objects. A revision of this kind is only justified given very strong evidence, something which I take to be lacking. Some might think that quantum field theory gives us reason to believe in illusionism about the material world we experience because it posits fields as fundamental and not, for example, material bodies. I am skeptical as to whether the best interpretation of quantum field theory requires us to hold that the ordinary world we experience is an illusion because fields are fundamental. Again, one can simply hold that there are different kinds of reality where both are equally real. Fundamentality need not force a graded view of levels of reality in all cases.<sup>49</sup> My skepticism about illusionism also derives from moral considerations. Illusionism about the ordinary world leads to a moral and existential outlook that is nihilistic. What is the point of existence and of being moral, if it is all



an illusion? Illusionism is neither existentially nor morally orienting. It brings out pure anxiety as to what our purpose could be. I believe it is better to hold that there are different kinds of realities because different kinds of reality provide us with the ground for moral orientation and navigation in a way that is lost under illusionism. As a consequence, I take the path of type R realism, of which, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita offers a version. Whether his version is the best form of realism about the self and consciousness is yet to be seen through further debate over the question: *which illusion, if any, should we accept?*<sup>50</sup>

## NOTES

1. See [Goff et al. \(2017a\)](#) for discussion of panpsychism in Western philosophy.
2. See [Perrett \(2001\)](#) for a presentation of the difference between the Western mind-body problem and Indian consciousness-mind problem.
3. In my (2019) I argued that the dependency relation allowed for different degrees of reality where some are more real than others. Here I will offer a distinct conception on which there are different kinds of reality, but they are equally real.
4. See [Deutsch and Dalvi \(2004\)](#) for a collection of source material on Advaita.
5. Strictly speaking [Albahari \(2018, 2020\)](#) focuses on Perennial Idealism, which she argues is found in many different traditions of philosophy. Here I want to focus on her use of Advaita as a contributor to Perennial Idealism.
6. It is important to note that Albahari offers one way in which Advaita can contribute to analytic cosmopsychism. However, given the vast diversity of what is discussed in the school, it is likely that there are other ways in which Advaita can contribute to analytic cosmopsychism.
7. See [Roelofs \(2019\)](#) for discussion of constitutive micropsychism.
8. I am introducing the distinction between the modal and the mechanical to clarify the problem.
9. I do not challenge the assumption that the reports of mystics should be taken seriously. See [Maharaj \(2018\)](#) for extensive discussion of the reports of mystics in his work on Ramakrishna.
10. *Brahma-sūtra*, IV.1.3.
11. Strictly speaking [Albahari \(2018, 2020\)](#) focuses on the aperspectival nature of consciousness in her solution, and not on the illusory nature of human subjects. I bring out both sides, so as to be consistent with Śāṅkara's version of Advaita.
12. [Albahari \(2020, 3\)](#) notes that one challenge for Perennial Idealism, "is to show how the world as it appears to us, with its tables, trees, atoms, and people, could conceivably be construed as a manifestation from the ground of aperspectival unconditioned consciousness." She attempts to answer the challenge by arguing that, "the physical world will be re-cast as a network of co-arising subjects, which turn out to be dispositional perspectives framed by configurations of cognitive and sensory imagery." However, it is unclear in this statement whether she holds that subjects are real. If the view is to be consistent with Advaita, human subjects, and subjects in general, are illusory. So, the project is really a project of recovering a kind of subjecthood that can account for certain phenomena.
13. See [Vaidya \(2019\)](#) for a discussion of epistemological problems that Advaita faces from the perspective of analytic epistemology.
14. Albahari only uses the metaphysics of Advaita as it falls under Perennial Idealism. So, she is under no specific obligation to defend the epistemology of any version of Advaita. However, it is important to inquire into what epistemology Perennial Idealism can use that goes beyond mystical reports. While I have no objection to mystical testimony, I wonder what epistemology is suitable to Perennial Idealism. See [Wilber \(1995\)](#) for an alternative interpretation of Perennial Idealism than the one offered by Albahari. Wilber's interpretation is more world affirming and realist than Albahari's view on which Śāṅkara's Advaita is well suited to Perennial Idealism.
15. See [Grimes \(1990, 16\)](#) for this translation of the passage.
16. See [Grimes \(1990, 21\)](#). Neither Grimes nor I are claiming that all of these characteristics are necessarily held by Śāṅkara.
17. See [Grimes \(1990, 22\)](#) for this description of the seven problems.
18. See [Grimes \(1990, 27\)](#) for this point.

19. See Grimes (1990, 36) for this point.
20. *Śrī-bhāṣya* (Rāmānuja 1978), I.1.1, 8–9. See Grimes (1990, 26).
21. See Grimes (1990, 44) for this point.
22. See Grimes (1990, 63) for this version of the argument.
23. *Śrī-bhāṣya* (Rāmānuja 1978), I.1.1, 58. See Grimes (1990, 64).
24. See Grimes 1990, 73.
25. See Grimes 1990, 74.
26. Grimes's (1990) is an excellent source for evidence that supports the conclusion that there is a standoff, even though he defends the Advaitin view by responding to critiques from Viśiṣṭādvaitins and other schools.
27. See Grimes 1990, 2.
28. See Grimes 1990, ch. 1.
29. Compare Schaffer (2010) and Nagasawa and Wager (2017). According to Shani these views have *braided* forms of monism where there is universality in diversity, as opposed to a generative form of monism.
30. Given the vast number of different Advaitin and Viśiṣṭādvaitin philosophers, these points are not to be taken as applying to every single figure in each tradition. Rather, they serve as general differentia that can help one initially see the difference between the two systems.
31. See Barua 2010, 12.
32. Srinivasachari 1943, 121.
33. *Ibid.*, 95.
34. See Barua 2010, 12.
35. See Barua 2010, 13–14.
36. See Barua 2010, 12.
37. In Vaidya (2019) I developed Rāmānuja's account of ground (*ādharma*) through consideration of Schaffer (2009) on grounding. However, it now seems that there are two points of disconnect between Schaffer's account of grounding and Rāmānuja's. First, it appears that grounding is transitive for Rāmānuja. Schaffer denies this. Second, Schaffer separates grounding from supervenience in part through the fact that former is hyperintensional, but the latter is not. Rāmānuja, does not engage the issue of hyperintensionality.
38. This argument is formulated on the basis of an unpublished manuscript by Elisa Freschi. In discussion we converged on the right version of the argument. The argument is originally due to a predecessor of Rāmānuja, Yamuna, that likely inspired his position on the nature of reality.
39. Thanks to Jen McWeeny for introducing me to the work of Margaret Cavendish who has a kind-based panpsychism as opposed to a degree-based panpsychism. On my understanding of Rāmānuja, he has a kind differentiation. There are different kinds of reality, which are equally real.
40. One critical question that Rāmānuja's view of the relation between the supreme person and each finite self faces is over the kind of agency finite selves have. If the supreme person controls *all* physical objects, including our bodies, then it would seem that the supreme person's authority would threaten to annihilate our agency and autonomy over our bodies. Does Rāmānuja's view allow for any freewill with respect to finite selves?
41. See Barua 2010, 15.
42. See Ruparell (2005, 45–48) for an account of Lipner's distinction between the epistemological and ontological.
43. Although it is controversial whether Śāṅkara is really an illusionist about the self, my own understanding is that with respect to the reality of the self, he does not hold that the self at the level of the worldly experience is as real as nondual consciousness.
44. See Ruparell (2005, 45–46) for this discussion of Lipner's interpretation of Rāmānuja.
45. It is important to note that even though Rāmānuja wants his view to not allow for imperfection to transfer from each finite self to the supreme person, there is a tension: how could the imperfections of the modifications not lead to an imperfection in the supreme person? Although Rāmānuja does not offer this answer, I think one can argue that there is a modal difference. The imperfections of each finite self are generically essential in the sense that finite selves are essentially imperfect in some way. However, no finite self is necessary for the supreme person, since each finite self contingently exists. Since Anita's imperfections are essential to her, but her existence is contingent for the supreme person, her imperfections are not part of the essence of the supreme person, who is essentially perfect.

46. See [Shani \(2022\)](#) for discussion of why there is no modal decomposition problem, rather only an issue of whether a cosmic consciousness has transparent access to the contents of any conscious finite self. I follow him in holding that there is no modal decomposition problem.
47. I am introducing the term “stable-subject individuation problem.”
48. See [Barua 2010](#), 14.
49. As an additional piece of evidence in favor of my view, David Chalmers has recently argued that experiences in virtual reality are real (as opposed to illusory), albeit real in their own unique way. I find that a similar view, although about a different subject matter, is at play in Rāmānuja's work. It is preferable, I think, to admit different kinds of reality rather than to postulate a grand dichotomy between fundamental reality and illusory construction.
50. I would like to thank Swami Medhananda, Itay Shani, Zeke Floro, Jesus Villicana, and Jennifer McWeeny for discussion of this paper.

### APPENDIX. TRADEOFFS BETWEEN ŚANKARA'S ADVAITA AND RĀMĀNUJA'S VIŚIṢṬĀDVAITA

Dimension	Advaita	Viśiṣṭādvaita
Ontological Advantage	Nondual consciousness does not lead to the decomposition problem because at the fundamental level there is no subject of consciousness that needs to be delimited, and at the nonfundamental level there are no real subjects to recover.	A supreme person with different kinds of reality in a hierarchy from more real to less real does not lead to the illusory subject generation problem, since there are no illusory subjects.
Ontological Disadvantage	Nondual consciousness leads to the illusory subject generation problem: how are illusory subjects generated?	A supreme person with different kinds of reality leads to the decomposition problem.
Epistemological Disadvantage	The hard problem of ignorance. How can ignorance play the causal role it needs to play in the theory, and yet have a coherent ontological status?	The hard problem of error. Given that some illusions happen, how can error be accounted for in a plausible way?
Epistemological Advantage	No hard problem of error. Illusions exist and can be explained.	No hard problem of ignorance.

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