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BETWEEN HEIDEGGER AND SHANKARA: DASEIN, BRAHMAN, AND THE QUESTION OF ONTOLOGICAL GROUND

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a sustained philosophical comparison between Martin Heidegger's concept of Dasein and Adi Shankara's metaphysical doctrine of Brahman, with particular attention to the question of ontological ground. Situating both thinkers within their respective intellectual traditions, the paper argues that despite their historical, cultural, and methodological divergences, Heidegger and Shankara share a profound preoccupation with the conditions under which Being, or its non-dual equivalent, can be disclosed. Heidegger's existential analytic, as elaborated in Being and Time (1927), posits Dasein as the entity for whom Being is a question, while Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, systematized principally in his commentaries on the Brahma Sutras and the Upanishads, identifies Brahman as the sole, undifferentiated ground of all appearance. The paper examines three thematic nodes of comparison: the nature of ontological ground, the role of concealment and ignorance in obscuring that ground, and the methodological stakes of uncovering it. Through close textual analysis and philosophical argument, it contends that both thinkers challenge the dominance of ontic or empirical modes of inquiry, and that a cross-traditional reading opens new possibilities for understanding the limits of representational thought. The paper concludes by reflecting on the asymmetries between the two positions, particularly regarding selfhood, temporality, and liberation.

Keywords: Heidegger, Shankara, Dasein, Brahman, Advaita Vedanta, ontological ground, Being, comparative philosophy, phenomenology, non-dualism

1. Introduction: The Ontological Question Across Traditions

The question of Being is not, strictly speaking, the exclusive property of any single philosophical tradition. While Western academic philosophy often traces its decisive formulation to the Greeks and its modern crisis to Nietzsche and Heidegger, analogous preoccupations with the ultimate ground of reality, and with the conditions of its concealment, are equally central to the philosophical inheritance of classical India. The comparison between Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Adi Shankara (788-820 CE) is therefore not merely an exercise in intellectual tourism. It is, rather, an attempt to think through one of philosophy's most persistent and demanding questions by holding two of its most rigorous formulations in productive tension.

Comparative philosophy, as a discipline, carries methodological risks. The temptation to flatten genuine conceptual differences in the name of a superficial universalism is ever-present, as is the opposite temptation to erect incommensurability where careful analysis might reveal unexpected convergences. This paper attempts to navigate between these dangers. It proceeds not by asserting that Heidegger and Shankara are saying the same thing, but by asking what each illuminates about the other's project when they are read in proximity. The central claim is that both thinkers are engaged in what might be called a critique of the ontologically forgetful: both are concerned with the way in which ordinary cognition, whether in the form of everyday Dasein's absorption in the They-self or in Shankara's account of avidya (primordial ignorance), systematically misses the ground of its own possibility.

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The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of Heidegger's existential analytic, focusing on the notion of Dasein and its relation to the question of Being. Section 3 examines Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, with particular attention to the concepts of Brahman, maya, and avidya. Section 4 undertakes a comparative analysis across three thematic nodes: ontological ground, concealment, and methodological stakes. Section 5 examines the significant asymmetries between the two positions, particularly regarding temporality, selfhood, and the soteriological orientation of Shankara's thought. The paper concludes with a reflection on what a cross-traditional reading of this kind contributes to ongoing debates in comparative ontology.

2. Heidegger's Existential Analytic: Dasein and the Question of Being

2.1 The Retrieval of the Question of Being

Heidegger opens Being and Time with a declaration that the question of the meaning of Being has been forgotten, and that this forgetting is not accidental but constitutive of Western metaphysics. He writes that Being has been treated as the most universal and emptiest of concepts, so obvious as to be beneath analysis. Against this tradition, Heidegger insists that the question of Being is the most fundamental of all questions, and that its neglect has led to a systematic distortion of our understanding of entities, including our understanding of ourselves.

The strategy Heidegger adopts to reopen this question is distinctive. Rather than beginning with consciousness, substance, or God, he begins with Dasein, the entity that we ourselves are. Dasein is characterized by two interrelated features. First, its Being is an issue for it: Dasein is the entity for whom the question of Being is always already alive, if not always explicitly raised. Second, Dasein is always already in a world, not as a subject confronting an external object, but as a being whose very constitution is relational, temporal, and thrown. Dasein does not first exist and then happen to find itself in a world; rather, being-in-the-world is the basic state of Dasein.

2.2 Thrownness, Fallenness, and the Concealment of Being

Heidegger's existential analytic identifies several structural features of Dasein that are relevant to the present comparison. Among the most important are thrownness (Geworfenheit) and fallenness (Verfallenheit). Thrownness refers to the fact that Dasein always finds itself already in a situation it did not choose: a language, a culture, a body, a historical moment. This is not a deficiency to be overcome but a structural feature of finite existence. Fallenness, by contrast, names the tendency of Dasein to lose itself in the public world of das Man (the They-self), to understand itself in terms of the average interpretations of its culture rather than owning its ownmost possibilities.

Crucially, fallenness is connected to the concealment of Being. In its everyday mode, Dasein is so absorbed in entities, in particular beings, that it never pauses to ask about Being as such. The ontological difference, the difference between Being and beings, is systematically passed over. This is not a failure of intelligence but a structural tendency of Dasein's existence: to be absorbed in the ontic is the default condition from which philosophical questioning must always wrest itself free. Heidegger's term for the disclosure of Being is aletheia, truth as unconcealment, and the movement from concealment to unconcealment is never final, never achieved once and for all, but is an ongoing struggle.

2.3 Authenticity and the Call of Conscience

The path toward what Heidegger calls authentic existence, existence that owns up to its ownmost possibilities rather than dispersing itself in the They-self, is opened by the call of conscience and the confrontation with death. Anxiety (Angst), in particular, functions as a fundamental attunement that strips away the comfortable illusions of das Man and individualizes Dasein, confronting it with the nullity at the heart of its existence. Being-toward-death is not morbidity but the recognition that Dasein's existence is finite, and that this finitude is the condition of its genuine selfhood.

It is important to note that Heidegger's project in Being and Time is ontological, not moral or soteriological in any traditional sense. He is not prescribing a way of life but undertaking a transcendental analysis of the conditions under which Being can be disclosed. The authentic Dasein is not a saint or a sage but an entity that has appropriated its own finitude and opened itself, however momentarily, to the question of Being. This distinguishes Heidegger's project sharply, as we shall see, from Shankara's Advaita.

3. Shankara's Advaita Vedanta: Brahman, Maya, and Avidya

3.1 The Non-Dual Ground: Brahman

Adi Shankara is the preeminent systematizer of the Advaita Vedanta school, a tradition of Indian philosophy that takes as its foundational claim the non-duality of reality. The Sanskrit term 'advaita' means literally 'not-two,' and the doctrine it names holds that reality is, at its deepest level, a single, undifferentiated consciousness, which Shankara identifies with Brahman. This is not merely a metaphysical thesis about the number of ultimate substances; it is a claim about the nature of experience, knowledge, and liberation.

Brahman, in Shankara's account, is sat-chit-ananda: pure Being, pure Consciousness, and pure Bliss. These are not attributes that Brahman possesses but rather names for the single, indivisible reality that Brahman is. Crucially, individual consciousness, or Atman, is not merely similar to or derived from Brahman but is identical with it: tat tvam asi, 'that thou art,' is one of the four great sayings (mahavakyas) of the Upanishads that Shankara takes as the culminating testimony of revealed scripture. The apparent multiplicity of selves, worlds, and objects is, from the standpoint of Brahman, an appearance, not an ultimate ontological fact.

3.2 Maya and Avidya: The Structure of Concealment

If Brahman is the sole reality, the question immediately arises: how is it that the world of multiplicity, of individual selves and discrete objects, appears to exist? Shankara's answer involves two interrelated concepts: maya and avidya. Maya refers to the power by which Brahman, while remaining unchanged, appears to give rise to a world of differentiation. It is often translated as 'illusion,' but this translation is misleading if it suggests that the phenomenal world simply does not exist. Shankara is careful to distinguish between absolute non-existence (asat) and the provisional, pragmatic existence of the empirical world (vyavaharika satta). The world is not nothing; it has a kind of existence. But it is not ultimately real in the way that Brahman is real.

Avidya, primordial ignorance, is the epistemic correlate of maya. Where maya names the ontological mechanism by which the appearance of multiplicity arises, avidya names the condition of the knowing subject that mistakes this appearance for ultimate reality. Avidya is not merely an absence of information but a positive force of misidentification: it causes the individual to identify the Atman with the body-mind complex, to mistake the contingent and finite for the absolute and infinite. This misidentification is the root of all suffering, and its removal, through the realization of Brahman, is moksha or liberation.

3.3 Adhyasa and the Logic of Superimposition

A concept that is essential to Shankara's analysis is adhyasa, typically translated as superimposition or false attribution. Shankara introduces this concept at the very beginning of his Brahma Sutra Bhasya, describing it as the appearance of something, as having the nature of something else. Adhyasa is the mechanism by which avidya operates: the individual superimposes the qualities of the not-self onto the self, and the qualities of the self onto the not-self. One identifies consciousness with the material body, awareness with mental processes, and so on. The result is a thoroughly confused understanding of one's own nature and of reality at large.

Adhyasa is significant for the present comparison because it points to a structural feature of ordinary cognition that Shankara and Heidegger share a concern about: the way in which the ground of experience is systematically obscured by the habits and categories of everyday understanding. In Heidegger's terms, the ontological difference is passed over; in Shankara's terms, Brahman is covered by the superimposition of the not-self. In both cases, a kind of fundamental error is at work, and in both cases the correction of this error requires something more than the accumulation of additional information.

4. Comparative Analysis: Three Thematic Nodes

4.1 The Nature of Ontological Ground

The most fundamental point of convergence between Heidegger and Shankara concerns the structure of ontological ground. Both thinkers maintain that ordinary inquiry, whether scientific, practical, or commonsensical, operates at a level that presupposes a more fundamental ground without acknowledging it. For Heidegger, the sciences investigate particular domains of entities but are incapable, by their very constitution, of raising the question of Being itself. Biology asks about living organisms, physics about the

physical, but neither can ask: what is it for something to be? This question is prior to all ontic inquiry, and its neglect is not merely a philosophical oversight but a systematic distortion.

For Shankara, the situation is structurally analogous. Ordinary cognition, including the various schools of Indian philosophy that posit irreducible plurality (such as Samkhya or Nyaya-Vaisheshika), operates at the level of empirical or logical differentiation. These inquiries take for granted the basic distinction between subject and object, self and world. But for Shankara, this distinction is itself a product of avidya and cannot be taken as ultimate. The non-dual ground, Brahman, is not simply one more item in an ontological inventory but the condition of all possible differentiation.

The crucial difference is this: for Heidegger, Being is not an entity. It cannot be encountered as a thing among other things, nor can it be represented by a concept. It is disclosed only in and through Dasein's existence, in the happening of Being's unconcealment. For Shankara, Brahman is not an entity in the ordinary sense either, but it is, in a way that is categorically stronger than what Heidegger's Being can claim. Brahman is not only the ground of disclosure; it is itself pure consciousness and the substance of all that appears. Heidegger resists any equation of Being with a supreme being or an absolute consciousness precisely because such moves, in his view, remain within the metaphysics he seeks to overcome.

4.2 Concealment and the Structure of Forgetting

Both thinkers are profoundly attentive to the mechanisms by which the ontological ground is concealed. Heidegger's analysis of concealment operates at multiple levels. At the level of everyday existence, Being is concealed by Dasein's absorption in entities, its fallenness into das Man. At the level of the history of metaphysics, Being is concealed by a tradition that has consistently reduced it to the presence of what is most present, to substance, to God, to will to power. Heidegger's project of Destruktion, the dismantling of the tradition, aims to recover the question of Being precisely by exposing the layers of sedimented interpretation that have buried it.

Shankara's account of concealment is organized around the concept of avidya, which he understands not as a merely individual failing but as a beginningless condition of empirical existence. Avidya is anadi, without beginning, a point that is philosophically significant because it means the concealment of Brahman cannot be traced to a first moment of error. There was never a time when the individual existed in a state of clear Brahman-realization before falling into ignorance; the ignorance is constitutive of empirical individuality as such. This is interestingly parallel to Heidegger's claim that fallenness is not an accidental feature of human existence but belongs to Dasein's structure.

However, the nature of what is concealed differs importantly. For Heidegger, what is concealed is the question of Being, an open and undetermined question that admits of no final answer. The disclosure of Being is an event (Ereignis) that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled. For Shankara, what is concealed is Brahman, a determinate reality that is, in its own nature, self-luminous and always already present. Moksha is not the creation of something new but the removal of an obscuration. The difference between jnana (liberating knowledge) and ignorance is not ontological but, in a sense, merely epistemic. This distinction has profound consequences for how we understand the relationship between the knower and the known in each tradition.

4.3 Methodological Stakes: Beyond Representational Thought

A third node of comparison concerns methodology: how do Heidegger and Shankara propose to move beyond the concealment they diagnose? Both thinkers are critical of what we might broadly call representational or propositional modes of cognition, and both insist that the disclosure of the ground requires a transformation of the cognitive subject itself.

Heidegger's critique of representational thinking is one of the central threads of his later work. In essays such as The Question Concerning Technology and The Age of the World Picture, he argues that modern thought is dominated by a Gestell, a frame that reduces all things to objects available for calculation and manipulation. This representational mode of thinking is both a consequence and a reinforcement of the forgetting of Being. The alternative Heidegger gestures toward is not another theory but a different attunement: a Gelassenheit or releasement, a letting-be that is open to Being's self-showing without attempting to master it.

Shankara's methodology is organized around the practice of shravana (hearing the scriptural testimony), manana (reflection on what has been heard), and nididhyasana (sustained meditative contemplation). The goal is not the acquisition of a new piece of information but the dissolution of the false identification that constitutes avidya. Liberating knowledge, jnana, is not propositional knowledge about

Brahman but an immediate, non-relational recognition of one's identity with Brahman. Shankara insists, against the Mimamsakas, that moksha cannot be achieved through ritual action (karma) alone, because action presupposes and reinforces the duality between agent and goal that is the very structure of avidya.

The parallel with Heidegger is suggestive. Both thinkers hold that the transformation required cannot be achieved by continuing to operate within the framework of ordinary cognition. For Heidegger, the turn (Kehre) in thinking involves moving from representational, calculative thought to a kind of meditative thinking that can receive the disclosure of Being. For Shankara, the movement from ignorance to knowledge requires not more objects of knowledge but a fundamental shift in the locus of knowing, from the ego-individual to the infinite Brahman. In both cases, the philosophical work is not merely intellectual but existential.

5. Asymmetries and Critical Differences

5.1 Temporality and the Finite Self

Perhaps the most significant difference between Heidegger and Shankara concerns the status of temporality and finitude. For Heidegger, temporality is not an obstacle to the disclosure of Being but its very condition. Dasein is essentially temporal: its understanding of Being is always structured by the three ecstases of temporality, having-been, the present, and the to-come. Being-toward-death is not a deficiency to be transcended but the condition of Dasein's authentic selfhood. Heidegger explicitly distances himself from any interpretation of his project as aiming at the overcoming of finitude.

Shankara's position is, in this respect, deeply opposed. For Advaita Vedanta, temporality belongs to the realm of maya and is ultimately unreal from the standpoint of Brahman. Time, as a framework of before and after, is a product of the limiting conditions (upadhis) imposed by avidya on the infinite Brahman. Moksha involves the recognition that the temporal, finite self is not the ultimate self, and that the Atman is eternal, unchanging, and free from the modifications of time. The liberated individual (jivanmukta) continues to exist within the empirical framework of time after liberation, but the realization of Brahman effects a fundamental shift in identification that renders temporal finitude existentially irrelevant.

This asymmetry runs deep. Heidegger's entire critique of the onto-theological tradition is motivated by his conviction that metaphysics has consistently failed to think Being in its temporal dimension, that it has hypostasized Being into an eternal, unchanging presence. Shankara's Brahman, precisely as eternal, unchanging, and self-identical, would appear to fall squarely within the target of Heidegger's critique. Heidegger would likely read Shankara's Brahman as yet another instance of the presence-metaphysics he seeks to overcome, the elevation of a supreme being to the status of Being itself.

5.2 The Self: Destruction or Transformation?

A related asymmetry concerns the fate of the self in the philosophical transformation each thinker envisions. For Heidegger, authentic Dasein is still Dasein: it is still the finite, thrown, individual being-in-the-world, but it has appropriated its ownmost possibilities rather than losing itself in the crowd. There is no dissolution of individuality in Heidegger's account of authentic existence; the call of conscience individualizes Dasein, pulls it back from the anonymous They-self to its own singular existence.

For Shankara, the situation is reversed. Moksha is precisely the recognition that the individual self, as a distinct entity with its own desires, memories, and projects, is not ultimately real. The Atman that is realized is not the individual jiva but the universal Brahman. Shankara does not advocate a nihilistic annihilation of the self, but the self that survives liberation is not a finite individual with a particular history; it is the infinite, undifferentiated consciousness that is Brahman. This is not the deepening of individuality but its transcendence.

This difference has implications for how we understand the relationship between philosophy and ethics in each tradition. Heidegger is notoriously reticent about drawing normative conclusions from his ontological analysis, and his engagement with National Socialism in 1933 raises deep questions about what happens when ontological inquiry is disconnected from ethical reflection. Shankara's tradition, by contrast, embeds the pursuit of Brahman-realization within a broader framework of dharmic ethics, renunciation, and the cultivation of virtues such as viveka (discrimination), vairagya (dispassion), and mumukshutvam (the desire for liberation). The soteriological orientation of Advaita Vedanta gives it an ethical and practical dimension that Heidegger's existential analytic, at least in its early form, conspicuously lacks.

5.3 The Role of Language and Scripture

A further asymmetry concerns the role of language and scriptural authority. Heidegger's later thought assigns language a central role in the disclosure of Being, famously declaring that language is the house of Being. But this is not the language of scripture or religious authority; it is the language of poetry, of thinking, of the naming that opens up worlds. Heidegger's method, particularly in the later works, involves a kind of etymological excavation and poetic attunement that seeks to recover the originary power of words covered over by their conventional usage.

For Shankara, the authority of the Upanishads is not merely the authority of a cultural tradition but the testimony (shabda pramana) of those who have directly realized Brahman. Scripture is not merely a pointer toward a reality that can be independently verified; it is, in a sense, the only means of knowing (pramana) by which the superindividual reality of Brahman can be communicated. This is because Brahman, being non-dual, cannot be an object of perception or inference, which are faculties suited only to empirical, differentiated reality. The Mahavakyas are not descriptions of Brahman from the outside but performative utterances that, properly received, dissolve the very distinction between knower and known.

Heidegger's suspicion of any onto-theological grounding, including scriptural authority, would make him resistant to this move. The Heideggerian thinker must always be willing to question even the most authoritative textual inheritance. Shankara, while himself a formidable dialectician who engages vigorously with rival schools, ultimately grounds his entire project in the authority of shruti (revealed scripture). This difference reflects a fundamental divergence in their understanding of the relationship between philosophical inquiry and inherited wisdom.

6. Conclusion: The Value and Limits of Cross-Traditional Reading

The comparison between Heidegger and Shankara is philosophically productive precisely because it is not a comparison between equals who are saying the same thing. The genuine convergences, the shared critique of ontic or empirical modes of inquiry, the structural parallel between fallenness and avidya, the insistence that the disclosure of the ground requires a transformation beyond representational thought, are illuminating because they highlight features of each thinker that might be obscured when they are read in isolation within their respective traditions.

Reading Heidegger against Shankara helps to clarify what is at stake in Heidegger's insistence on the irreducibility of temporality and finitude. The contrast with a tradition that regards these as ultimately unreal throws into sharp relief the degree to which Heidegger's entire project is structured by a commitment to the ineliminability of finitude, a commitment that is as much a philosophical choice as a demonstrated conclusion. Conversely, reading Shankara against Heidegger draws attention to what might be called the political and ethical stakes of non-dual ontology: in a tradition that ultimately regards all finite individuality as phenomenal, the question of how to navigate relations of justice, care, and responsibility in the empirical world becomes philosophically urgent in a way that Shankara's writings do not always directly address.

The most important asymmetry remains the soteriological orientation of Shankara's project. Advaita Vedanta is not merely a theoretical position about the nature of reality; it is a path, a sadhana, structured toward liberation. This gives Shankara's philosophy a concrete human significance that Heidegger's, for all its existential depth, struggles to match. The phenomenological richness of Heidegger's analysis of everydayness, anxiety, care, and authenticity is arguably greater than anything in Shankara's writings, which are primarily addressed to philosophical adversaries and advanced seekers rather than to ordinary human experience in its full complexity. But Shankara's vision of a reality in which the individual does not merely own its finitude but discovers its identity with the infinite offers a horizon of meaning that Heidegger, by design, refuses to enter.

In the end, what a cross-traditional reading of this kind demonstrates is not that comparative philosophy dissolves all differences in a warm bath of universal agreement, but that engaging seriously with a tradition very different from one's own can reveal the contingency of assumptions so deep that they appear to be necessary. Heidegger's resistance to the infinite and Shankara's resistance to finitude are both, in their own ways, attempts to think the ground of experience with honesty and rigor. That they arrive at such different places is not a sign of failure but of the inexhaustibility of the question they share: what is it for anything to be at all?

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