Bridging the Eternal and the Present: Vedānta's Philosophical Relevance

Gitashree Mondal

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Presidency University, Kolkata, India

Abstract:

Vedānta, rooted in the Upanishads, is a profound philosophical system that explores the relationship between Ātman (the self) and Brahman (the ultimate reality), advocating for the unity of all existence. Its central teachings emphasize the dissolution of ego, transcending the illusion of duality (Māyā), and attaining liberation (Mokṣa) through knowledge, devotion, and selfless action.

This paper explores Vedānta's historical development, core metaphysical principles, and ethical dimensions, particularly in its major schools—Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita. It also examines how Vedānta's teachings address contemporary challenges such as materialism, social inequality, and environmental degradation, offering a framework for personal transformation and collective well-being. By integrating ancient wisdom with modern relevance, Vedānta provides a holistic path for spiritual and societal progress.

Keywords: *Vedānta* Philosophy, *Ātman* and *Brahman*, Non-duality, *Mokṣa* (Liberation), Philosophical Relevance of *Vedānta*.

Introduction: *Vedānta*, a profound and intricate philosophical system, delves into fundamental questions about the nature of reality, the self, and the cosmos. The term "*Vedānta*" is derived from two Sanskrit words- "*Veda*" (knowledge) and "*Anta*" (end or conclusion)—signifying the culmination of Vedic wisdom. Rooted in the *Upanishads*, *Vedānta* transcends its role as a mere philosophical system to offer a spiritual pathway toward realizing the highest truth, one that integrates the self and the cosmos into a unified whole.

At the heart of *Vedānta* is the exploration of the relationship between *Ātman* (the individual self) and *Brahman* (the ultimate reality or universal consciousness). *Vedānta*

addresses the nature of existence, the origins of the universe, and the purpose of human life. These philosophical inquiries lead to a non-dualistic perspective, wherein distinctions between self and other, subject and object, dissolve. By comprehending and experiencing this non-duality, one can transcend the limitations of the ego and attain *Mokṣa*- liberation from the cycle of birth and death (*Saṃsāra*)[1].

Although *Vedānta* is deeply rooted in Indian spiritual traditions, its teachings offer universal insights into the human condition. Over the centuries, *Vedānta* has attracted a wide array of individuals and intellectuals across different cultural and geographical contexts. This universality stems from its focus on principles such as the unity of all existence, the impermanence of material reality, and the quest for ultimate meaning, which resonate with spiritual seekers worldwide.

In the contemporary world, *Vedānta*'s relevance has grown in response to challenges such as materialism, social inequality, and environmental degradation. The fast-paced technological advancements and growing political and economic instability of the modern age have contributed to a sense of alienation and existential crises among individuals[2]. Furthermore, the dominance of materialism, with its emphasis on wealth, status, and possessions, often leaves individuals with a spiritual void, as these external sources of satisfaction are fleeting.

Vedānta's teachings on interconnectedness and the realization of the true self offer a counterbalance to materialism. By emphasizing eternal and unchanging nature of *Brahman*, *Vedānta* encourages individuals to look inward and recognize their inherent divinity, thus transcending the transient material world[3]. Additionally, the philosophy's insistence on the essential oneness of all beings addresses social inequality, suggesting that distinctions based on race, caste, gender, or nationality are illusory. This recognition fosters compassion, solidarity, and respect for others, irrespective of background or social status[4].

Vedānta's ecological ethos also speaks to environmental concerns. By teaching that all life forms are interconnected and manifestations of *Brahman*, it promotes a deep respect for nature. Such a perspective can encourage sustainable living and foster a harmonious relationship with the environment, challenging the exploitative practices that contribute to environmental degradation[5].

In summary, *Vedānta* provides both a metaphysical framework and practical guidance to address contemporary challenges. Its teachings on the unity of existence, the illusory nature of material distinctions, and the ultimate reality of *Brahman* offer pathways for individuals seeking meaning in a fragmented, materialistic world. Through meditation, ethical living,

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[1] Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1953. p. 203
[2] Müller, F. Max. *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. Kessinger Publishing. 2001. p. 59
[3] Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1953. p. 219
[4] Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002. p. 165
[5] Müller, F. Max. (2001). *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. Kessinger Publishing. p. 87

and self-inquiry, *Vedānta* encourages one to transcend the ego and realize the oneness of the self with the cosmos.

Historical Background and Core Tenets of *Vedānta:* *Vedānta*'s origins trace back to the *Veda*s, ancient Indian texts that form the bedrock of Hindu philosophy and spirituality. The four Vedic collections- *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*- contain hymns, rituals, and prayers. However, it is the *Upanishads*, a later part of the Vedic corpus, that serve as the primary philosophical foundation for *Vedānta*.

The term "*Vedānta*" signifies both the physical conclusion of the Vedic texts and the culmination of Vedic wisdom, as encapsulated in the *Upanishads*. These texts shift from ritualistic practices to deep philosophical inquiry, exploring the nature of reality, the self (*Ātman*), and the ultimate truth (*Brahman*)[6].

Origins in the *Upanishads:* Composed between 800 and 200 BCE, the *Upanishads* present dialogues between sages and disciples, addressing profound metaphysical questions. Central to their teachings is the notion that behind the multiplicity of the world's forms lies a singular, eternal reality- *Brahman*. This concept of *Brahman* as the ultimate reality distinguishes *Vedānta* from other philosophical traditions[7]. The *Upanishads* also emphasize the *Ātman*, which is said to be identical to *Brahman*, encapsulated in the famous phrase "Tat Tvam Asi" (Thou art That), illustrating the non-dual nature of self and ultimate reality.

Development of Vedantic Thought: The evolution of *Vedānta* into a systematic philosophy took place through commentaries on the *Upanishads*, notably the *Brahma Sūtras*, attributed to Badarayana, which provide a coherent framework for Vedantic thought. Another seminal text, the *Bhagavadgītā*, integrates Vedantic ideas into its discourse on duty, devotion, and the self[8].

Several schools of *Vedānta* developed over time, each offering distinct interpretations of the *Upanishads*. Among these, the most prominent are *Advaita Vedānta*, *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta*, and *Dvaita Vedānta*.

- *Advaita Vedānta*: Non-Dualism: *Advaita Vedānta*, formulated by Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th century CE, is grounded in the absolute non-duality of *Brahman*, which Shankaracharya characterizes as *Nirguṇa*- without attributes or form. *Advaita* posits that the phenomenal world and the individual self are products of *Māyā* (illusion), and it is only through *Avidyā* (ignorance) that individuals perceive duality[9].

Advaita teaches that liberation (*Mokṣa*) is attained through *Jñāna Yoga* (the path of knowledge), wherein the seeker realizes the identity of *Ātman* and *Brahman*. This realization dispels the illusion of individuality, culminating in oneness with the universe[10].

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[6] Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1953. p. 172

[7] Müller, F. Max. *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. Kessinger Publishing. 2001. p. 48

[8] Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1953. p. 178

[9] Müller, F. Max. *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. Kessinger Publishing. 2001. p. 48)

[10] Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002. p. 89

- *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta*: Qualified Non-Dualism: The *Viśiṣṭādvaita* school, founded by Ramanuja in the 11th century CE, offers a different perspective. Ramanuja contends that *Brahman* possesses both personal and impersonal aspects and equates *Brahman* with a personal God. In this view, *Ātman* is distinct from *Brahman* but remains eternally dependent upon it[11]. Liberation in *Viśiṣṭādvaita* is achieved through *Bhakti* (devotion), where the soul retains individuality in its union with *Brahman*.

- *Dvaita Vedānta*: Dualism: *Dvaita Vedānta*, founded by Madhvacharya in the 13th century CE, takes a dualistic stance, asserting an eternal distinction between the individual self (*Ātman*) and *Brahman*. In *Dvaita*, liberation entails eternal service to a personal God, with no dissolution of individuality[12].

Despite their differences, all Vedantic schools uphold the centrality of *Brahman* as the ultimate reality and share the common goal of liberation. *Advaita*, *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, and *Dvaita* offer varying but complementary insights into the relationship between the self and the cosmos, illustrating the depth and richness of the Vedantic tradition, which continues to inspire philosophical inquiry and spiritual practice today.

Metaphysical Foundations of *Vedānta*: The metaphysical foundations of *Vedānta* are deeply rooted in its exploration of reality, consciousness, and the self. Central to *Vedānta*'s metaphysics is the relationship between *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, and *Ātman*, the individual self. These concepts form the bedrock of *Vedānta* philosophy and its interpretations across different schools.

***Brahman*: The Ultimate Reality:** In *Vedānta*, *Brahman* is the foundational concept and the ultimate reality. It is described as infinite, eternal, unchanging, and beyond sensory perception[13]. *Brahman* is both immanent and transcendent—it pervades all things and is the source of everything in the universe, while also remaining beyond it. *Brahman* is often characterized in two ways:

***Nirguṇa Brahman*:** The formless, attributeless aspect of *Brahman*, transcending all qualities and limitations.

***Saguṇa Brahman*:** The aspect of *Brahman* that manifests with attributes and forms, such as the personal God worshipped in various theistic traditions (e.g., Vishnu, Shiva).

The *Advaita Vedānta* school, particularly through the teachings of Adi Shankaracharya, emphasizes that *Brahman* is *Nirguṇa*—without attributes. It posits that all distinctions we perceive are the result of *Māyā* (illusion)[14]. In this view, the world of form, individuality, and multiplicity is an illusory projection of the one, undivided *Brahman*.

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[11] Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1953. p. 142
[12] Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002. p. 178
[13] Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1953. p. 20
[14] Müller, F. Max. *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. Kessinger Publishing. 2001. p. 112

In contrast, the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita* schools emphasize the *Saguṇa* aspect of *Brahman*. Ramanuja's *Viśiṣṭādvaita* asserts that *Brahman*, while possessing attributes, remains the supreme reality, whereas Madhvacharya's *Dvaita* posits a permanent distinction between *Brahman* and the individual soul[15].

***Ātman*: The Self:** *Ātman* refers to the individual self or soul in *Vedānta*. The *Upanishads* declare that *Ātman* is *Brahman*, indicating that the true self is not separate from the ultimate reality (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 85). The identification of *Ātman* with *Brahman* is central to the non-dualistic philosophy of *Advaita Vedānta*, where realizing this unity leads to liberation (*Mokṣa*).

Conversely, *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita* maintain that while *Ātman* is intimately connected with *Brahman*, it is not identical to *Brahman*. Ramanuja argues that the individual soul is part of *Brahman* but retains its individuality in both this life and after liberation. Madhvacharya goes further, asserting a permanent duality between *Ātman* and *Brahman*, where the individual self is eternally distinct from the supreme God[16].

***Māyā*: The Illusion of Duality:** A central concept in *Advaita Vedānta* is *Māyā*, the principle that creates the illusion of separation and multiplicity. According to Shankaracharya, *Māyā* veils the true nature of *Brahman* and makes the world appear as a realm of dualities—subject and object, self and other, life and death[17]. This illusory perception causes human suffering, as individuals mistakenly identify with their body, mind, and ego rather than recognizing their true nature as *Brahman*.

Liberation (*Mokṣa*) is attained when one transcends *Māyā* through knowledge and realizes that all dualities are illusions and that the self (*Ātman*) is *Brahman*. This leads to the dissolution of the ego and the experience of unity with the cosmos.

In *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita*, *Māyā* plays a less central role. These schools acknowledge the material world as temporary yet real, a manifestation of *Brahman*'s will. They emphasize devotion and ethical living as means to transcend worldly limitations and achieve union or proximity with God[18].

Epistemology of *Vedānta*: *Pramāṇa* and the Means of Knowledge: In *Vedānta*, epistemology—the study of knowledge and how we come to know things—plays a crucial role in understanding reality. *Vedānta* identifies different sources of knowledge, called *Pramāṇas*, which provide valid means of understanding both the external world and metaphysical truths.

The *Pramāṇas*: Sources of Knowledge: *Vedānta* recognizes several *Pramāṇas*, the instruments through which valid knowledge can be acquired. The major *Pramāṇas* accepted in *Vedānta* include:

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[15] Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002. p. 45

[16] Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002. p. 102

[17] Müller, F. Max. *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. Kessinger Publishing. 2001. p. 147

[18] Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002. p. 75

1) *Pratyaksha* (Perception): Direct sensory experience, which is limited in grasping the nature of *Brahman*[19].

2) *Anumāna* (Inference): Knowledge derived from reasoning and logical deduction, allowing individuals to draw conclusions based on observed patterns.

3) *Upamāna* (Comparison): Knowledge gained through analogy, understanding one thing by comparing it to something similar.

4) *Arthāpatti* (Postulation): Knowledge involving postulating something to explain a situation.

5) *Anupalabdhi* (Non-cognition): Knowledge derived from the absence of something, highlighting the illusory nature of distinctions.

6) *Śabda* (Verbal Testimony): Knowledge obtained from sacred texts and trustworthy sources. In *Vedānta*, the *Śabda Pramāṇa* is of utmost importance, as it refers to the authority of the *Veda*s and *Upanishads* as revealed scriptures[20].

The Role of *Śabda* in *Vedānta*: Among all *Pramāṇas*, *Śabda* holds a special place in *Vedānta*. The *Upanishads*, as revealed knowledge, are considered the most authoritative source of metaphysical knowledge[21]. These texts provide insights into *Brahman*, the self, and the path to liberation. Since *Brahman* is beyond the reach of the senses and ordinary reasoning, it is only through studying the *Veda*s and *Upanishads* that one can attain the highest knowledge.

Śabda Pramāṇa is validated through personal experience and the guidance of a qualified teacher. The role of the *guru* is crucial, as the *guru* helps the disciple correctly interpret scriptural teachings.

***Jñāna Yoga*: Knowledge as a Path to Liberation:** In *Advaita Vedānta*, the epistemology of *Pramāṇas* culminates in *Jñāna Yoga*—the path of knowledge. Through the study of scriptures (*Śabda*), reasoning (*Anumāna*), and meditation, the seeker dispels ignorance (*Avidyā*) and realizes the identity of *Ātman* and *Brahman*, achieving liberation.

In other *Vedānta* schools like *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita*, knowledge is important but often subordinated to *Bhakti Yoga* (the path of devotion), where devotion to God is the primary means of attaining liberation.

Ethical Implications of *Vedānta* Philosophy: The ethical dimension of *Vedānta* is closely tied to its metaphysical and epistemological teachings. *Vedānta*'s emphasis on the unity of all beings and the illusory nature of distinctions provides a strong foundation for ethical behaviour. The principles of *Vedānta* encourage individuals to live in accordance with *Dharma* (righteousness) and practice selflessness, compassion, and devotion.

***Dharma*: Righteousness and Moral Duty:** The concept of *Dharma* is central to *Vedānta* ethics. It refers to the moral order of the universe and the duties individuals must follow to

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[19] Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1953. p. 38
[20] Müller, F. Max. *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. Kessinger Publishing. 2001. p. 210
[21] Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002. p. 55

live harmoniously[22]. Each individual has specific duties depending on their stage of life, social role, and inclinations—collectively known as *Svadharma* (one's own *Dharma*). Fulfilling these duties purifies the mind and prepares one for spiritual knowledge.

Karma Yoga, the path of selfless action, is particularly emphasized in the *Bhagavadgītā*, where Lord Krishna instructs Arjuna to perform his duty without attachment to outcomes. This idea of *Niṣkāma Karma* (selfless action) encourages ethical integrity.

Ahiṃsā: **Non-violence:** A core ethical value derived from *Vedānta* is *Ahiṃsā*, or non-violence. Since *Vedānta* teaches that all beings are manifestations of the same ultimate reality (*Brahman*), causing harm to others equates to harming oneself[23]. *Ahiṃsā* promotes kindness, compassion, and empathy, extending to thoughts and words. Shankaracharya emphasizes that virtues such as non-violence and truthfulness are necessary for spiritual progress.

The principle of *Ahiṃsā* has practical applications in personal and social contexts. It has inspired movements for social justice and non-violent resistance, notably in the work of Mahatma Gandhi, who drew upon Vedantic ethics to advocate for independence through non-violence.

Selflessness and Renunciation of Ego: *Vedānta*'s metaphysics of non-duality leads to the ethical ideal of selflessness. Since the individual ego results from ignorance (*Avidyā*), ethical living involves transcending the ego and its desires[24]. In *Advaita Vedānta*, this process is central to *Jñāna Yoga*, where the aspirant seeks to dissolve false identifications with the ego and realize the self (*Ātman*) as one with *Brahman*.

The renunciation of egoistic desires is also key in *Karma Yoga*, where actions are performed not for personal gain but for the welfare of others, fostering a sense of unity with all beings.

Ethical Implications in Social and Environmental Contexts: *Vedānta*'s teachings on interconnectedness have significant implications for contemporary social and environmental ethics. In a world facing inequality and environmental degradation, *Vedānta* offers a framework for addressing these challenges through unity, compassion, and respect for all life.

1. Social Justice and Equality: *Vedānta*'s emphasis on the unity of all souls undermines discriminatory practices based on caste, gender, or race. This idea supports movements toward social justice, advocating for equality and dismantling systems of oppression[25].
2. Environmental Ethics: The belief that all life is interconnected leads to an ethic of respect for nature. Environmental degradation can be seen as a consequence of ignorance (*Avidyā*), where humanity forgets its intrinsic connection to the natural

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[22] Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1953. p. 109
[23] Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002. p. 122
[24] Müller, F. Max. *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. Kessinger Publishing. 2001. p. 190
[25] Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002. p. 135

world. *Vedānta* encourages a harmonious relationship with nature, advocating for sustainability and ecological responsibility in the face of climate change.

The Role of *Bhakti* and Devotion in Ethical Living: In *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita Vedānta*, the ethical life is intertwined with *Bhakti* (devotion) to a personal God. Devotion cultivates humility, compassion, and selflessness. Through devotion, the ego is gradually dissolved, and the practitioner develops love and service toward all beings.

Ramanuja's *Viśiṣṭādvaita* emphasizes that ethical conduct prepares the soul for devotion and ultimate union with God. Similarly, Madhvacharya's *Dvaita* places great importance on *Bhakti Yoga* as a path to ethical living.

***Sādhanā*: Ethical Discipline as Spiritual Practice:** In *Vedānta*, ethical living is part of *Sādhanā*—the disciplined pursuit of spiritual goals. Ethical virtues such as truthfulness, non-violence, and compassion are essential for purifying the mind and preparing for higher knowledge[26]. The ethical codes of *Yamas* (restraints) and *Niyamas* (observances) in Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras* align with many Vedantic principles, helping seekers transcend selfish desires and realize oneness.

The ethical implications of *Vedānta* philosophy provide a framework for personal and societal transformation. Its metaphysical insights into the unity of all existence and the illusory nature of distinctions offer a profound basis for ethical living. Through the principles of *Dharma*, *Ahiṃsā*, and selflessness, *Vedānta* encourages lives of integrity, compassion, and devotion. Its emphasis on interconnectedness forms a compelling foundation for addressing contemporary issues such as social inequality, environmental degradation, and the loss of meaning in modern life. By integrating ethical discipline with spiritual practice, *Vedānta* offers a holistic path to both individual liberation and collective well-being.

Conclusion: Vedānta, with its rich metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical foundations, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding reality, the self, and the cosmos. At the heart of Vedānta lies the recognition of the unity between Ātman and Brahman, which serves as both a metaphysical truth and an ethical guide for human life. This non-dualistic view dismantles the ego, showing that distinctions between individuals, species, and the environment are illusory.

The enduring relevance of Vedānta is seen in its application to modern challenges such as materialism, social inequality, and environmental degradation. Its teachings on interconnectedness provide ethical solutions—encouraging compassion, non-violence, and sustainable living. Vedānta's insistence on the oneness of all beings offers a counter-narrative to the divisive and exploitative tendencies of contemporary society.

Whether through Jñāna (knowledge), Bhakti (devotion), or Karma (selfless action), Vedānta directs individuals toward spiritual liberation (Mokṣa), fostering a sense of unity

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[26] Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002. p. 150

with the cosmos and aligning personal well-being with collective harmony. Through its timeless insights, Vedānta continues to inspire both philosophical reflection and practical action in pursuit of a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world.

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1) Müller, F. Max. *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. Kessinger Publishing. 2001.
2) Radhakrishnan, S. *The Principal Upanishads*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1953.
3) Sharma, Chandradhar. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass. 2002.