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The Subtractive Epistemology of Advaita Vedanta: Negation, Adhyasa and the Dis-Identification of the Non-Self

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***Abstract*—This article examines the epistemological significance of negation in Advaita Vedānta, focusing on Śaṅkara's account of adhyāsa (superimposition) and the Upaniṣadic method of neti, neti ("not this, not this"). It argues that self-knowledge in Advaita is not primarily the acquisition of object-based knowledge, but the removal of erroneous identification with the body, mind, and other aspects of the non-Self (anātman). Through a philosophical analysis of superimposition, the discrimination between the seer and the seen, the five sheaths (pañca kośa), and the three states of experience (avasthātraya), the article explores how Advaita challenges the objectification of the Self. It proposes Subtractive Epistemology as an interpretive framework connecting the diagnosis of misidentification in adhyāsa with the corrective function of neti, neti. Rather than claiming that Śaṅkara himself formulated this terminology, the article presents it as a contemporary framework for understanding these complementary methods. It concludes that liberation (mokṣa) is understood not as the production of a new state, but as the removal of ignorance that obscures the recognition of the ever-present Self.**

***Index Terms*—Advaita Vedānta; Subtractive Epistemology; Adhyāsa; Neti, Neti; Self-Knowledge; Mokṣa.**

I. INTRODUCTION

A pillar of Indian philosophy rooted in the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and Bhagavad Gita, Vedanta (literally "the culmination of the Vedas") shifts the focus of enquiry from outward ritualism to direct self-realization. (Radhakrishnan, S.: 2008:24) Its primary insight, particularly within the non-dual (Advaita) tradition systematized by Adi Shankara, is that human suffering stems from Adhyasa (superimposition)—a fundamental cognitive error in which the individual confuses the transient body, mind, and emotions for the true Self. Advaita centers on comprehending the non-difference between the individual self (Atman) and absolute reality (Brahman). (Mahadevan, T. M. P.: 1977:11)

Instead of gaining conceptual knowledge, Advaita employs a subtractive methodology known as Via Negativa or Neti, Neti ("not this, not this") to separate everything observed (Drisya) from the unchanging observer (Drig). (Sharma, C.: 1997:268). Through this methodical rejection of the non-self, one realizes Moksha (freedom) not as a future state to be attained, but as an ever-present, self-evident truth that becomes apparent the moment primal ignorance (Avidya) is discarded. (Mahadevan, T. M. P.: 1980:45)

The epistemological essence of Advaita Vedanta can be summarized as follows: Vedanta is not about understanding Atman as an object, but about setting aside or "un-understanding" what is non-self (An-atman). (Mahadevan, T. M. P.: 1957:89). This characterization accurately describes the direct method of Atma-Vichara (Self-Inquiry) as taught in Shankara's tradition and emphasized by modern interpreters such as Sri Ramana Maharshi and T.M.P. Mahadevan. (Mahadevan, T. M. P.: 1980: 48).

II. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADOX: WHY THE SELF CANNOT BE OBJECTIFIED

To understand the necessity of a subtractive methodology, one must confront a fundamental paradox: How does one gain knowledge of that which is the very subject of all knowledge? (Radhakrishnan, S.: 2008:138).

In empirical life (Vyavahara), as well as in Western epistemology and empirical science, knowledge operates through a distinct triadic division:

In this model, a knower (pramata) investigates an external object (prameya) using a valid means of knowledge (pramana). (Sharma, C.: 1997:240). However, Atman—Pure Consciousness—cannot be measured, studied, or intellectualized as an external object. All objects (Drisya) are illuminated by consciousness itself, the eternal Subject (Drik).

If Advaita were to treat the Atman as an object to be known, it would encounter three insurmountable logical fallacies:

1. Infinite Regress (Anavastha Dosha): If the Self were an object observed by a subject, one must ask: Who is observing that subject? Observing that secondary subject would require a tertiary subject, resulting in an endless chain of observers. (Sharma, C.: 1997:243).
2. Loss of Subjectivity (Jadata): Any entity that can be objectively known—whether a body, a thought, or a physical particle—is intrinsically non-conscious (jada). Its existence must be proven by a conscious observer. If Atman could be objectified by the mind, it would cease to be Pure Consciousness and become merely another inert mental construct. (Radhakrishnan, S.: 2008:145).
3. Perpetuation of Duality (Dwaita): If the Self is an object that a separate subject is trying to comprehend, duality endures. True non-duality (Advaita) cannot be realized as long as a division exists between the knower and the known. (Sharma, C.: (1997:250).

III. THIS EPISTEMOLOGICAL DILEMMA IS EXPLICITLY ADDRESSED IN THE KENA UPANISHAD:

"Know that alone to be Brahman which cannot be comprehended by the mind, but by which the mind is said to be comprehended—and not this which people worship here." (Kena Upanishad, 1.4–1.5).

Because the Self is self-luminous (svayamprakasha), no additional mental process is required to "discover" it. It is a mistaken identity (adhyasa)—an overlay of incorrect concepts, mental alterations, and physical identifications projected onto the Self—that prevents one from recognizing their genuine nature. Therefore, the traditional Vedantic method does not involve accumulating new concepts about God or the Soul; it methodically destroys mistaken identification with all that the Self is not.

IV. SUPERIMPOSITION (ADHYASA) AND THE MECHANICS OF ILLUSION

Why do individuals experience limitation, grief, and fear if the Atman is eternally present and infinite? In the introduction to his Brahma Sutra Bhashya (Adhyasa Bhashya), Adi Shankara states that Adhyasa (superimposition) is the root cause of all human sorrow and spiritual ignorance (Avidya). Shankara defines Adhyasa as:

"The apparent presentation, in the form of remembrance, to consciousness of something previously observed in some other place—the mutual coupling of the Real and the Unreal." (Brahma Sutra Bhashya, Intro). (Sankaracarya: 1977)

Adhyasa is fundamentally the cognitive confusion of the Real (Satya) with the Apparent (Mithya), or the Subject (Drik) with the Object (Drisya).

Brahman / Atman (Satya - Pure Consciousness)
│
[Superimposition / Adhyasa]
│
Non-Self / World (Mithya - Dependent Appearance)

V. SATKARYAVADA AND THE ANALOGY OF CLAY AND POT

To illustrate the ontological relationship between substance and appearance, Advaita draws upon the Satkaryavada framework (Chandogya Upanishad, 6.1.4). A clay pot is not a substance independent from clay. If clay is removed, no "pot" remains. "Pot" is simply a name (nama) and form (rupa) imposed upon clay for functional utility.

- Clay (Satya): Exists independently. It persists before the pot is formed, while the pot exists, and after the pot is destroyed. (Mahadevan, T. M. P.: 1957:102).

- Pot (Mithya): Possesses no independent existence separate from the clay. Mithya does not mean non-existent (like a hallucination); it denotes dependent reality—that which is experienced but lacks ultimate, independent ontological status. (Deutsch,: 1969:27–34).

VI. VIVARTAVADA: THE METAPHOR OF THE ROPE AND SNAKE

Vivartavada is the Advaita doctrine of apparent transformation. It asserts that an effect (karya) is merely an illusory appearance of the cause (karana), without the cause undergoing any actual change in its intrinsic nature.

When a coiled rope is mistaken for a snake in dim lighting, the resulting fear and physiological reactions are phenomenologically real to the observer. Ontologically, however, no snake exists. To resolve the terror, one does not need to destroy a real snake or create a rope; one simply needs light to recognize: "This is not a snake." In the same manner, Brahman does not physically transform into the universe; Brahman appears as the universe due to Maya (superimposition).

Analytical Methods of Dis-Identification

Advaita Vedanta provides structured analytical tools to systematically separate the Subject from the Object.

Drig-Drisya Viveka (Discrimination Between Seer and Seen)

The central premise of Drig-Drisya Viveka is straightforward: since an individual is the observer of what is perceived, they cannot be the object of perception itself.

- The eye perceives form (e.g., a flower). The flower is the seen (drisya); the eye is the seer (drig).
- The mind perceives the condition of the eye (e.g., clear or strained). The eye becomes the seen; the mind is the seer.
- Pure Awareness perceives the state of the mind (e.g., thoughts, emotions, memories). The mind is the seen; Awareness is the ultimate, unconditioned Seer.

Pancha Kosha Viveka (Deconstruction of the Five Sheaths)

In the Taittiriya Upanishad (2.1–2.5), human experience is analyzed through five concentric sheaths (koshas) that veil the Atman. The seeker methodically examines and negates identification with each layer: (Vidyaranya, 1967).

Sheath (Kosha)	Level of Experience	Reason for Negation (An-atman)
Annamaya Kosha	Physical body made of food	Transient, subject to birth, decay, and death; inert without life force.
Pranamaya Kosha	Vital energy and breath	Mechanical and unconscious; fluctuates based on physical health.

Sheath (Kosha)	Level of Experience	Reason for Negation (An-atman)
Manomaya Kosha	Mind, emotions, sensory processing	Fluctuating, contradictory, and subject to mood swings and fatigue.
Vijnanamaya Kosha	Intellect and ego-sense	Intermittent; active in waking/dream states, absent in deep sleep.
Anandamaya Kosha	Causal body / deep sleep state	Conditional bliss; depends on the temporary absence of mental agitation.

VII. AVASTHATRAYA PARIKSHA (ANALYSIS OF THE THREE STATES)

The Mandukya Upanishad examines three states of consciousness: Waking (Jagrat), Dream (Swapna), and Deep Sleep (Sushupti). Because each state mutually excludes the others—the waking ego vanishes in the dream, and the dream ego vanishes in deep sleep—none of these states represent the absolute Self. The continuous thread of awareness that witnesses the presence or absence of these three states is Turiya (the "Fourth"), which is the underlying substrate of consciousness itself. (Mahadevan, T. M. P.: 1957:120).

VIII. EPISTEMOLOGICAL TOOL: NETI, NETI AND VIA NEGATIVA

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad offers the ultimate formula for Vedantic enquiry: "Athato adeshah neti neti"—"Now follows the instruction: Not this, not this" (2.3.6).

Positive definitions of the Self (e.g., "The Self is luminous like a sun") risk triggering the Objectification Trap, where the mind constructs a mental image and treats it as an object of perception. Human language operates through attributes (guna), actions (kriya), and relations (sambandha). Because Brahman is unconditioned and attribute-less (Nirguna), language cannot describe It directly (Vachyartha).

Advaita resolves this through indirect indication (Lakshana). (Comans,: 2000: 172–185). By systematically stripping away all qualified concepts and mental constructs (upadhis), Neti, Neti negates not the existence of the Self, but the identification of the Self with any object of perception. What remains when all mental representations fall away is the non-negatable, self-luminous Witnessing Consciousness (Sakshi / Abadhita Chaitanya).

IX. SUBTRACTIVE EPISTEMOLOGY IN ADVAITA VEDĀNTA: ADHYĀSA AND NETI, NETI

Śaṅkara's Adhyāsa Bhāṣya explains ignorance (avidyā) as the mutual superimposition of the Self (ātman) and the non-Self (anātman). Through this superimposition, individuals mistakenly identify

the Self with the body, senses, and mind. (Śaṅkarācārya, 1965:1). Self-knowledge therefore requires the removal of erroneous identification rather than merely the acquisition of additional information.

The Upaniṣadic method of neti, neti ("not this, not this"), discussed in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (2.3.6), complements this analysis by negating limiting descriptions of ultimate reality. This negation does not deny existence; rather, it challenges the identification of Brahman or the Self with finite forms and attributes. Thus, adhyāsa diagnoses the error, while neti, neti provides a method for withdrawing mistaken identifications.

This study proposes Subtractive Epistemology as an interpretive framework connecting these two approaches. Its central argument is that, in Advaita Vedānta, knowledge emerges through the removal of superimposition and conceptual limitations, enabling the recognition of the Self as it is. The contribution of this framework is not the claim that Śaṅkara himself used the term "Subtractive Epistemology," but the systematic integration of adhyāsa and neti, neti as complementary processes of epistemic correction. Its originality should be established through comparison with existing scholarship on Advaita, negation, ignorance, and self-knowledge.

X. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR MOKSHA

Understanding this subtractive methodology redefines the spiritual quest for liberation (Moksha):

1. Ignorance as Cognitive Error: Ignorance (Avidya) is not a lack of information, but an active misperception—mistaking the ephemeral Non-Self for the eternal Self.
2. Liberation as Ever-Present (Nitya-Siddha): Because Atman is one's intrinsic nature, Moksha cannot be an event produced in time through action (karma) or meditation (dhyana). Anything created in time is subject to destruction. Moksha is Nitya-Siddha (ever-attained); it consists entirely of removing the cognitive error that suggested one was bound.

XI. DIRECT VEDANTIC REFLECTION: TEXTUAL SUPPORT AND QUOTATIONS

The following section examines key foundational texts from the Upanishads, Shankara's treatises, and the Bhagavad Gita to discover how frequently this idea appears in Vedantic literature.

The Upanishads

- Mandukya Upanishad (7): Describes the true Self entirely through negation:

"Turiya is not that which turns conscious inland, nor that which turns conscious outward, nor that which is conscious both ways... It is unperceivable, unrelated, incomprehensible, inferable, unthinkable, indescribable... It is the cessation of all phenomena, peaceful, blissful, non-dual."

- Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (3.8.11): Sage Yajnavalkya explains to Gargi:

"That Imperishable, O Gargi, is never seen, but is the Seer; It is never heard, but is the Hearer; It is never thought, but is the Thinker; It is never known, but is the Knower. There is no other seer but This, no other hearer but This..."

XII. VIVEKACHUDAMANI BY ADI SHANKARA (CREST-JEWEL OF DISCRIMINATION)

Shankara states clearly that the path of wisdom is the elimination of wrong qualities (Upadhi):
•Verse 160: The fool believes he is the body; the man of moderate intelligence believes he is the soul within the body; but the truly enlightened man recognizes "I am Brahman" and views the eternal, unconditioned Atman as his actual Self."
• Verse 204: Therefore, recognize your true nature as Pure Consciousness, detached and calm, and let go of the attachment with the bodily sheaths, which are the result of ignorance and are of the nature of non-self."

XIII. CONCLUSION

To assert that "Vedanta is not about understanding Atman, but about un-understanding what is non-self" restores Advaita to its core methodology. If Vedanta were an affirmative discipline of object-knowledge, it would remain an endless intellectual accumulation of concepts. Instead, it is a discipline of subtraction and dis-identification.
Through study (Sravana), reflection (Manana), and deep assimilation (Nididhyasana), the seeker lets go of false identification with physical, emotional, and intellectual sheaths. When the misapprehension of the non-self is discarded, the self-luminous Atman remains revealed in its innate completeness—just as the sun shines unobscured once the storm clouds depart.

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