

# Sankara's Doctrine of Maya

Harry Oldmeadow

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## Abstract

*Like all monisms Vedanta posits a distinction between the relatively and the absolutely Real, and a theory of illusion to explain their paradoxical relationship. Sankara's resolution of the problem emerges from his discourse on the nature of maya which mediates the relationship of the world of empirical, manifold phenomena and the one Reality of Brahman. Their apparent separation is an illusory fissure deriving from ignorance and maintained by 'superimposition'. Maya, enigmatic from the relative viewpoint, is not inexplicable but only not self-explanatory. Sankara's exposition is in harmony with sapiential doctrines from other religious traditions and implies a profound spiritual therapy.*

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*Maya* is most strange. Her nature is inexplicable.  
(Sankara)<sup>i</sup>

*Brahman* is real; the world is an illusory appearance;  
the so-called soul is *Brahman* itself, and no other.  
(Sankara)<sup>ii</sup>

## I

The doctrine of *maya* occupies a pivotal position in Sankara's metaphysics. Before focusing on this doctrine it will perhaps be helpful to make clear Sankara's purposes in elaborating the Advaita Vedanta. Some of the misconceptions which have afflicted English commentaries on Sankara will thus be banished before they can cause any further mischief. Firstly, Sankara should not be understood or approached as a 'philosopher' in the modern Western sense. Ananda Coomaraswamy has rightly insisted that,

The Vedanta is not a philosophy in the current sense of the word, but only as it is used in the phrase *Philosophia Perennis*... Modern philosophies are closed systems, employing the method of dialectics, and taking for granted that opposites are mutually exclusive. In modern philosophy things are either so or not so; in eternal philosophy this depends upon our point of view. Metaphysics is not a system but a consistent doctrine; it is not merely concerned with conditioned and quantitative experience but with universal possibility. It therefore considers possibilities that may be neither possibilities of manifestation nor in any sense formal, as well as ensembles of possibilities that can be realised in a given world.<sup>iii</sup>

This claim is pregnant with significance. It alerts us to the kind of confusion which bedevils any attempt to accommodate Advaita within the assumptions and the vocabulary of a purely rational and dialectical philosophic outlook. This remains true whether one is engaged in explanation or apparent 'refutation'. The same misconceptions will ambush any study resting on the assumption that metaphysics is but a branch of philosophy.

What essentially distinguishes the metaphysical from the philosophical proposition is that the former is symbolical and descriptive, in the sense that it makes use of symbols to describe or translate knowledge possessing a greater degree of certainty than any knowledge of a sensible order, whereas philosophy... is never anything more than what it expresses. When philosophy uses reason to resolve a doubt, this proves precisely that its starting point is a doubt that it is striving to overcome, whereas... the starting point of a metaphysical formulation is always something essentially intellectually evident or certain, which is communicated, to those able to receive it, by symbolical or dialectical means designed to awaken in them the latent knowledge that they bear unconsciously and, it may even be said, eternally within them.<sup>iv</sup>

Metaphysics, then, both grows out of and points to the plenary and unitive experience of Reality. It attempts to fashion out of the ambiguities and limitations of language, and with the aid of symbolism, dialectics, analogy and whatever lies at hand, principles and propositions which testify to that Reality. Metaphysics is, in brief, "the doctrine of the uncreated".<sup>v</sup>

Sankara was not the 'author' of a new 'philosophy' but a metaphysician and spiritual teacher. His purpose was to demonstrate the unity and consistency of the Upanishadic teachings on *Brahman*, and to explain certain apparent contradictions "by a correlation of different formulations with the point of view implied in them".<sup>vi</sup> Like his gurus Gaudapada and Govinda, Sankara was engaged in an exposition of Vedanta and the development of a framework, both doctrinal and practical, for the quest of liberation.

However, Sankara's teachings should in no sense be considered irrational or anti-rational—he was, indeed, a masterful logician and a most formidable opponent in debate. The point is simply that his metaphysic, while it always mobilises reason where appropriate, cannot be strait-jacketed in any purely rationalistic framework. Reason was not the idol it has become for some but rather a tool, an instrument, not the ultimate avenue to, or test of, Reality. In another context a contemporary commentator has said: "Reason may be compared to a convex lens which directs the light of the Spirit in a particular direction and on a limited field."<sup>vii</sup> Sankara himself warned that:

the pure truth of *Atman*, which is buried under *maya*, can be reached by meditation, contemplation and other spiritual disciplines such as a knower of *Brahman* may prescribe—but never by subtle argument.<sup>viii</sup>

Mircea Eliade has suggested that:

Four basic and interdependent concepts, four 'kinetic ideas' bring us directly to the core of Indian spirituality. They are *karma*, *maya*, *nirvana*, and *yoga*. A coherent history of Indian thought could be written starting from any one of these basic concepts; the other three would inevitably have to be discussed.<sup>ix</sup>

This claim not only emphasises the cardinal importance of the doctrine of *maya* but also forewarns us of the hazards of considering it in isolation. It is with these cautionary observations in mind that we can now turn explicitly to the doctrine of *maya* and its place in Sankara's Advaita Vedanta.

## II

T.R.V. Murti has remarked that any absolutism, be it that of Madhyamika Buddhism, Vedanta or Bradleian philosophy, must posit a distinction between the ultimately Real and

the empirically or relatively real. It thus establishes a doctrine of two truths and, consequently, a theory of illusion to explain the relationship.<sup>x</sup> Mahadevan has clearly articulated the problem which Advaita Vedanta had to resolve:

Truth, knowledge, infinitude is *Brahman*. Mutable, non-intelligent, finite and perishing is the world. *Brahman* is pure, attributeless, impartite and immutable. The world is a manifold of changing phenomena, fleeting events and finite things... The problem for the Advaitin is to solve how from the pure *Brahman* the impure world of men and things came into existence. It is on this rock that most of the monistic systems break.<sup>xi</sup>

Sankara's resolution of this problem hinges on the doctrine of *maya*.

The Sankhya-Yoga *darsana* had postulated the existence of two distinct and ultimate entities, *purusa* (loosely, 'spirit') and *prakrti* (loosely, 'nature' or 'matter', not excluding subtle matter). The nature of reality had been explained in terms of a cooperative relationship between these two entities, *prakrti* being for man "a veritable fairy godmother".<sup>xii</sup> For Sankara and the Advaitins such a formulation was untenable: no such relationship could exist between two such disparate entities. Not only did they believe that the Sankhya view could not be supported logically but it also compromised the sole reality of *Brahman* which Sankara identified as the central teaching of the *Upanishads*. The alternatives to the Sankhya view were either a full-blown materialism which could immediately be thrown out of court under the auspices of Upanishadic *sruti*, or the belief that material existents are in some sense less than real—illusions utterly dependent on the reality of *Brahman* for their existence but their apparent independence and multiple existences grounded in some pervasive error. Such was the Advaitin view and it was along such lines that the puzzling relationship of the phenomenal world to *Brahman* was to be explained, the doctrine of *maya* being the key to the whole argument.

We shall return to the paradox of the two truths and to the theory of illusion in some detail when we come to discuss the world-*Brahman* relationship in specifically Advaitin terms. But first let us consider the suggestive etymology of the term *maya* which has been translated, or at least signalled, by a kaleidoscopic array of terms. These can be sampled in two clusters: (a) 'illusion', 'concealment', 'the web of seeming', 'appearance', 'glamour', 'relativity', 'classification', 'contingency', 'objectivisation', 'distinctivisation', 'exteriorisation'; (b) 'cosmic power', 'divine art', 'universal unfolding', 'cosmic magic', 'the power of Isvara' and 'the principle of self-expression'. Clearly there is, behind these terms, a principle of considerable subtlety. However, in these translations, we can see two strands of meaning—more or less negative in the first group, positive in the latter. The Sanskrit terms *avarana* ('concealment') and *viksepa* (projection) are closely associated with the notion of *maya* and designate two aspects, or guises, of it. These twin faces of *maya* are reflected in Hindu temple iconography and are traceable in the etymology of the word.

The word *maya* is linked to the root 'matr': 'to measure, form, build, or plan'. Several Greco-Latin words are also connected with this root: metre, matrix, matter and material.<sup>xiii</sup> On a more immediate, literal level the word refers simply to 'that which' (*ya*) 'is not' (*ma*).<sup>xiv</sup> In its more positive meanings we find *maya* is etymologically related to the Assyrian *maya* (magic) and to *maya*-Devi (mother of Sakyamuni Buddha), Maia (mother of Hermes) and Maria (mother of Jesus).<sup>xv</sup> Here we can detect the obvious association with the feminine and Shaktic pole of manifestation. All of these etymological considerations provide clues to the various meanings which will emerge more clearly in subsequent discussion.

As Mahadevan has said, following Sankara, "To logic *maya* is a puzzle. Wonder is its garment; inscrutable is its nature".<sup>xvi</sup> This does not mean that nothing whatsoever can be said about *maya* in logical terms but rather that the ratiocinative process must necessarily arrive, sooner or later, at certain impasses which cannot, by their nature, be overcome

logically. Sankara did elaborate a detailed and acute dialectical examination of *maya*. Of itself this could not lead one to penetrate the nature of *maya*, but through it the mind could be cleared of certain misconceptions. The following exposition is a condensed account which attempts to rehearse Sankara's argument in outline and in its most salient points.

*Maya* is a power or potency of *Brahman*, coeval with *Brahman*, completely dependent on and inseparable from *Brahman*, neither independent nor real in itself. It is not different from *Brahman* on pain of contradicting Scriptural declarations of non-difference, but it is also not non-different from *Brahman* as there cannot be identity between the Real and the unreal. Nor can *maya* be both different and non-different as such contradictors cannot reside in one and the same thing. The relationship between *maya* and *Brahman* is thus *tadatmya*, neither identity nor difference nor both.<sup>xvii</sup> A similar dialectic exposes *maya*'s status considered in terms of the Real. *Maya* is not real because it has no existence apart from *Brahman*, because it disappears at the dawn of knowledge, because it does not constitute a limit on *Brahman*. However, it is not altogether unreal because it does project the world of appearances. It is not both real and unreal because of contradiction.

*Maya* is not possessed of parts. If it were partite it would have a beginning and consequently the Lord and the *jivas* which are reflections thereof would have a beginning. Furthermore, *maya* with a beginning would necessitate another *maya* as its cause and there would thus be a contingency of infinite regress. However, *maya* cannot be partless because of the contingency of its not being the primal cause. It is the cause only of partite phenomena, and cannot be both partite and impartite because of contradiction.

*Maya*, has a phenomenal and relative character and is an appearance only (*vivarta*). It is of the nature of superimposition (*adhyasa*) and is removable by right knowledge. Its locus is *Brahman* but *Brahman* is in no way affected by *maya*. *Maya* is beginningless (*anadi*), for time arises only within it; it is unthinkable (*acintya*), for all thought is subject to it; it is indescribable (*anirvacaniya*), for all language results from it.<sup>xviii</sup> Because its nature is outside the determination of normal human categories it is indeterminable (*anirvaniya*) and indefinable. *Maya*, indeed, is most strange!

### III

Before moving into an exploration of Sankara's views on the relationship of the world to *Brahman* and the role of *maya* in 'mediating' this relationship, a small digression: it is sometimes suggested, often obliquely rather than directly, that the classical Indian view of reality is somewhat idiosyncratic. We have seen in the Vedanta the refusal to equate the 'real' with the existent. Such a position sits uncomfortably with modern Western notions derived from our recent intellectual history. However, in the long view it is the modern notion of reality (as the existent) which looks eccentric even within the Western tradition. A view more in accord with the Vedanta is everywhere to be found in traditional wisdoms. Here we shall restrict ourselves to two illustrative examples. St Augustine:

I beheld these others beneath Thee, and saw that they neither altogether are, nor altogether are not. An existence they have because they are from Thee; and yet no existence, because they are not what Thou art. For only that really is that remains unchangeably ...<sup>xix</sup>

Here we not only see a view quite in agreement with the Indian insistence on eternity and immutability but a line of thinking which, like Sankara's, accommodates certain paradoxical possibilities—things which "neither altogether are, nor altogether are not". From Hermes Trismegistus:

That which is dissoluble is destructible; only that which is indissoluble is everlasting... Nothing that is corporeal is real; only that which is incorporeal is devoid of illusion.<sup>xx</sup>

Here we again anticipate some of the themes residing in Sankara's doctrine of *maya*.

#### IV

As we have seen already the nub of the problem confronting Advaita was the relationship of the empirical world of multiple phenomena to *Brahman*.<sup>xxi</sup> It was to this question that much of Sankara's work was addressed and it is here that the doctrine of *maya* comes into full play. The Upanishadic view had suggested that the world, in all its multiplicity, emanates from, subsists in and ultimately merges in *Brahman*. In the *Mundaka Upanishad*, by way of example, we find this:

As a spider spreads and withdraws (its thread)...  
so out of the Immutable does the phenomenal universe arise.

And this:

As a thousand sparks from a blazing fire  
Leap forth each like the other,  
So friend, from the Imperishable, modes of being  
Variously spring forth and return again thereto.

This 'projection' of *Brahman* is not to be understood as something other than *Brahman*. As the same Upanishad tells us,

Immortal in very truth is *Brahman*  
East, west, north and south  
below, above *Brahman* projects Itself  
*Brahman* is the whole universe.<sup>xxii</sup>

This is by no means the pantheistic notion wherein the cosmos and the Absolute are identified, but is to be understood in the spirit of the old Rabbinic dictum: "God is the dwelling place of the universe; but the universe is not the dwelling place of God."<sup>xxiii</sup> The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* describes the Lord (Isvara) as the *mayin*, the wonder-working powerful Being out of whom the world arises.<sup>xxiv</sup> The word *maya* is used in this sense in the *Rg Veda*.

Sankara's purpose was to make explicit and to explain more fully the Upanishadic view that the universe is really only in the nature of an appearance, devoid of any ultimate ontological reality. Following the *Upanishads* Badarayana had insisted on the sole reality of *Brahman*, "The alone, supreme, eternal" which "through the glamour of Ignorance, like a magician, appears manifold...".<sup>xxv</sup> Sankara's metaphysic elucidates the nature of this manifold. The key principle is *maya* and the crucial process *adhyasa* (superimposition). We have already established that:

...the term *maya* combines the meanings of 'productive power' and 'universal illusion; it is the inexhaustible play of manifestations, deployments, combinations and reverberations, a play with which *Atma* clothes itself even as the ocean clothes itself with a mantle of foam ever renewed and never the same.<sup>xxvi</sup>

'*Maya*' can be used to signify both the principle which effects the illusory world, the power which superimposes the manifold and sensuous on the supersensuous *Brahman*, and the effects of this power, i.e. the world. In the ensuing discussion the sense in which it is being used will be clear from the context.

The relationship of the world to *Brahman*, according to Sankara, is paradoxical. The world is illusory, an appearance only. Now, several obvious questions present themselves:

if there is only one Reality (*Brahman*) how can its non-duality be sustained in the face of the multiple world? What is the nature of the illusory world of *maya*? In what sense can we speak of the world and *Brahman* as being both different and non-different? Is not *Brahman* (the cause) affected by *maya* (the effect)? What is Sankara's stance in regard to Isvara and his relationship to *maya*? We shall address these questions in turn.

The first question has already been partially answered. The phenomenal world, simply, is not real—it is not eternal and immutable, and it is sublated by the experience of *Brahman*. We recall the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*: "...of the non-real there is no coming to be: of the real there is no ceasing to be."<sup>xxvii</sup> The world is not real. It has no ontological or ultimate status. Nevertheless, while the world is not real (*sat*), nor, says Sankara, is it altogether unreal (*asat*). It is apparently real (*vyavaharika*). It is perceived and it exhibits spatial, temporal and causal order. "There could be no non-existence" (of external entities) says Sankara, because "external realities are perceived".<sup>xxviii</sup> It is the existence and the apparent reality of the world which is in need of explanation.

It has often been remarked that *maya* can be viewed from several standpoints: from that of mundane experience, the phenomenal world of *maya* is real; from that of the inquiring mind *maya* and all her effects are a riddle, a puzzle, a Sphinx; from the viewpoint of the Absolute and from that of the realised being, *maya* simply is not. The problematic relationship between *maya* and *Brahman* is only apparent from the empirical, worldly and *maya*-created point of view. It is only because of ignorance (*avidya*) that we are unable to see the non-duality of *Brahman*. Non-duality exists *a priori*: the separation of the world from *Brahman* is an illusory 'fissure' which from its own standpoint, within the limits imposed by the very nature of *maya*, is enigmatic. Right Knowledge reveals the non-duality of *Brahman* quite uncompromised or qualified by the phenomenal realm.<sup>xxix</sup>

Clearly this still leaves many questions unanswered: If this world is illusory, how is the illusion to be explained? What is the nature of the illusion? Sankara distinguishes three kinds of illusion: a phenomenal or 'objective' illusion such as our waking perception of the empirical world (*vyavaharika*); a private, subjective illusion such as a dream; and a third kind of illusion, altogether unreal, non-existent and absurd, of which the hare's horn is the most popular example.<sup>xxx</sup>

The illusion of the world is of the first kind: the world is not simply a hallucination or a chimera, nor is it an absurd non-entity. *Maya*, and thus the world, is not real but it is existent. It is certainly not non-existent. Why does this illusory world have an apparently objective homogeneity? Because the world is not an illusion of each particular individual, in which case each individual would 'dream' a different world, but of the human collectivity. The empirical and objective 'solidity' of the world proves not its reality but the collective nature of the illusion.<sup>xxxi</sup> Mircea Eliade has written of the association of *maya* with temporality. His commentary is worth quoting at some length not only because this opens up another perspective on the questions at hand but also because it consolidates some of the points already made:

...the veil of *maya* is an image-formula expressing the ontological unreality both of the world and of all human experience: we emphasise ontological, for neither the world nor human experience participates in absolute Being. The physical world and our human experience also are constituted by the universal becoming, by the temporal: they are therefore illusory, created and destroyed as they are by Time. But this does not mean they have no existence or are creations of my imagination. The world is not a mirage... The physical world and my vital and psychic experience exist, but they exist only in Time... Consequently, judged by the scale of absolute Being, the world and every experience dependent upon temporality are illusory... Many centuries before Heidegger, Indian thought had identified, in temporality, the 'fated' dimension of all existence... In other words, the discovery of historicity, as the specific mode of being of man in the world, corresponds to what the Indians have

long called our situation in *maya*... In reality our true 'Self'... has nothing to do with the multiple situations of our history.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Whence comes this illusion and how is it maintained? The brief answer is that it derives from *maya* as *avidya* (ignorance, or nescience) and is generated and sustained by *adhyasa* (superimposition). These terms require clarification.

Some commentators have distinguished *avidya* from *maya*, associating *avidya* not only with the negative aspect of *maya* and thus with the *jiva* but not with *Isvara*. Sankara himself used the two terms more or less interchangeably. The question has generated something of a philosophical squabble but Mahadevan has persuasively argued that the distinction cannot be maintained with any philosophic integrity. He exposes the faulty constructions of some of the post-Sankaran commentators who have been bent on separating *avidya* from *maya*. Nevertheless Mahadevan does concede that the distinction does have some empirical utility:

When *prakrti* generates projection or when it conforms to the desire of the agent as is the case with *Isvara* it is called *maya* in empirical usage. When it obscures or when it is independent of the agent's will it is known as nescience (*avidya*). Apart from this adjunct-conditioned distinction, there is no difference between *maya* and nescience.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

It is in this sense that some speak of *maya* as being cosmic in significance, *avidya* subjective. Until the dawn of knowledge all are subject to ensnarement in the web of appearances. This is the source of the illusion. The 'mechanism', as it were, through which the illusion is generated and sustained is *adhyasa*, the super-imposing of limitations and multiplicities upon *Brahman*. Because of *avidya* and through *adhyasa* we mistakenly take phenomenal distinctions to be real. This, according to Gaudapada, is like seeing footprints of birds in the sky.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Padmapada, one of Sankara's disciples, explained that "superimposition means that manifestation of the nature of something in another which is not of that nature". So it is when one says, "I am deaf" where a property of the organ of hearing is imposed on the self.<sup>xxxv</sup> An example Sankara himself used was "the sky is blue".<sup>xxxvi</sup> In like manner we couple the unreal with the Real and vice versa.<sup>xxxvii</sup> As a recent commentator has observed,

The main or primary application of *adhyasa* is made with respect to the self. It is the superimposition on the Self (*Atman*, *Brahman*) of what does not properly belong to the Self (finitude, change) and the superimposition on the non-self of what does properly belong to the Self (infinite, eternity) that constitute *avidya*.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Thus *maya* makes possible the 'impossible'—the appearance of the infinite and unconditioned as if finite and contingent.

We can now see how and why *maya* makes the world-nature inscrutable to the discursive mind. *Maya* is an "ontic-noetic state wherein limitations (*upadhis*) are imposed on Reality".<sup>xxxix</sup> All attachments, aversions, dreams, fears and thoughts, all memories, cognitions and mental modifications of whatever kind are grounded in *maya*. "The mind which is a product of *maya* cannot in full measure understand the nature of its parent."<sup>xl</sup> It is only intuition (in the full and characteristically Indian sense—*jnana*) that can apprehend the *Brahman*-nature. In this context it is worth remembering that in a metaphysic such as Sankara's "logical proof is only a quite provisional crystallisation of intuition ...".<sup>xli</sup> In this order *maya* is not, in fact, inexplicable but only not self-explanatory.<sup>xlii</sup>

The second question we posed in reference to the world-*Brahman* relationship: how we are to understand the 'difference' and 'non-difference'? We have already seen how in strictly logical terms this relationship can only be enunciated negatively, i.e. *maya* and *Brahman* are neither different, nor non-different, nor both. Nevertheless we can speak provisionally, metaphorically as it were, of "difference" and "non-difference". The

difference of *maya* and *Brahman* is clear enough. It is the non-difference which is more puzzling. In metaphysical terms the following principal demonstration articulates the relationship precisely:

The 'non-difference' of Real and unreal does not in any way imply either the unreality of the Self or the reality of the world. To start with the Real [*Atman/Brahman*] is not 'non-different' in function of the unreal [the world of *maya*]; it is the unreal which is 'non-different' in function of the Real, not, that is, inasmuch as it is unreality, but inasmuch as it is a 'lesser Reality', the latter being none the less 'extrinsically unreal' in relation to 'Absolute Reality'.<sup>xliii</sup>

Whilst ultimately unreal, "cosmic existence partakes of the character of the real and the unreal."<sup>xliv</sup> The relationship of the relative to the Absolute is elaborated in one fashion or another in all traditional metaphysics and is to be found in the esoteric and sapiential dimension of most religious traditions, albeit couched in the vocabulary appropriate to the tradition in question. It can, for instance, be formulated no less precisely in the terminology of the theistic Occidental traditions, i.e. in terms not of *Brahman* and *maya* but in terms of God and man. This is provided that we remember that,

In the three Semitic monotheistic religions, the name 'God' necessarily embraces all that is proper to the principle [the Absolute] with no restriction whatsoever, although their exoteric formulations evidently envisage the ontological aspect alone.<sup>xlv</sup>

In other words, 'God' refers, in this context, to the trans-ontological and Beyond-Being 'dimension' of Reality and not to personalised theological notions of God which correspond not to *nirguna-Brahman* but to *saguna-Brahman* which encompasses Isvara. One such formulation explicates the relationship this way:

That we are conformed to God—made in His image—this is certain; otherwise we should not exist. That we are contrary to God, this is also certain; otherwise we should not be different from God. Without analogy to God we should be nothing. Without opposition to God we should be God. The separation between man and God is at the same time absolute and relative... The separation is absolute because God alone is real and no continuity is possible between nothingness and Reality; but the separation is relative—or rather 'not absolute'—because nothing is outside God. In a sense it might be said that the separation is absolute as from man to God and relative as from God to man.<sup>xlvi</sup>

This kind of enunciation is closest in spirit to the Sufic tradition but similar statements of the Absolute-Relative can be found in other Occidental wisdoms, not excluding the Christian and Judaic.

Our next question: is not *Brahman* in some sense affected, contaminated, as it were, by *maya*? Are not the effects implicit in the cause? By no means, says Sankara. We shall not here rehearse the theories of apparent manifestation (*vivartavada*) or transformation (*parinama-vada*) but simply recall the famous analogy with which Sankara resolved this problem.

As the magician is not affected by this illusion (*maya*) which he himself has created, because it is without reality (*avatsu*), so also *Paramatman* is not affected by the illusion of *Samsara*... Consequently it is false to hold that the cause is polluted by the qualities, materiality etc of the effect, if they return into that essence.<sup>xlvii</sup>

The illusion is caused by the power of the magician and the ignorance of the audience: for the magician there is *no illusion whatsoever*. So with *Brahman*, *maya* is illusion until the dawn of knowledge; thence *maya* is not. *Brahman*, says Sankara, cannot be affected by *maya* just as the desert sands cannot be muddied by the waters of a mirage.<sup>xlviii</sup>

*Maya* is sometimes referred to as 'the power of Isvara' which brings us to the question of the place of Isvara in the Advaitin scheme and his connections with *maya*. Isvara's nature is of *saguna-Brahman* which might roughly be signified as 'qualified *Brahman*',<sup>xlix</sup> the qualifications having only an *ad hoc* validity and existing only from a strictly *maya*-

based point of view. In a sense Isvara can be represented as the cosmic parallel to the *jiva* with the qualification that Isvara remains untouched by *avidya*. Further,

Isvara is the reflection of *Brahman* in *maya*, and the *jiva* is the same reflection of *Brahman* in *avidya*, which is only 'part' of *maya*.<sup>1</sup>

*Brahman* thus appears as Isvara when considered from the relatively ignorant viewpoint of the *jiva*. As Vivekananda so aptly put it, "Personal God [Isvara] is the reading of the Impersonal by the human mind."<sup>li</sup> *Brahman* is in all senses prior to Isvara. Metaphysically speaking "*maya* non-manifested...is Being: Isvara".<sup>lii</sup> Here we find a principle analogous to Meister Eckhart's distinction between God (the ontological, Being dimension of the Absolute; Isvara) and the God-head (the Absolute, Beyond-Being, unqualified; *Brahman*).<sup>liii</sup>

Considered in religious rather than metaphysical terms Isvara becomes the creator of the universe, the great magician who conjures up the spectacle of the realm, out of whom the world arises. Being untouched by *avidya* and divine in nature, Isvara also becomes an exemplar and a focus of bhaktic worship. Whilst ruthlessly non-dualistic in his metaphysics Sankara himself addressed prayers to the deities. He was sympathetically disposed towards bhaktic forms of worship, denying only that ultimate realisation could be reached by such practices. Certainly he did not see bhakti only as a concession to the weakness of the popular mind—as some neo-Vedantins would have it. Isvara not only provides a focus for bhakti but also helps to bring the world into a more immediately intelligible relationship with *Brahman*.

## V

Up to this point we have, for the most part, been considering only the negative aspects of *maya*—illusion, concealment, *avidya*. Mention of Isvara provides a bridge to the other side of *maya*, the aspect of projection and of 'divine art', and to the related notion of *lila*. *Maya* is indeed 'cosmic illusion' but

...she is also divine play. She is the great theophany, the unveiling of God 'In Himself and by Himself' as the Sufis would say. *Maya* may be likened to a magic fabric woven from a warp that veils and a weft that unveils; she is the quasi-incomprehensible intermediary between the finite and the Infinite—at least from our point of view as creatures—and as such she has all the multi-coloured ambiguity appropriate to her part-cosmic, part-divine nature.<sup>liv</sup>

As this passage suggests, the Sufic doctrine of the veil is, in some respects, analogous to the doctrine of *maya* as articulated in Advaita Vedanta. *Maya* has also been called the principle of 'self-expression' (i.e., Isvara). In this context:

Creation is expression. It is not a making of something out of nothing. It is not making so much as becoming. It is the self-projection of the Supreme. Everything exists in the secret abode of the Supreme. The primary reality contains within itself the source of its own motion and change.<sup>lv</sup>

This perspective on *maya* also embraces the idea of *lila* to which we will return presently. But first a digression is in order to meet possible objections to the notion that *maya* simultaneously has both a negative and a positive character.

How is it, it may be asked, that *maya* both conceals and projects? This is the kind of question likely to vex an either/or line of ratiocinative thought. The objection is best met by analogy. We turn here to Frithjof Schuon, a contemporary commentator who has illuminated many traditional doctrines in terms intelligible across the linguistic and symbolic barriers of the various traditional wisdoms:

It is very easy to label as 'vague' or 'contradictory' something one cannot understand. Rationalist thinkers generally refuse to admit a truth that represents contradictory aspects and that is situated

seemingly beyond grasping, midway between two negative enunciations. Now there are some realities which could be formulated in no other way than this. The ray which proceeds from a light is itself light, since it illumines, but it is not the light from which it proceeded; therefore it is neither that light nor yet other than that light, though growing ever weaker in proportion to its distance from its source. A faint light is light for the darkness it illumines, but darkness for the light whence it emanates. Similarly *maya* is both light and darkness at the same time: she is light inasmuch as being the 'divine art', she reveals the secrets of *Atma*; she is darkness inasmuch as she conceals *Atma*. As darkness she is ignorance, *avidya*.<sup>lvi</sup>

The idea of *lila* can also be explored in another, larger context. A perennial line of questioning which inevitably arises in any consideration of the religious doctrines of creation and manifestation runs along these lines: why does manifestation occur in the first place? Why, in crude terms, does the world exist? Here we shall not concern ourselves with questions of beginning and end, of temporality and eschatology, which, in Vedanta, are always subordinate to the inquiry into 'the relation of ground and consequent'. Rather, the question here is this: is there any 'explanation' for the appearance, as it were, of *maya*? Here we will touch lightly on three responses to this question: the conventional Vedantin attitude; the notion of *lila*; and a metaphysical 'explanation' not itself drawn from Sankara's metaphysic but in no way incompatible with it.

Radhakrishnan has articulated the typical Vedantin response to these kinds of questions when he writes:

If we ask why the Supreme has this... character, why it is what it is [and thus the 'why' of *maya*] we can only accept it as a given reality. It is the ultimate irrationality in the sense that no logical derivation of the given is possible. It is apprehended by us in spiritual consciousness and accounts for the nature of experience in all its aspects. It is the only philosophical explanation that is possible or necessary.<sup>lvii</sup>

In other words certain questions about *maya* cannot be resolved outside the plenary experience. Elsewhere Radhakrishnan reminds us that,

If we raise the question as to how [or why] the finite rises from out of the bosom of the infinite, Sankara says that it is an incomprehensible mystery...<sup>lviii</sup>

As Murti has observed, the doctrine of *maya* is not, in itself, an explanation of this mystery.<sup>lix</sup>

As we have seen already, any attempt to explain the 'creation' or 'origin' of the world is bound to fail not only because the mind is trapped in *maya* but also because the very notion of creation is an error. As Gaudapada stressed, "...this is the supreme truth: nothing whatever is born" (or 'created').<sup>lx</sup> It is only when we have torn the veil of *maya*, as it were, that we can see that this kind of question is ultimately meaningless.<sup>lxi</sup>

All this notwithstanding, the notion of *lila*, is in some sense a kind of metaphorical explanation. In the *Brahma-Sutra Bhasya* Sankara says:

The activity of the Lord...may be supposed to be more sport [*lila*] proceeding from his own nature, without reference to any purpose.<sup>lxii</sup>

This recalls Krsna's words in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

There is naught in the three worlds that I have need to do, nor anything I have not gotten that I might get, yet I participate in action.<sup>lxiii</sup>

This idea of the playfulness of the Creator Lord is found in the *Rg Veda*, the *Upanishads* and the *Gita* though the word *lila* as such is not always used.<sup>lxiv</sup> The notion conveys that Isvara's creation answers to no compelling necessity or constraint but arises out of an inherent exuberance or joy. It is spontaneous, purposeless, without responsibility or moral consequence—in short, like play.

Ramakrishna was fond of recounting the following story which contains something of this idea of the playfulness of Isvara. (The anecdote is perfumed with the scents of Hindu spirituality.)

Once there came a saddhu here [Ramakrishna would relate] who had a beautiful glow on his face. He just sat and smiled. Twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening, he'd come out of his room and look around. He'd look at the trees, the bushes, the sky and Ganges and he'd raise his arms and dance, beside himself with joy. Or he'd roll on the ground, laughing and exclaiming 'Bravo! What fun! How wonderful it is, this *maya*. What an illusion God has conjured up!' This was his way of doing worship.<sup>lxv</sup>

It may be noted in passing that the idea of God's playfulness is by not peculiar to the Hindu tradition. This formulation from Meister Eckhart, for instance, is in no way at odds with Sankara's:

There has always been this play going on in the Father-nature... sport and players are the same.<sup>lxvi</sup>

Or this, from Boehme:

The creation is the same sport out of himself.<sup>lxvii</sup>

The third response we anticipated was the metaphysical 'resolution' of the problem of manifestation. To translate the following formulation back into specifically Hindu terms we need only substitute *Brahman* for 'the Absolute' and 'Essence', and *maya* for 'illusion'.

As for the question of the 'origin' of illusion it is amongst those questions that can be resolved—or rather, there is nothing in it to resolve—though this resolution cannot be adjusted to suit all needs of causality; there are demonstrations which, whether they are understood or not, are sufficient in themselves and indeed constitute the pillars of metaphysical doctrine... the infinitude of Reality implies the possibility of its own negation... and this negation being impossible in the Absolute itself, it is necessary that this 'possibility of the impossible' should be realised in an 'internal dimension' which is 'neither real nor unreal', that is to say which is real on its own level while being unreal in respect of Essence, with the result that we touch everywhere the Absolute, from which we cannot emerge, although it is at the same time infinitely far off so that no thought can ever circumscribe it.<sup>lxviii</sup>

While Sankara maintains the traditional reticence on this question it is clear that such a demonstration is precisely attuned to his metaphysics: this is anything but accidental. The harmony of all sapiential doctrines, of metaphysics expounded within the protective cadre of a properly constituted religious tradition, derives not from any subjective or psychological source. Rather, it springs from the direct apprehension of Reality which is the ultimate purpose of the gnostic or jnamic dimension within each religion.<sup>lxix</sup> Such metaphysics must be sharply differentiated from the self-contradictory notion of metaphysics as a branch of profane philosophy, i.e. a so-called metaphysics deriving from purely subjective and mental resources, cut off from the spiritual disciplines and bereft of the supports transmitted by a religious tradition.

## VI

These considerations, appropriately, lead us into a brief examination of the place of the doctrine of *maya* in the spiritual life. The role of this doctrine in the quest for liberation is implicit in much that has already been said. In conclusion a few brief remarks will suffice.

In Sankara's teachings the doctrine of *maya* is integral not only to a profound metaphysic but to the spiritual therapies which were its inevitable accompaniment. Neither Sankara nor any other Hindu metaphysician had the slightest interest in the doctrine as an intellectual curiosity but only as part of a way towards Right Knowledge, towards liberation.

Certainly the doctrine of *maya*, properly understood, never led anyone into 'pessimism' or 'nihilism' such as is postulated by some critics of Hinduism. The denial of the ultimate reality of the world was inextricably linked with the affirmation that enlightenment and liberation were possible, possible indeed within this life. To separate the doctrine of *maya* from the belief in *jivanmukti* can only lead to the sort of lop-sided view that falls prey to the prejudices mentioned above. On this issue we can do no better than recall the words of Eliade when he wrote:

...perhaps more than any other civilisation, that of India loves and reverences Life, and enjoys it at every level. For *maya* is not [a] gratuitous cosmic illusion... to become conscious of the cosmic illusion does not mean, in India, the discovery that all is Nothingness, but simply that no experience in the world of History has any ontological validity and therefore, that our human condition ought not to be regarded as an end in itself...<sup>lxx</sup>

The doctrine of *maya* helps us to develop an attitude in which the world can be rightly regarded. If we are mindful of the fugitive and illusory nature of the world then the realm of *maya* itself can help us in our quest—were it otherwise the Hindus would not have elaborated complex cosmological and other sciences.<sup>lxxi</sup> The essential purpose of the doctrine is to free us from the snares of material existence, to deliver us from the countless solicitations of the world which only tighten the bonds of ignorance and chain us to the samsaric wheel.

This kind of teaching we find on all sides where spiritual welfare is the focus of attention. A few eloquent examples derived from other traditions will recall the universality of this central theme in religious teachings:

The phenomena of life may be likened unto a dream, a phantom; a bubble, a shadow, a glistening dew, or lightning flash, and thus they ought to be contemplated. (*Prajna-Paramita*).<sup>lxxii</sup>

The world is finite, and truly that other is infinite: image and form are a barrier to that Reality.  
(Rumi)<sup>lxxiii</sup>

A life devoted to the interests and enjoyments of this world, spent and wasted in the slavery of earthly desires, may be truly called a dream, as having all the shortness, vanity and delusion of a dream...  
(William Law)<sup>lxxiv</sup>

It is Sankara's purpose to awaken us from this dream, to awaken us to the true Self and to Reality through Right Knowledge. The point of doctrines like that of *maya* is to lead us beyond the level where the question is asked (the level of mental modifications) into the realm where we can experience the answer. Once the plenary, unitive experience of realisation has dispelled our ignorance *maya* no longer is. As the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* tells us:

By becoming what one is  
The whole world of appearance will once again  
Be lost to sight at last.<sup>lxxv</sup>

Herein lies the purpose, the justification, the end of all Sankara's doctrines. The metaphysics Sankara elaborated is not only the crown-jewel of India's religious thought but a spiritual therapy addressed to our innermost nature and to our most profound needs.

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<sup>i</sup> Sankara, *The Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* tr. Swami Prabhavananda & Christopher Isherwood, New York: New American Library, 1970, p49. (The transliteration, accenting and italicizing of Sanskrit terms has been standardized throughout.)

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- ii Sankara per T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Ramana Maharshi, the Sage of Arunacala* London: Unwin & Allen, 1978, p120.
- iii A.K. Coomaraswamy, "The Vedanta and Western Tradition" in *Coomaraswamy Vol 2: Selected Papers—Metaphysics* Princeton: Bollingen Series, 1977, p6.
- iv F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* New York: Harper & Row, 1975, pp29-33.
- v T. Burckhardt, *Alchemy: science of the cosmos, science of the soul* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, p36.
- vi Coomaraswamy, op.cit., p4. See also p22.
- vii Burckhardt, op.cit., p36.
- viii *Crest-Jewel*, p43.
- ix M. Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* Princeton: Bollingen Series, 1969, p3. It should perhaps be noted that by *nirvana* Eliade is here signalling whatever bears on the Absolute, be it called *nirvana*, *Brahman*, or whatever. Similarly, the term *yoga* is to be understood in its full amplitude as 'spiritual means' rather than as referring only to a particular *darsana*.
- x T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* London: Allen & Unwin, 1974, p104 and 320ff. See also R. Brooks, "Some Uses and Implications of Advaita Vedanta's Doctrine of *Maya*" in *The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedanta* ed. M. Sprung, Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973, p98.
- xi T.M.P. Mahadevan *The Philosophy of Advaita* Madras: Ganesh & Co, 1957, p227.
- xii For a discussion of the Sankhya position see M. Hiriyana, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy* London: Unwin, 1978, pp107-120.
- xiii Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p59.
- xiv T.M.P. Mahadevan *Outlines of Hinduism* Bombay: Chetana, 1956, p149.
- xv W. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* London: Allen & Unwin, 1971, p83.
- xvi Mahadevan, *Philosophy of Advaita* pp232-233..
- xvii *ibid.*, pp233-234.
- xviii See E. Deutsch *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1969, p29, and "Introduction" to *Crest-Jewel*, pp16ff.
- xix *Confessions* 9.vii, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- xx from *Stobaei*, quoted in Perry, p101.
- xxi Ultimately it is obviously improper to speak of any 'relationship' between *Brahman* and the world as it is anchored in a dualist conception which Advaita seeks to overcome. However such a notion is expedient if this caution is kept in mind. Further, we will be less wide of the mark if we speak of the relationship of the world to Brahman, but not the obverse.
- xxii *Mundaka Upanishad* 1.i.vii & 2.ii.xii.
- xxiii Quoted in S. Radhakrishnan, *Selected Writings on Philosophy, Religion and Culture* ed. R.A. McDermott, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970, p146.
- xxiv *Svetasvatara Upanishad* 4.x.
- xxv per P. Duessen, *The System of the Vedanta* New York: Dover, 1973, p187.
- xxvi F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence* New York: Harper & Row, 1975, p89.
- xxvii *Bhagavad Gita* 2.xvi.
- xxviii *The Brahma-Sutra Bhaysa of Sankaracarya* tr. Swami Gambirananda, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965, pp418ff.
- xxix See Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence* p215. Sankara's argument is supported by the theory of *vivartavada* which demonstrates that the world of *maya* is only an apparent manifestation of *Brahman*. For commentary see E. Deutsch, pp27-2. It should be noted that *Brahman*, properly speaking, is non-dual rather than one as the category of number is not applicable.
- xxx See "Introduction" to *Crest-Jewel*, p15.
- xxxi F. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* London: Perennial, 1979, p68, and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* London: Perennial, 1969, p169.

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- xxxii M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* London: Collins, 1972, pp239-240.
- xxxiii Mahadevan, *The Philosophy of Advaita* p231. See also P.T. Raju, *Idealistic Thought of India* Boston: Harvard University Press, 1953, p115.
- xxxiv Gaudapada, *Mandukya-karika* III.48 & IV.28, quoted in Mahadevan, *Ramana Maharshi* p120.
- xxxv Deutsch, p34.
- xxxvi *Crest-Jewel*, p62. For a discussion of the statement "the sky is blue" see R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, p35.
- xxxvii *Crest-Jewel*, p62.
- xxxviii Deutsch, p34
- xxxix *ibid.*, pp28 & 30.
- xl Mahadevan, *The Philosophy of Advaita* p250 & p248. See also J.G. Arapura, "Maya and the Discourse about Brahman" in *The Problem of Two Truths* p111, and Radhakrishnan, *Selected Writings* p140.
- xli Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives* p10.
- xlii Hiriyana, p161.
- xliii Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives* pp98-99.
- xliv Radhakrishnan, *Selected Writings* p143.
- xlv F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* London: Perennial, 1965, pp96-97.
- xlvi Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives* pp160-161.
- xlvii Sankara quoted in P. Duessen, p275. See also p278.
- xlviii *Crest-Jewel*, p49.
- xlix Hiriyana, pp164-165. See also F. Schuon, "The Mystery of the Veil", *Studies in Comparative Religion* XI:2, Spring 1977, p71.
- l P.T. Raju, pp116ff.
- li "Introduction" to *Crest-Jewel*, p23.
- lii Schuon, *Light on the Ancient World* p97.
- liii For an accessible discussion of this distinction see H. Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* New York: Harper & Row, 1976, pp54-59.
- liv Schuon, *Light on the Ancient World* p89.
- lv Radhakrishnan, *Selected Writings* p141.
- lvi Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives* pp100-101.
- lvii Radhakrishnan, *Selected Writings* p141.
- lviii S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* London: Unwin, 1974, pp48-49.
- lix T.R.V. Murti, "The individual in Indian religious thought" in *The Indian Mind* ed. C. Moore, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967, p337.
- lx Gaudapada, quoted in Mahadevan, *Ramana Maharshi* p120.
- lxi Raju, *Idealistic Thought* pp113-114.
- lxii Sankara *Brahma-Sutra Bhasya* II.i.33 in Deutsch, p38. For the context see Swami Gambhirananda's translation, p361.
- lxiii *Bhagavad Gita* 3.xxii-xxv. See A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Lila" in *Selected Papers—Metaphysics*, p150.
- lxiv *ibid.*, pp151ff. See also "Play and Seriousness" in the same volume, pp156-158.
- lxv C. Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974, p103.
- lxvi Coomaraswamy, "Lila", p148.
- lxvii *ibid.*, p148.
- lxviii Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* pp72-73. As Schuon has also written, "the Divine Maya, relativity, is the necessary consequence of the very infinitude of the Principle...", *Logic and Transcendence* p89. See also F. Schuon, "Atma-Maya", *Studies in Comparative Religion* 7:3, Spring, 1977, *passim*.
- lxix Contemporary and modernistic commentators, tyrannised by ratiocinative modes of thought, often betray their own ignorance in their attempts to criticize Sankara's doctrines. Thus, for example, Renou when he

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asserts that the idea of maya "disguises the mutual irreducibility of the One and the Many". L. Renou, *Religions of Ancient India* New York: Schocken, 1968, p56. This signals a failure to understand that from the enlightened point of view, the "Many" is not.

<sup>lxx</sup> Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* pp242-243.

<sup>lxxi</sup> See S.H. Nasr, *Man and Nature* London: Allen & Unwin, 1976, pp188-189.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Quoted in Perry. *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* p96.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> *ibid.*, p112.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> *ibid.*, p95.

<sup>lxxv</sup> *Svetasvatara Upanishad* 1.x.

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