

**BHAGAVAD GITA AND INDIAN ETHICS PREACHING OF
GREAT PHILOSOPHER ADI SANKARA**

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Abstract

This paper examines the central role of Jnana (spiritual knowledge) in ethical living through the lens of Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Shankara asserts that ignorance (Avidya) of the true Self is the root of all moral failings. Ethical behavior, in his view, is not the result of social conditioning or fear of punishment but arises naturally from Self-realization — the knowledge that the individual soul (Atman) is identical with the universal soul (Brahman). Once this non-dual truth is realized, the ego dissolves, and the individual perceives the unity of all existence. This profound insight results in spontaneous adherence to core ethical values such as Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truth), Karuna (compassion), and Vairagya (detachment). The enlightened being, or Jivanmukta, embodies the highest ethical ideal, acting without attachment or selfish motive. The study underscores Shankara's view that true knowledge is both the foundation and the culmination of ethical life.

Keywords: Jnana- Adi Shankaracharya - Ethical Living- Advaita Vedanta - Self-Realization - Avidya, Atman, Brahman, Ahimsa, Jivanmukta - Spiritual Ethics

Introduction

In the realm of Indian philosophy, Adi Shankaracharya, the prominent philosopher of Advaita Vedanta, offers profound insights into the nature of reality, the Self, and the essence of ethical living. According to Shankara, knowledge (Jnana) is the key to understanding the true nature of the self and the universe. This knowledge, which transcends the limitations of the mind and senses, reveals the non-dual nature of reality — the realization that the individual soul (Atman) is identical with the Supreme Brahman, the ultimate reality. Shankara posits that ethical behavior does not stem from external rules or societal conditioning but arises naturally from the realization of one's true nature. He argues that ignorance (Avidya) — the false perception of separateness and individuality — is the root cause of moral failures. Once this ignorance is dispelled through the awakening of Jnana, an individual understands their intrinsic oneness with all beings, leading to spontaneous ethical living

Review of literature

According to Shattuck (1999:18-20) between 2000 and 1500 BCE, people from central Asia began to migrate to and settle in western and northern Europe, south and east Iran and India. The group that migrated to India settled in the Indus River Valley. They called themselves Aryans. Over time they became the dominant force in northwest India and their culture and belief systems amalgamated with that of the original inhabitants. When the Aryans settled in India, they brought with them the sacred Sanskrit language. In support of this theory, an examination of Sanskrit reveals a close relationship with the Indo-European languages. Burnett (1992:33) confirms that in 1786 Sir William Jones observed that the Sanskrit languages were closely related to the languages of Greece, Rome, the Celts and Germans. Shattuck (1999:19) suggests that this relationship is attributed to the ancient connections of these immigrants and that therefore Sanskrit, Persian and the Latin languages are all related and stem from the Indo-European language family. Dr. Surendra Patha (Adi Shankaracharya's message is a message of hope, truth and love. Through his life, Shankara presented an example before us to live by the Truth. One doesn't believe that the Hindu philosophy, as we know it today, was really properly articulated in the way that it is today. So it is a long time before we get this kind of crystal clear nirguna/saguna and all of that 'tattwamasi' interpretation along these lines.

Jnana and Avidya: The Root of Ethical Failure

In Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, the foundation of both spiritual liberation and ethical living lies in the distinction between Jnana (true knowledge) and Avidya (ignorance). According to Shankara, Avidya is the fundamental cause of all human suffering, delusion, and unethical behavior. It is the ignorance of one's true nature — the mistaken identification of the Self (Atman) with the body, mind, and ego, rather than with Brahman, the infinite, non-dual reality. This ignorance gives rise to duality — the perception that one is separate from others and from the world. As a result, it fosters self-centeredness, desire, fear, jealousy, hatred, and attachment. These tendencies manifest in unethical actions such as violence, dishonesty, greed, and exploitation. Thus, from Shankara's perspective, the ethical failures of individuals and societies stem not from a lack of moral instruction, but from a deeper metaphysical ignorance. Therefore, ethical transformation, in Shankara's view, is not possible without spiritual awakening. In this way, Avidya is the root of ethical failure, and Jnana is the root of ethical excellence. The journey from ignorance to knowledge is not only a spiritual quest but also the foundation for a moral and harmonious life.

Jnana as the Basis of Dharma

In the philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya, Jnana (Self-knowledge) is not only the key to liberation (moksha) but also the true foundation of Dharma — righteous living or moral duty. Unlike conventional views that consider Dharma as a set of externally prescribed duties or social

rules, Shankara emphasizes that real Dharma flows from inner wisdom rooted in the realization of the non-dual Self (Atman). According to Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, when a person is under the influence of Avidya (ignorance), they identify with the body and ego, and act out of personal desires and attachments. In such a state, Dharma is often misunderstood or followed mechanically, motivated by fear, social obligation, or personal gain. However, when this ignorance is destroyed through Jnana — the knowledge that Atman is Brahman, and all beings are essentially one — the individual's ethical perspective transforms completely.

A Jnani (one who has attained Self-knowledge) does not need external guidance to act righteously. Their actions are naturally aligned with Dharma, because:

- They no longer seek personal gain or act from selfish desires.
- They perceive all beings as their own Self and hence naturally practice Ahimsa (non-violence), Karuna (compassion), and Satya (truthfulness).
- They remain unaffected by pleasure and pain, success and failure, and thus act with equanimity and detachment (Vairagya).

Shankara explains that such ethical conduct is not imposed but spontaneous, because it arises from clarity of vision.

Social Relevance of Shankara's View

While Adi Shankaracharya is often associated with renunciation and spiritual liberation, his teachings hold deep social relevance, especially in today's fragmented and conflict-ridden world. At the heart of Shankara's philosophy is the idea that true knowledge (Jnana) leads to the realization of the oneness of all beings. This insight is not only spiritually transformative but also ethically and socially empowering. In a society increasingly divided by ego, materialism, inequality, and violence, Shankara's vision offers a radical solution: inner transformation through self-knowledge. When individuals realize that the same Brahman dwells in all beings, discrimination, exploitation, and hatred lose their foundation. Ethical values such as non-violence, truthfulness, compassion, humility, and universal brotherhood become natural outcomes of this realization.

Some key aspects of the social relevance of Shankara's view include:

- **Promotion of Social Harmony:** By emphasizing the unity of existence, Shankara's Advaita Vedanta breaks down barriers of caste, creed, race, and religion. The Jnani sees no distinction between self and other, fostering equality and respect for all.
- **Foundation for Ethical Leadership:** Leaders grounded in Jnana would act not out of self-interest or power-hunger, but from a place of wisdom, compassion, and responsibility.

- **Inner Peace as a Basis for Outer Peace:** Shankara's approach suggests that peace in society begins with peace in the individual. A person free from ego and desire contributes to a **less violent, more balanced world**.
- **Critique of Superficial Morality:** Shankara's teachings encourage people to move beyond mechanical ritualism and blind obedience to social customs, and instead cultivate genuine inner ethics based on knowledge and awareness.

Though Shankara lived in the 8th century, his emphasis on conscious living, spiritual insight, and ethical self-governance remains deeply applicable in modern contexts — from personal growth to education, community relations, and even global peace efforts.

Conclusion

Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta presents a profound philosophical foundation for ethical living, rooted in Jnana (Self-knowledge). In contrast, Jnana reveals the non-dual nature of the Self and Brahman, dissolving egoistic tendencies and replacing them with values like compassion, truth, and non-violence. In a world plagued by division and moral confusion, the vision of oneness offers a spiritual basis for unity, justice, and peace.

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