

VEDANTA

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1. Core Definition

Vedanta, literally translating to "the end or culmination of the Vedas" (from Sanskrit: *Veda* meaning knowledge and *anta* meaning end), represents a vast and intricate system of metaphysical theories and cognitive practices that form the fundamental philosophical core of Hinduism. It is not a single, monolithic school of thought but rather a family of traditions dedicated to synthesizing and interpreting the profound teachings contained within the **Upanishads**, the final sections of the Vedic corpus. The primary aim of Vedanta is to attain *moksha*, or spiritual liberation, through the direct realization of the ultimate reality, **Brahman**. This realization involves understanding the true nature of the self (**Atman**) and its relationship--or lack thereof--to the cosmos and the material world. Its origins trace back to India around the sixth century BCE, coinciding with the composition of the earliest major Upanishads, marking a profound shift from the ritualistic focus of the earlier Vedic period toward deep introspection and philosophical speculation regarding consciousness and existence.

The various schools within Vedanta grapple with the precise nature of the relationship between **Brahman** (the ultimate, unchanging reality), **Atman** (the individual soul or self), and **Jagat** (the phenomenal world). While all Vedantic schools accept the authority of the Upanishads, their interpretations differ dramatically, leading to diverse metaphysical doctrines ranging from radical non-dualism to strict dualism. Despite these internal disputes, the shared commitment to understanding the relationship between the self and the absolute, and the use of disciplined inquiry (*vichara*) and meditation (*dhyana*) as methods of realization, unify the Vedantic tradition. The sophistication of these ancient Indian philosophies extends beyond religious doctrine, offering complex epistemological frameworks that address the nature of knowledge, perception, and the limitations of human understanding in perceiving ultimate truth.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **Vedanta** succinctly captures its historical positioning within the Vedic literature. The four Vedas--Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda--are historically layered texts, culminating in the philosophical treatises known as the **Upanishads**. These treatises constitute the final portions of the Vedas (hence the 'end of the Veda') and are often referred to as *Jnana Kanda* (the knowledge section), distinguishing them from the earlier *Karma Kanda* (the ritualistic section). The development of Vedanta as a coherent school of philosophy began when thinkers sought to reconcile the sometimes seemingly contradictory statements found across the various Upanishads

into a unified system. This crucial systematization was primarily achieved through the composition of the **Brahma Sutras** by Badarayana, dating roughly between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE.

The historical trajectory of Vedanta involves three major phases: the revelatory phase (the Upanishads), the systematizing phase (the Brahma Sutras), and the commentarial phase (the works of major Acharyas or teachers). It was the commentarial phase, beginning most prominently with **Adi Shankara** in the 8th century CE, that solidified Vedanta's prominence. Shankara's Advaita (non-dualist) interpretation, along with the later dualistic and qualified non-dualistic interpretations offered by figures like Ramanuja and Madhva, established the robust intellectual framework for all subsequent Hindu philosophy. These subsequent interpretations demonstrated that the foundational texts were fertile ground for multiple, distinct metaphysical systems, ensuring the intellectual vitality and sustained relevance of the Vedantic tradition throughout the medieval and modern periods.

3. Foundational Texts: The Prasthan Trayi

The entirety of Vedantic philosophy rests upon a triple foundation of authoritative texts known collectively as the **Prasthan Trayi** (The Three Sources). Mastery of these three components--the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras, and the Bhagavad Gita--is considered essential for any scholar or teacher wishing to establish a legitimate school of Vedanta. Each of the three texts serves a specific interpretive purpose and provides a unique angle on the core teachings regarding Brahman and liberation. The rigorous study of these sources ensures that Vedantic philosophy remains grounded in scriptural authority while allowing for deep intellectual exploration.

The Upanishads (Shruti Prasthan): These texts constitute the revealed scripture (*Shruti*) and are considered the primary source of Vedantic knowledge. They contain the central metaphysical inquiries, such as "*Tat Tvam Asi*" (Thou Art That), which affirm the identity of the individual soul (Atman) and the ultimate reality (Brahman). They are foundational because they present the direct, intuitive experiences of the ancient sages regarding ultimate truth.

The Brahma Sutras (Nyaya Prasthan): Also known as the Vedanta Sutras, this text is the logical and systematic treatise (*Nyaya*) designed to resolve apparent contradictions within the Upanishads. Composed in aphoristic style, the Brahma Sutras provide a framework for coherent philosophical argument, demanding that all major Vedantic commentators base their doctrines on their interpretation of these concise verses.

The Bhagavad Gita (Smriti Prasthan): Considered the memorial tradition (*Smriti*), the Gita integrates the philosophical teachings of the Upanishads with practical ethics and devotion (*Bhakti Yoga*). Set within the narrative of the Mahabharata, it serves as an accessible guide to applying Vedantic principles in daily life, emphasizing duty (*Dharma*) and various paths to liberation (*Yoga*).

4. Major Schools (Sampradayas) of Vedanta

The central point of contention among Vedantic thinkers is the degree of identity or difference between **Brahman** and the phenomenal world/individual soul. This single metaphysical dispute gave rise to several distinct schools (*Sampradayas*), each providing a unique interpretation of the Prasthanas Trayi. The three most historically significant and enduring schools dominate the landscape of classical Indian philosophy: Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Dvaita.

Advaita Vedanta (Non-Dualism), championed by Adi Shankara, holds that only Brahman is ultimately real (*sat*) and that the world as we perceive it is an illusory superimposition (*Maya*). The individual soul (Atman) is fundamentally non-different from Brahman; the apparent separation is due solely to ignorance (*avidya*). This school emphasizes the path of knowledge (*Jnana Yoga*) as the primary means to liberation, where liberation is simply the realization of one's already existing identity with the Absolute. Advaita has had a pervasive influence on global philosophy and Eastern spirituality.

Vishishtadvaita (Qualified Non-Dualism), systematized by **Ramanuja** in the 11th century, posits a middle ground. It asserts that Brahman is the sole reality, but the individual souls and the material world are real, inseparable attributes (modes) of Brahman. Brahman is analogous to the soul of a body, where the universe (souls and matter) is the body. This school strongly integrates the path of devotion (*Bhakti Yoga*) as the most effective means to attain union with the supreme being, whom Ramanuja often identified with Vishnu.

Dvaita Vedanta (Dualism), founded by **Madhva** in the 13th century, asserts a strict, eternal distinction between the individual soul and Brahman (identified as God). In this view, God, the self, and matter are eternally separate entities. Dvaita maintains that difference is absolute and essential, rejecting both the identity claim of Advaita and the qualified identity of Vishishtadvaita. Liberation is achieved through devotion to God, who grants release from the cycle of rebirth.

5. Key Metaphysical Concepts

All schools of Vedanta operate using a shared vocabulary of complex metaphysical and epistemological concepts, although the interpretation of these terms varies significantly across the traditions. Understanding these key terms is essential for grasping the profound depth of Vedantic thought, which deals fundamentally with the nature of consciousness and reality.

Brahman: The ultimate reality, the absolute, unchanging, infinite, and transcendent source of all existence. In Advaita, Brahman is impersonal and without attributes (*Nirguna*), while in dualistic schools, Brahman is viewed as a personal God (*Saguna*) who possesses infinite auspicious qualities.

Atman: The self, or the individual soul. The central quest of Vedanta is to determine the true nature of Atman, whether it is identical to Brahman (Advaita) or eternally distinct from it (Dvaita). The realization that Atman is distinct from the physical body, the senses, and the mind is the first step toward spiritual inquiry.

Maya: A crucial concept, particularly in Advaita, referring to the power of illusion that veils Brahman and projects the empirical world of multiplicity and change. Maya is neither strictly real nor unreal; it is the cosmic principle responsible for the appearance of duality in the non-dual reality. Overcoming **Maya** through knowledge (*Jnana*) is necessary for liberation.

Moksha (Liberation): The ultimate goal of all Vedantic practice. It signifies freedom from *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth. For Advaita, Moksha is the removal of ignorance leading to the realization of identity with Brahman. For other schools, it is the attainment of eternal dwelling in the presence of the Supreme Being.

6. Significance and Impact on Philosophy and Cognition

The impact of **Vedanta** has been far-reaching, fundamentally shaping the course of Indian philosophy and culture and, particularly in the modern era, influencing global spirituality and thought. Within India, Vedanta provided the intellectual and spiritual framework for the resurgence of Hinduism during the Bhakti movement and continues to inform the practices of millions through meditation, yoga, and ethical systems. Furthermore, the intellectual rigor required for navigating the complex arguments between the various schools fostered a culture of deep philosophical debate that valued logic and textual interpretation alongside revelation.

The cognitive practices developed within Vedantic traditions are highly sophisticated. They emphasize the necessity of self-inquiry (*vichara*), focusing the mind (*dhyana*), and ethical purification (e.g., non-violence, truthfulness) to prepare the intellect for receiving profound metaphysical truths. These practices, systematized in various forms of Yoga, are aimed at retraining the mind to perceive reality beyond the limitations imposed by the senses and ego. This focus on introspection and the systematic analysis of consciousness has drawn attention from modern psychologists and philosophers interested in the structure of subjective experience and altered states of consciousness.

The influence of Vedanta extended significantly to Western intellectual thought in the 19th and 20th centuries. Figures like Arthur Schopenhauer and thinkers associated with the Transcendentalist movement were deeply impressed by the Upanishads and the monistic philosophy of Advaita. In the 20th century, Swami Vivekananda introduced Vedanta explicitly to the West, framing it as a universal, rational philosophy compatible with modern science, thus initiating a global spiritual movement rooted in these ancient Indian concepts.

7. Relationship to Modern Science and Quantum Theory

A unique aspect of Vedanta's contemporary relevance lies in the parallels drawn between its metaphysical postulates and findings in modern physics, particularly the development of quantum theory. The original source content notes that the sophistication of certain Vedantic philosophies "has greatly impacted contemporary science, inclusive of the cultivation of quantum theory." While this statement may be interpreted broadly, the connection often revolves around the Advaitic emphasis on non-dualism, the illusory nature of perceived matter, and the fundamental role of consciousness.

Pioneers of quantum mechanics, such as Erwin Schrödinger and Werner Heisenberg, noted striking similarities between the conclusions drawn from quantum physics and the monistic view of reality articulated in the Upanishads. Schrödinger, for instance, frequently cited Vedantic philosophy, particularly regarding the identity of the observer and the observed, and the idea that consciousness is singular and universal, echoing the Advaitic concept that **Atman** is ultimately **Brahman**. Quantum theory posits a reality where subatomic particles exist as probabilities until observed, blurring the lines between objective reality and the role of the conscious observer--a concept that resonates powerfully with the Vedantic assertion of **Maya**, where the world's solidity is dependent upon perception and ignorance.

However, it is crucial to note that this relationship is often one of philosophical congruence rather than direct scientific influence on the empirical development of quantum physics. Scientists find in Vedanta a pre-existing philosophical framework that seems to anticipate the counter-intuitive nature of subatomic reality. This convergence highlights the enduring power of Vedantic thought to address foundational questions about existence, consciousness, and the unity of the cosmos, appealing both to philosophers seeking coherence and physicists seeking context for their findings.

8. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its profound influence, Vedanta, particularly its dominant Advaita school, has been subject to continuous philosophical debate and criticism, both internally from other Vedantic schools and externally from other orthodox and heterodox Indian philosophical traditions (e.g., Nyaya, Vaisheshika, and Buddhism). The main internal debate centers on the problem of difference versus identity. Dualist schools (Dvaita) criticize Advaita for rendering the phenomenal world and the individual soul unreal, arguing that this diminishes the importance of moral action, devotion, and the eternal reality of personal God.

External criticisms often focus on epistemological issues, especially concerning the concept of **Maya**. Critics challenge how an ultimate, pure, non-dual Brahman could be associated with the power of illusion (Maya) without tainting Brahman itself. Furthermore, questions arise regarding the locus of ignorance (*avidya*): If Brahman is pure consciousness, and Atman is Brahman, how can

ignorance arise in the first place? Other traditions have criticized the Advaita school's reliance solely on scriptural testimony (*shabda pramana*) over empirical evidence or rigorous logic in areas where pure reason might lead to alternative conclusions.

In contemporary philosophy, Vedanta faces the challenge of reconciling its ancient metaphysical claims with modern scientific materialism and naturalism. While parallels with quantum mechanics are often cited, critics caution against conflating ancient mystical insights with empirically verifiable scientific data. Nonetheless, Vedanta's enduring strength lies in its comprehensive attempt to integrate cosmology, epistemology, and soteriology (the study of salvation) into a single, cohesive system, ensuring its continued relevance in global philosophical discourse.

Further Reading

[Vedanta \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Advaita Vedanta \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[The Upanishads \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Quantum Mechanics \(Wikipedia\)](#)