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Śaṅkara on memory and the continuity of the self

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Abstract: **An issue much discussed by Indian philosophers and Western philosophers alike is one that concerns the need to assume a continuing self (or subject of experience) in giving an account of the world and our experience of it. This paper concentrates on two arguments put forward by the eighth-century AD Indian philosopher Śaṅkara, in a short passage of his commentary on Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahmasūtra*. The innovative peculiarity of these arguments is that they rest on an appeal to the content of memory judgements. Śaṅkara takes the line that an analysis of the content of memory judgements shows that a Buddhist attempt to reconstrue memory as mere similarity between successive experiences is fundamentally flawed. Our concern, therefore, is whether Śaṅkara's account of the content of memory judgements is correct, and whether it establishes the required continuity.**

An issue much discussed by Indian philosophers and Western philosophers alike is one that concerns the need to assume a continuing self (or subject of experience) in giving an account of the world and our experience of it. This paper will address just one aspect of this highly complex issue, concentrating on two arguments put forward by the eighth-century AD Indian philosopher Śaṅkara in a short passage of his most celebrated work, his commentary on Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahmasūtra*. The innovative peculiarity of these arguments is that they rest on an appeal to the content of memory judgements. Śaṅkara takes the line that an analysis of the content of memory judgements shows that a Buddhist attempt to reconstrue memory as mere similarity between successive experiences is fundamentally flawed. Śaṅkara's first argument focuses on the necessity of assuming the very same self at the two different moments contained in my presently remembering one of my past experiences. His second argument focuses on a claimed infallibility of a back reference to the self in memory judgements. Our concern, therefore, will be whether Śaṅkara's account of the content of memory judgements is correct, and whether it establishes the required continuity.

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For both Śaṅkara and the Buddhist, the question of the continuity of the self through a temporal stream of experiences is of central importance in their soteriological theories. A fundamental Buddhist tenet is that we are held in the round of birth, death and rebirth because of the major cognitive error of believing we possess a permanent soul; it is this which underlies much of our thinking, our desires and our strivings, and which is the root cause of suffering. The correction of this cognitive error is vital in undermining these connections, and therefore in achieving release from rebirth. For Śaṅkara there is also a sense in which the idea of a permanent soul needs to be rooted out if we are to achieve release from rebirth, but he thinks that this comes later in the steps towards liberation. The final step involves the realization that what we took to be the soul (the *ātman*) is identical with *brahman*, and hence the very notion of an individual soul is supplanted by the true notion of reality. Yet prior to this step there is the important stage of rites and duties, as laid down in the Vedas. The *karma-yogin* (one who engages in these activities) must act with the idea of himself as a 'doer', so as a continuing agent and enjoyer of the flux of experiences, and must act with the idea of that self as a spiritual self with aims and motives above the mundane ones which characterize ordinary lives. Such is Śaṅkara's interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā*[1] – in the steps towards salvation, a belief in the existence of the permanent soul is vital, even though it becomes supplanted at the final step.

Śaṅkara's conflict with Buddhism

Śaṅkara presents his metaphysical theory of the one, undifferentiated, pure consciousness – *nirguṇa brahman*[2] – in a commentary on an earlier work by Bādarāyaṇa. That earlier work, the *Brahmasūtra* or *Vedāntasūtra*,[3] constitutes, with the much earlier *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavadgītā*,[4] the basic corpus of literature for the philosophers and philosopher-theologians identified as the orthodox (Hindu) school of Vedānta. Śaṅkara's special metaphysical position, not standardly adopted by other Vedānta philosophers, is an austere monism. Śaṅkara seeks to show that the way in which we experience the ordinary physical world and our own place within it is ultimately flawed, a false superimposition (Sanskrit *adhyāsa*) upon the one undifferentiated reality. We wrongly see the world in terms of a complex diversity, a diversity of objects and causal relations, of space and time, and of individual experiencers of that world – individual psychophysical organisms which have their own place within the temporal flux of causally evolving nature.

It is at first sight somewhat surprising, therefore, that we find passages within Śaṅkara's text which are devoted to defending the idea of objects of experience, of causal links between such objects over time, and of the persistence of the observers of those objects. We have, however, to understand these passages in

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context, for they are essentially directed at rival philosophical traditions such as Buddhism. Śaṅkara's perspective might fairly be put as follows. These ideas, which are employed by all of in our ordinary unenlightened lives, will ultimately prove themselves to be a misconstrual of reality. Yet until that ultimate point is reached – until we grasp the real nature of *nirguṇa brahman* – we are compelled to make use of them.

The Buddhist, for example, who seeks to undermine them and offer an alternative description of the world as we experience it, a description which captures no more than the momentariness – the fleeting nature – of thoughts, feelings, perceptions and the atomic ingredients of the physical world, has neither a proper ground for making such a move nor a coherent story to tell to replace our ordinary notions. Bādarāyaṇa's *sūtras* II.ii.18–32[5] are targeted against a number of these central Buddhist ideas and Śaṅkara's interpretation and defence of those *sūtras* tries to prove that both persisting objects and persisting subjects are required to make sense of experience.

A proper appreciation of the value of Śaṅkara's arguments would need to take account of all of this integrated commentarial material, as well as of other parts of the commentary and other works by Śaṅkara too. In what follows, however, our focus will be on Śaṅkara's short commentary on *sūtra* II.ii.25,[6] which reads in Thibaut's translation: 'And on account of remembrance' (Thibaut, 413), and, with a little interpretative addition, in Swami Gambhirananda's translation: 'And (a permanent soul has to be admitted) because of the fact of remembrance' (i.e. memory) (Gambhirananda, 412). This second rendering of the *sūtra* makes plain that the conflict is specifically between the Buddhist general momentariness or impermanence account of our experience, and the orthodox belief in a permanent soul, the Buddhist *anattā*[7] thesis, and the Hindu *ātman* thesis. The very fact of memory is being proposed by Bādarāyaṇa as a refutation of the Buddhist's theory.

Now Śaṅkara's discussion of this *sūtra* alone hardly makes a complete case for a *permanent soul*, and at best proves the need to assume some *persisting subject of experience* to make sense of memory. This would at most be the beginning of an argument for the existence of a permanent soul. Our assessment of Śaṅkara's discussion will therefore largely abstract from the grander debate about the soul and focus specifically on the merits of Śaṅkara's arguments for such a persisting subject. With this abstraction we can also read Śaṅkara as making a contribution to the more general (Indian and Western) philosophical debate concerning the continuity or persistence of a self through a temporally extended stream of experiences.

Śaṅkara attempts two proofs, both based upon memory, of this continuity of the self. The first proof begins with Bādarāyaṇa's claim that the mere fact of remembering proves this continuity, and develops two counterarguments against the Buddhist construal of memory. The second proof is that, in making memory judgements, whatever else I may be mistaken about I cannot be mistaken about

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the reference of the 'I' to my past self. Both of these attempted proofs deserve more serious critical discussion than they currently seem to attract.[8]

Śaṅkara was, of course, not the first in the Indian tradition to build a case for the continuity of the self upon memory. Gauṭama's (second-century AD) *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.10 claims that 'desire, aversion, effort, pleasure, pain and cognition are the indicatives of the soul', and Vāṭsyāyana's (fourth-century AD) *Nyāyabhāṭya* explains this as an inferential proof of the continuity of one and the same agent who both perceives and later recognizes the same thing. The soul is not apprehended by perception, though it is also known, says Vāṭyāyana, from the scriptures. Uddyotakara's (sixth-century AD) *Nyāyavārṭika* on the same *sūtra* argues, at some length, against the Buddhists' denial of the continuing agent and their attempt to treat memory and recognition in terms of the mere causal relationship between distinct experiences. The continuing soul is the common agent of perceptions, desire and so forth. Uddyotakara's discussion, though it shares a common goal with Śaṅkara's, does not, however, so explicitly appeal to the *content* of memory judgements in the manner of Śaṅkara's attempted proofs. Similarly, Śaṅkara's appeal to features of the content of memory judgements seems to go further than the Mīmāṁsā view that in memory we are presented with a direct experience of the continuing self.[9]

Śaṅkara's first proof – the fact and nature of memory judgements

Echoing the *sūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa, Śaṅkara begins by offering this simple and at first sight quite compelling claim: the Buddhist denial of a persisting self is inconsistent with the fact that we remember past experiences. He writes:

> **Remembrance means recalling to mind something after its perception, and that can happen only when the agent of perception and memory is the same; for one person is not seen to remember something perceived by another. How can there be an awareness of the form, 'I who saw earlier see now', arise [*sic*] unless the earlier and later perceiver be the same?** (412)

Similarly, Śaṅkara cites the fact of recognition of objects previously experienced, which is a specific form of remembering:

> **Moreover, it is well known to all that direct experience in the form of recognition, such as 'I who saw that, see this now', occurs only when the agent of seeing and remembering is the same. Should their agents be different, then the awareness will take such a form, 'I remember, but somebody else saw': but nobody in fact experiences in this way. Where cognition takes such a form, all understand the agents of seeing and remembering to be different, as for instance in, 'I remember that he saw this then'.** (412)

But can such a simple appeal to the *fact* of memory – or the *fact* of recognition – be a legitimate counter to the Buddhist's denial of the continuity of the self?

A supporting case might be developed for Bādarāyaṇa and Śaṅkara as follows. It certainly does seem to be a fact that I remember past experiences. And if I

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remember seeing the blossom on my lilac trees last spring, it follows that I saw the blossom, and it follows that I was there where the lilacs blossomed. From the fact that I remember seeing the blossom, the continuity of this self is undoubtedly established.

This is quite consistent with the fact that I do not always remember my past experiences, as well as the fact that I sometimes misremember. I do not, for example, remember seeing the blossom on the lilac trees ten years ago; and this does not imply that I did not see the blossom, nor that I was not there. Failure to remember hardly constitutes a proof of lack of continuity of the self, and, moreover, no more constitutes a refutation of the proof of continuity drawn from the fact of success in remembering. Neither does the fact that I misremember seeing the blossom eight years ago argue for the lack of continuity of the self, or undermine the proof of continuity from the fact of success on other occasions.

The situation is comparable to the way in which the fact of perception can be seen to establish the reality of objects in the external world. It seems a quite reasonable reply, to the question how I can prove the reality of objects outside of the mind – objects in the physical world – that it is simply a fact that I do perceive them. It is a fact that I now perceive the paper in front of me, and from that fact it clearly follows that the paper is there in front of me. So from the fact that I can see the objects, the real existence of such objects in the external world is undoubtedly established.

And again this is quite consistent with the fact that I do not always perceive objects in the external world (even those in my vicinity), as well as the fact that I sometimes misperceive. I do not, for example, see the book which lies to the left of my field of vision, nor one which is within my field if vision but which I do not notice since I am focusing on the paper; and this does not imply that either book is not there. Failure to perceive hardly constitutes a proof of lack of existence, and, moreover, no more constitutes a refutation of the proof of existence drawn from the fact of success in perceiving. Neither does the fact that I misperceive a shadow as a book undermine the proof of the real existence of physical objects from the fact of my success on other occasions.

So a case can be mounted in support of Bādarāyaṇa's appeal to the fact of memory echoed by Śaṅkara in turn. However, there is a real problem looming. Isn't such an appeal to the *fact* that we remember past experiences, or the *fact* that we perceive external objects, simply question-begging in circumstances in which these facts have been denied? If an argument has been propounded to show that these are not facts at all, or that they are misconstruals of what really are the facts, then those arguments themselves need to be met. So Dr Johnson's 'refutation' of Berkeley by kicking a stone cannot count as a legitimate refutation of Berkeley's reconstrual of the facts concerning experience.

To his credit, Śaṅkara substantially strengthens his argument against the Buddhist by reporting a Buddhist reconstrual of the facts concerning

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remembering. It is in his counterarguments to this reconstrual that he introduces some subtle points concerning the content of memory judgements. According to the Buddhist, what appears to be my remembering some past experience is more properly seen as a mere similarity between some past and some present experience. In, for example, the case of recognition of an object supposedly perceived on some previous occasion, we simply have the past experience and a present experience which is similar to it. I will say more about the nature of this claim below.

Śaṅkara has two counterarguments to this thesis. The first is that the experience of recognition involves the thought of my presence on the original occasion of contact with the object, rather than the different thought that my present experience is like that of some other person's:

> **… human dealings cannot be said to be dependent on mere similarity, for the experience is of the existence of the entity itself [the self] (expressing itself as, 'I am that very person') and not of mere similarity with that (as would be expressed in, 'I am like that person').** (413)

(We might just note in passing that this doesn't quite meet the point which the Buddhist – on Śaṅkara's own description of his opponent's position – is making about memory judgements merely reflecting a similarity of experience*s*, not of experience*rs*.)

Śaṅkara's second counterargument is somewhat more complex. He argues that mere similarity of perceptions could not give rise to the recognition of an object as the same as that previously met with, for there must also be assumed to be someone who recognizes that similarity:

> **Since similarity, which is apparent in such a judgement as 'This is similar to that', is dependent on two factors, and since from the point of view of the believer in momentariness, there is no single perceiver of two similar things, it amounts to a false incoherent jargon on his part to assert that recognition results from similarity. This can only be possible if the perceiver of the similarity of the entities of the preceding and succeeding moments be the same.** (412–413)

A possible Buddhist rejoinder is that the supposed recognition of the object is actually just one more ingredient in the sequence of experiences, an 'entirely new cognition which is not dependent on the perception of the things of the earlier and succeeding moments'. And Śaṅkara replies that this construal of the thought contained in recognition seems to rob it entirely of an essential part of its content: 'No, since in the awareness, ''This is like that'', are involved (three) distinct factors. If this experience of similarity be an independent experience (not related to the two similar factors), then the expression, ''This is like that'', would be meaningless, and the expression would simply be ''similarity''' (413).

The first objection which must be raised against Śaṅkara – and one which tells against both of his counterarguments – is the following. Neither recognition specifically, nor remembering generally, standardly involve the thought of the continuity of the self. 'I am that very person' is not part of the content of most acts

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of recognition – I see and know this man without the higher reflections that he was seen in the past and that the person who saw him was my very self. That simple kind of remembering, which involves perhaps pinning a name or a role on the person presented, no more needs those higher reflections than the recognition of an apple tree as an apple tree. No more does the act of bringing back to consciousness some previously experienced object or event of necessity include the thought about the past experience of that object or event by someone, and no more needs the extra thought about the identity of that someone with me. If, therefore, it is Śaṅkara's contention that *every* experience of remembering involves the assumption of the continued existence of the self, he is clearly wrong. The simple fact that we remember past experiences cannot be offered in this way as a proof of the persistence of the self. 'I am that very person'; 'I who saw that see this now'; these do not figure in the content of our normal experience of remembering. Even 'this is like that', where we make a judgement of similarity, requires no thoughts that 'this is what I presently see', 'that is what was previously seen', and 'what previously saw is the very same person as what presently sees'. The mere fact of memory (or of recognition) seems not therefore in itself to provide the basis of the proof of continuity of the self which Śaṅkara is seeking.

So Śaṅkara's counterarguments to the Buddhist's reconstrual of the facts concerning memory must be revised. Śaṅkara can no longer claim that *all* cases of memory or recognition contain an ingredient which the Buddhist cannot account for – the thought of my presence at some past moment: remembering as such need involve no higher thoughts which provide for his proof of continuity. But Śaṅkara may still claim that we do, nevertheless, have such thoughts from time to time. We are able to reflect on our current experiences in a way which incorporates a reference to our past and present selves, and indeed the very concept of memory (and for that reason the concept of recognition too) involves as an integral part the notion of the continuity of the self. Memory and recognition still seem to presuppose the identity of past and present self, so Śaṅkara can still argue that the content of a thought such as 'I remember seeing this object then' cannot be properly accounted for by the Buddhist.

A second objection, again telling against both of Śaṅkara's counterarguments, is that he is oversimplifying the claim which the Buddhist is making. It would be quite wrong to see the Buddhist as offering a reductive analysis of memory and recognition into mere similarity of experiences – the suggestion is not, for example, that 'I recognize this object as the same object I saw yesterday' is *merely equivalent to* 'I have a current experience which is similar to one had by someone yesterday'. Of course they are not equivalent, neither in meaning nor necessarily in truth value. The claim is rather that what *causes* me to make the judgement is indeed (in many if not in all cases) a similarity of experiences. But even noting this point about the Buddhist's account of memory and recognition leaves out a vital dimension of the Buddhist's thinking.

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The *full* causal explanation of our making judgements of memory and recognition is far from simple, even on the traditional Buddhist account. We do not need to go to later sophistications of Buddhism, since we find that the explanation suggested even by the early Pali canon is highly complex. Central to even this early Buddhist thought is the so-called 'doctrine of dependent origination': 'effects' come into existence only given the prior existence of the right set of 'causal conditions'.[10] Though this is a thesis concerning causal origination generally, it has a very special application in the context to another central doctrine, that of the five aggregates.[11] (Śaṅkara himself discusses these doctrines in earlier pages, under *sūtras* II.ii.18–19.) The person at any moment is regarded, according to that doctrine, as a collection of five aggregates – cognitive, emotional, volitional, perceptual and physical elements – and the person over time is regarded as a causal sequence of such aggregates. The causal interaction between ingredients of these aggregates and throughout the temporal sequence of them is complex indeed. One extremely important factor in the genesis (and 'persistence') of the other ingredients in the causal chain which constitutes the person, is the false belief in personal continuity. Obviously, mere similarity of experiences cannot be said to give rise to that belief, for the latter is on the contrary a precondition of the former's giving rise to judgements of memory and recognition.

The clear implication of these central Buddhist doctrines for the origin of memory judgements and judgements of recognition is that their genesis is quite complex. Mere similarity of experiences, past and present, is hardly sufficient to generate such thoughts. It is only within the context of the other causal conditions – and particularly of the cognitive error contained in the belief in a continuing subject of experience – that similarity of experiences can give rise to memory judgements and judgements of recognition. Treating the Buddhist account of such judgements outside of the complexities of these standard Buddhist doctrines involves a clearly unacceptable oversimplification.

Here indeed is a point on which Śaṅkara and the Buddhist could, in fact, concur. Śaṅkara is arguing that reducing the facts of memory to a sequence of momentary experiences leaves it quite obscure precisely how and why we come to impute a continuity to the self – how we project the 'I' of now into the 'I' of the past, and indeed the 'I' of the future. The Buddhist would agree that the explanation has to be quite involved. For him, the issue will only be resolved when we have a complete diagnosis of the deep origins of suffering; and for Śaṅkara, when we have a proper understanding of the deep confusions whereby *brahman* is misconceived as *ātman*.

Let us now turn specifically to the (revised) version of Śaṅkara's second counter-argument. The Buddhist claim was that recognition, for example, could be perfectly well accounted for in terms of the similarity of experiences – seeing Q in the marketplace yesterday and seeing Q here and now are experiences which have a sufficient degree of similarity in their content to give rise to recognition. Śaṅkara's

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counterargument was that such similarity alone could not give rise to the recognition of Q, for there must also be assumed to be someone who recognizes the similarity, and that 'can only be possible if the perceiver of the similarity of the entities of the preceding and the succeeding moments be the same' (413). Claiming, as the Buddhist does, that the judgement does not contain this identity of past and present self robs it of an essential part of its content.

Yet we can understand the flaw in Śaṅkara's reasoning as follows. Let us assume that a higher-level judgement such as 'I recognize Q' has indeed arisen out of the similarity of two experiences, one in the past and one in the present. (We have allowed that such cases may occur.) Does it follow that the very same self must be presented by both experiences? Must the very same self be presented with these two experiences to be able to make a judgement of comparison? I suggest that there is one sense in which this is necessary, but it is not enough to establish Śaṅkara's case. What is required for recognition is only that the thought of the previous Q of yesterday and the thought of the perceived Q of today are *now* presented together to one self as the two terms for comparison. Misrecognition equally involves the gathering together in the present thought the man before me now and the present thought of some other man previously perceived who is not identical to him. Śaṅkara's claim is that the preceding and the succeeding experiences must both be owned by one and the same continuing self. That is true, but only if the recognition is successful: it is not required for the judgement of recognition as such.

This actually makes good sense of the Buddhist rejoinder that 'recognition' is 'an entirely new cognition which is not dependent on the perception of the things of the earlier and succeeding moments' (413). The actual preceding and succeeding perceptions may well be the intended referents of the judgement of recognition, but the judgement has a content in the absence of successful reference. The flaw in Śaṅkara's second counterargument may therefore be summarized as follows. Mere similarity of experiences, without a continuing self to notice such similarity, cannot account for recognition – such is Śaṅkara's argument from content for the continuity of the self. But the content of a judgement of recognition need contain only the thought of the preceding and the succeeding experiences, and these can be presented to the self at any moment at which a momentary self perceives.

To conclude this discussion of Śaṅkara's first attempted proof of continuity, it can fairly be claimed that Śaṅkara's adoption of Bādarāyaṇa's appeal to the fact that we remember past experiences is not a simple question-begging move. He is aware of the Buddhist argument which challenged the fact and attempted to show how the supposed recognition was analysable into mere similarity of past and present experiences; and he has produced two counterarguments to this challenge. The objections I have so far developed have been aimed at these counterarguments.

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Other routes to accusing Śaṅkara of question-begging would need to appeal to other challenges to the fact. For example, it could be pointed out that Śaṅkara's description of the experience of recognition presupposes something else which the Buddhist has denied, namely the assumption of the persistence of objects of experience themselves. Śaṅkara's understanding of 'I saw this then' clearly involves 'this' as referring to the very same object at an earlier and a present moment, just as it involves for him the reference of 'I' to the very same self at both moments. If no objects of perception persist from moment to moment then a quite different analysis of 'I saw this then' would be required, one which the Buddhist had tried to provide by offering mere similarity as the proper account of recognition. Yet Śaṅkara is not unaware of the Buddhist denial of the persistence of objects of experience, and the *sūtras* immediatedly preceding the present *sūtra* were devoted to showing the logical incoherence of that denial.

One general weakness of Śaṅkara's case for the persistence of the self is his heavy reliance on that special form of remembering which is recognition – though to be fair he has placed this to the fore following the Buddhist's lead. Recognition does at least seem to import similarity into the centre of the debate, for memory in general (*contra* Hume)[12] hardly seems to involve similar experiences, or similarity more generally. We remember events and objects which we perceived only on one occasion and unless we say that the remembering experience itself – the present thought of the past event or object – resembles the past event or object, or resembles the past experience of that event or object, that kind of remembering does not rely upon a recognition of similarity. Indeed, it is not too difficult even to think of cases of recognition where dissimilarity far outweighs the degree of similarity exhibited by the object now and in the past.

Śaṅkara's second proof – the infallibility of the 'I'

At the end of his commentary on BSB II.ii.25 Śaṅkara offers a new proof of the continuity of the self, a proof which claims an infallibility for the reference of 'I' in memory judgements. He writes:

> **It may be conceded, however, that in the case of an external thing there may be the possibility of doubt of the form, 'It may be either that very thing or similar to that', for in the case of an external thing there is scope for delusion. But in the case of the cognizer himself there can never be such a doubt as, 'I may be either that very person or similar to him'. For there occurs a definite recognition of identity, as in, 'I who saw yesterday, am remembering today'.** (413–414)

This rendering of Śaṅkara's words by Gambhirananda suggests an argument which appeals to an infallible reference to the 'I' of the past contained within our first-person memory judgements. If this is indeed Śaṅkara's intention, he might seem to have a simple and conclusive refutation of the Buddhist denial of continuity. If I do indeed make an unassailable reference to my past self – as indeed

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the very same as my present self – in memory judgements, then Śaṅkara has a direct disproof of the Buddhist's claim. His argument may be put as follows. The Buddhist denies that there is a continuing self from moment to moment, and construes memory judgements as arising from the similarity of a past and a present experience. Śaṅkara is arguing that the act of remembering contains more that a mere similarity, for an analysis of the content of a memory judgement reveals a reference not only to the present self of the present moment, but also to the very same self at the past moment. Moreover, whatever else I may be mistaken about in making the memory judgement, I cannot be mistaken in the reference I make to the self of the past; the content of my memory judgement contains an infallible reference to my self in the past, and so the continuity of my self is established by this very infallibilty.

Is Śaṅkara's claim, that the reference to my past self is infallible, at all plausible? There is nothing infallible within simple memory judgements or within simple acts of recognition. If I remember seeing Q yesterday – if I have the thought of Q yesterday, as for example in 'Q was in the marketplace yesterday' – I could be wrong on all counts. I could be wrong in thinking that the event in question took place yesterday, in thinking that it was Q rather than R who was in the marketplace, in thinking that there was anyone at all in the marketplace yesterday. Nothing in the judgement is infallible. And in a case of recognition, for example in recognizing this person before me as Q, it is equally patent that this person might not be Q at all. So if we remain at the level of simple memory judgements or judgements of recognition we find nothing which is infallible.

On the other hand, moving to higher-level judgements, we introduce a reference to the 'I'. One kind of higher-level judgement seems nevertheless to introduce only a reference to the 'I' of the present, and though *that* may be an infallible reference, it does not by itself support Śaṅkara's thesis. For let me make the judgement 'I recognize this man as Q'. The 'I' is the present 'I' and I cannot get this reference wrong even though I am in fact misrecognizing the man in front of me. Clearly from the fact that this reference is infallible, the continuity of my self cannot be established.

But does 'I recognize this man as Q' *only* introduce the 'I' of the present? If we allow that the concept of recognition in itself involves a back reference to a previous occasion we have to say with Śaṅkara that the 'I' of the past is also being introduced. Obviously, if my recognition of Q is based on fitting a description to a man who I have never previously met – his striking beard or his peculiar philosophical claims, for example – then my recognition of Q makes no assumption about my previous self. So let us make plain that our example 'I recognize this man as Q' really does include the thought that it is the Q who I previously met, so a back reference to 'I' is included in the thought.

Clearly, too, in a memory judgement at this level such as 'I remember this man as Q who I met in the marketplace yesterday', or 'I remember seeing Q in the

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marketplace yesterday', I have imported a back reference to the 'I' of the past. But is it infallible?

We have already noted that much may be wrong with the judgement 'I remember seeing Q'. We have also noted that at least I cannot be wrong about the reference to the *present* 'I' as the one who is making the judgement. We may now concede to Śaṅkara that the judgement involves 'a definite recognition of identity' as he calls it, since it obviously goes beyond the judgement 'I remember *somebody* saw Q'. 'I remember seeing Q' implies that I, who am making the judgement, was there in the past – it implies an identity between the 'I' of the present and the 'I' of the past. Such higher-level memory judgements leave open no scope for a lack of identity between the two references of 'I'. And now if the 'I' of the present is an infallible reference, *and* the judgement implies this 'definite recognition of identity', must not the 'I' of the past be an infallible reference too?

We might come to this conclusion from another direction as well. Suppose I *try* to remember what I did a week ago today. Now clearly *I* am trying to remember, and I can make no mistake about that – it's not someone else who is doing the trying. But equally I am trying to remember what *I* did a week ago, and I can make no mistake about that either. There is no greater difficulty in achieving an infallible reference to the 'I' of the future. If I try to predict what I will do a week from now, I can make no mistake about the 'I' of the future. Nor indeed can I fail to achieve an infallible reference to the 'I' in my fantasies or my imaginings, for they are fantasies or imaginings about what 'I' would do, or should do, or would like to do. We seem to have a quite secure contact with the 'I' of the past, or the future, or our fantasies and imaginings.

But now we can see that this is not enough for Śaṅkara's case. Such infallibilty of reference of the 'I' in these various thoughts about the past, the future and the world of fantasy is hardly enough to secure my actual presence in any of them. I can mistakenly think myself in the marketplace yesterday, and so mistakenly think that I remember seeing Q there. I can make false predictions about what I will do in a week from now. And by definition I only imagine myself in a fantasy situation. The infallibility of reference of the 'I' in these various thoughts is really after all no more than the infallibility of the present 'I', together with the 'definite recognition of identity' which Śaṅkara insists on.

Śaṅkara's second attempt at proving the continuity of the self does not work. An infallible back reference of the 'I' may well be accepted as an integral part of the concept of memory, as used in our higher-level memory judgements, but this does not entail an infallible knowledge of the self in the past and its continuity into the present. Thinking it so doesn't make it so.

Alternative readings of the second proof

The version of Śaṅkara's second attempted proof which we have considered, drawing on a supposed infallibility of the reference to the 'I' of the

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past, was suggested by Gambhirananda's translation of the relevant sentences of Śaṅkara's commentary. It is possible, however, to read Śaṅkara as offering a different argument which is also suggested by that translation. Rather than the supposed infallibility of the back reference of 'I', Śaṅkara may be using the lesser notion of the indubitability of such a reference. I never can doubt that it was me and suppose that it may have been somebody else – such may be Śaṅkara's intended 'definite recognition of identity, as in, ''I who saw yesterday, am remembering today''. Now clearly this is a different argument from our first interpretation, for that which is indubitable for me may well not be something that constitutes infallible knowledge.[13] There may be various reasons why I am unable to doubt something, but (contrary to Descartes' method) it hardly follows that I must be right on the matter. Unless, that is, my inability to doubt is a direct consequence of the lack of scope for delusion itself.

The objection to this second version of the argument must be similar to that we developed against the first version. I may be unable to doubt that I am the one who is judging that 'I remember that I met him in the marketplace yesterday', and I may be unable to doubt that this judgement of mine is intended to concern (*inter alia*) myself yesterday – that indeed is contained in the very thought. Yet my inability to doubt either of these things does not in itself entail that my reference to the 'I' of the past is correct. Content, as we have seen, does not guarantee truth here. Moreover, there is another objection to this version of the argument, which is that there does indeed seem to be scope for delusion after all, and for that reason we can entertain a doubt about the past reference to the 'I'. Memory is notoriously unreliable the longer ago the supposed events occurred, and memory, as we know, is not completely reliable even in short-term cases. Memory, just like perception, can suggest to us contradictory thoughts – I could not have been in the marketplace then, I reflect, for I also distinctly remember being somewhere else.

And here is a case where I am certain about the event concerned, but entertain a doubt about whether it really was me that experienced it and not someone else. Suppose I am given to exchanging old experiences with my retired army colleagues, and come to know a great deal about those old times. It could well happen that an experience or two have become exchanged in more ways than one, in the telling and retelling. I can be certain about the event, and even strongly inclined to impute the experience to my very self in the past, and yet harbour a doubt about whether it really is a memory of my own. If such doubts can occur, the second version of Śaṅkara's argument is undermined.

Both versions we have considered were suggested by Gambhiranada's translation of Śaṅkara's sentences. Thibaut translates them a little differently:

> **We admit that sometimes with regard to an external thing a doubt may arise whether it is that or merely similar to that; for mistakes may be made concerning what lies outside our minds. But the conscious subject never has any doubt whether it is itself or only similar to itself; it rather is distinctly conscious that it is**

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> **one and the same subject which yesterday had a certain sensation and today remembers that sensation.** (*Thibaut,* 415)

The new, third interpretation of Śaṅkara's argument suggested here is not an appeal to infallibility, nor an appeal to indubitability, but an appeal to the simple fact that we do not harbour doubts of the kind in question. The first sentence may nevertheless militate against this interpretation, for there might well be an intended modality by the conjunction of the two sentences. Be that as it may, if Śaṅkara is appealing only to the fact that doubts of this kind do not arise he seems to be at one with the earlier Nyāya philosophers, and possibly with the fifth-century AD Mīmāṁsā philosopher Śabara who argued (in Taber's words) that 'Memory establishes the existence of a continuous self not insofar as it *presupposes* a single subject of experience that both had the remembered experience and now remembers it, but insofar as it directly reveals one.'[14] Yet it is one thing to say we do not doubt the continuity of the self, and another to claim that we therefore have a direct revelation of its continuity. We do not doubt, so we are therefore certain, that we are one and the same, yet such an undisturbed cognitive state need not be interpreted as the direct presentation in memory of the continuing self. That would be an interpretation as much licenced as the undisturbed cognitive state of certainty about God's existence licences the conclusion that the fact is therefore directly revealed to us – or the undisturbed cognitive state about our immortality licences the conclusion that we are directly aware of our immortal souls.

The third interpretation gives us the weakest of the three alternatives, resting the case on the mere absence of doubt. Absence of doubt no more entails truth than indubitability entails it, even putting aside this question of direct presentation. And sometimes, indeed, doubts of the relevant kind can arise in us as we have seen above. Would Śaṅkara, then, be content with the very weakest rendering of his argument which might go along the lines 'We sometimes do not doubt the continuity of the very same self as experiencer and rememberer, so there really is such continuity'?

Let us not forget the soteriology in which Śaṅkara embeds his metaphysics and epistemology. The *karma-yogin* must work with the conviction that he has or is a permanent *ātman*, and indeed with the conviction that there is an omnipotent and omniscient deity, for these are convictions which are presupposed in his rites and duties as laid down in the Vedic tradition. Yet the *jñāna-yogin*, striving to unpick the confusions which blind him from the real nature of *brahman*, is moving towards a conviction that there are no individual souls and there is no *Īśvara* presiding over the world of experience and the bliss or damnation of those souls. The *karma-yogin* not only *does* not doubt but *should* not doubt the continuity of the self. The *jñāna-yogin* realises that the secure cognitive conviction of the *karma-yogin* ultimately licenses no conclusion about the immortality of the soul or about God's existence.

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Reconciling Śaṅkara and Buddhism

To conclude, both of Śaṅkara's attempts to use the content of memory judgements as the basis of a proof of the continuity of the self have serious objections against them. Śaṅkara's first proof is flawed in that it fails to allow for lower-level judgements which do not include the 'I' as part of their content; and, more seriously, since he oversimplifies the Buddhist account of memory as causally based on mere similarity. Moreover, Śaṅkara mistakenly assumes that the content of memory judgements contains the actual experiences both past and present, rather than the mere thought of such experiences – the latter can figure in such content without necessarily implying the persistence of the self. Śaṅkara's second proof claims an infallible reference to the 'I' of the past as part of the content of memory judgements, whereas the only infallibility to be found in such judgements lies in the reference to the 'I' of the present. Alternative readings of this second proof provide no stronger grounds for the continuing self.

Buddhism, which Śaṅkara takes as his target, would indeed agree that mere similarity of experiences is insufficient to account fully for the content of memory judgements and judgements of recognition. Such judgements have therefore to be treated as systematically mistaken, and the fatal ingredient which is added to experienced similarity is a belief in a persisting self. Śaṅkara has attempted to argue for such a persisting self on the grounds that without assuming its existence we cannot fully account for the content of memory judgements and judgements of recognition. Putting aside such reservations as I have noted concerning the detail of Śaṅkara's arguments, the Buddhist might well concur with the spirit of Śaṅkara's conclusion.

Notes

1. See Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā*, translated by Swami Gambhirananda, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1984). In ch. 2, v. 11, (39), Śaṅkara writes: 'Thus, the two kinds of steadfastness – that based on the conviction about the nature of the Self, and that based on the conviction about rites and duties – have been distinctly spoke of by the Lord Himself who saw that the coexistence of knowledge and rites and duties is not possible in the same person, they being based on the convictions of non-agentship and agentship, unity and diversity (respectively).' The Buddhist theme of the connection between rectifying the cognitive error of a persisting self and spiritual liberation is expounded in, for example, the *Milindapañhā* and other texts included in H. C. Warren *Buddhism in Translations* (New York NY: Atheneum, 1984).
2. Sanskrit *nirguṇa brahman* = non-qualified reality; Śaṅkara also uses the idea of qualified reality = Sanskrit *saguṇa brahman* in his general metaphysical theory, to refer to the Lord (Sanskrit *Īśvara*).
3. Usually dated between 200 BC and 400 AD. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Śaṅkara's commentary are taken from *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya of Sri Śaṅkarācārya*, translated by Swami Gamhirananada (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972). An alternative English edition of the text, probably more readily available, is *Vedānta-sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya*, translated by George Thibaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), being vols 34 and 38 of the Sacred Books of the East series edited by F. Max Muller. This latter edition is currently reprinted by (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988).

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4. The *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavadgītā* are usually dated earlier than 400 BC.
5. Gambhirananda, 402–426; Thibaut, vol. 34, 400–428.
6. Gambhirananda,412–414; Thibaut, vol. 34, 413–415. Śaṅkara notes various schools of Buddhism at the beginning of his discussion (in the preamble to his commentary on II.ii.18), and it is clear that his present target is the school of Sarvāstivādins, the 'realist nihilists' as he calls them as opposed to the Vijñānavādins, the 'idealist nihilists'. The former are committed to the real existence of things in the external world, albeit of merely momentary atoms. Śaṅkara does not identify specific texts during his discussion of the realists, but he may well have had in mind the *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu (fourth–fifth century AD).
7. Pali *anattā* = Sanskrit *anātman* = no-soul.
8. That Śaṅkara uses these arguments is frequently noted in the literature, yet recent critical studies of Śaṅkara's conflict with the Buddhists have given insufficiently detailed attention to them. Chandradhar Sharma *The Advaita Tradition in Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996) contains just one paragraph (211–212) beginning ' … the fact of knowledge, memory and recognition give a death-blow to the theory of momentariness'. Govind Chandra Pande *Life and Thought of Sankaracarya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994) contains just one paragraph (262) which refers to 'the impossibility of satisfactorily explaining the facts of memory and recognition', given the Buddhist denial of the self as a permanent substance.
9. These Nyāya and Mīmāṁsā contributions to the debate with the Buddhists have received more critical attention than Śaṅkara's. Both are discussed in John A Taber 'The Mīmāṁsā theory of self-recognition', *Philosophy East and West*, **40** (1990), 35–57; and a Nyāya-inspired defence of realism about both objects and subjects of experience is developed in Arindam Chakrabarti 'I touch what I saw', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **52** (1992), 103–116. For the Nyāya contribution, see *The Nyāya-Sūtras of Gauṭama, with the Bhāṣya of Vāṭsyāyana and the Vārṭika of Uḍḍyoṭakara*, transl. Ganganatha Jha (reprinted Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984); and for the Mīmāṁsā contribution, see *Śabara-Bhāsya* transl. Ganganatha Jha (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1932–1936).
10. Sanskrit *pratītyasamutpāda* = Pali *paṭiccasamuppāda* = doctrine of dependent origination. See, for example, the *Visuddhi-magga* and the *Saṁyutta-nikāya* in Warren *Buddhism in Translations*.
11. These are listed in various fashions in many early Buddhist texts, for example in the *Saṁyutta-nikāya*. Śaṅkara lists them as follows: ' … the five *skandhas* (groups), viz the group of colour (consisting of the sense-organs and their objects), the group of egoism (*ālaya-vijñāna* – rousing constantly the idea of ''I''), the group of feelings (of happiness etc), the group of conceptual knowledge (such as ''this is a cow'' and so on), and the group of attitudes (of liking, disliking, delusion, merit, demerit)'. Preamble to II.ii.18, 402–403.
12. David Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.) (first edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888), bk 1, pt 4, sect. 6, 260–261.
13. I am grateful to a *Religious Studies* anonymous referee of an earlier version of this paper for reminding me of this, and indeed for pointing out that the third alternative reading of Śaṅkara's argument is also possible – one which brings Śaṅkara's argument much closer to earlier Nyāya and Mīmāṁsā arguments.
14. Taber 'The Mīmāṁsā theory', 37.

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