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Advaita (Non-dualism) as Metatheory: A Constellation of Ontology, Epistemology, and Praxis

Latha Poonamallee¹

Abstract: Integrating contradictory and mutually exclusive positions is a challenge in building a metatheory. In this paper, I examine how *advaita* (non-dualism) philosophy is a metatheory. Based on a holistic, non-dualistic ontology, discovery based epistemology, and personal accountability-action-reflection oriented praxis, it provides a useful metatheory for embracing, learning from, and transcending the paradoxes of social life. I use the example of Gandhi as a practitioner of this approach to action and knowledge.

Keywords: Epistemology, metatheory, ontology, paradox, praxis.

Introduction

Metatheories have continued to draw the attention of scholars in different fields (Abrams & Hogg, 2004; Carter & Jackson, 1987; Ritzer, 1988; Tsoukas, 1994). However, the discourse around nature, use and legitimacy of metatheory is a highly contested one. For example, Ritzer (1988, p. 188) while making a useful distinction between metatheory that seeks to lay down the prerequisites for doing theory, and metatheories that take developed theories as their subject matter, also bestows legitimacy on the latter approach as more useful and argues that the former approach prevents us from getting on with theorizing. Another school of thought (Abrams & Hogg, 2004; Furfey, 1965; Carter & Jackson, 1987) takes the position that examining metatheory as a constellation of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions (Carter & Jackson, 1987) is a useful one.

This paper is more aligned with the latter view that an examination of the underlying assumptions about theorizing can increase “theoretical consciousness” (Ritzer, 1988) and provide an alternate framework for inquiry (Abrams & Hogg, 2004). Metatheory defines the boundaries of a phenomenon, its audience, and the level of analysis to study a particular phenomenon (Abrams & Hogg, 2004). Furthermore, each theory depends on a metatheory for its legitimacy (Carter & Jackson, 1987). If a metatheory is defined as a constellation of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions, one of the biggest challenges that it faces is how to integrate the conflicting and paradoxical nature of these assumptions that permeate most social science research. Van de Ven and Poole (1988) define paradox as the simultaneous presence of two mutually exclusive assumptions or statements; taken singly, each is

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incontestably true, but taken together they are inconsistent. This translates into metatheoretical – ontology, epistemology, method/praxis – polarities (Figure 1).

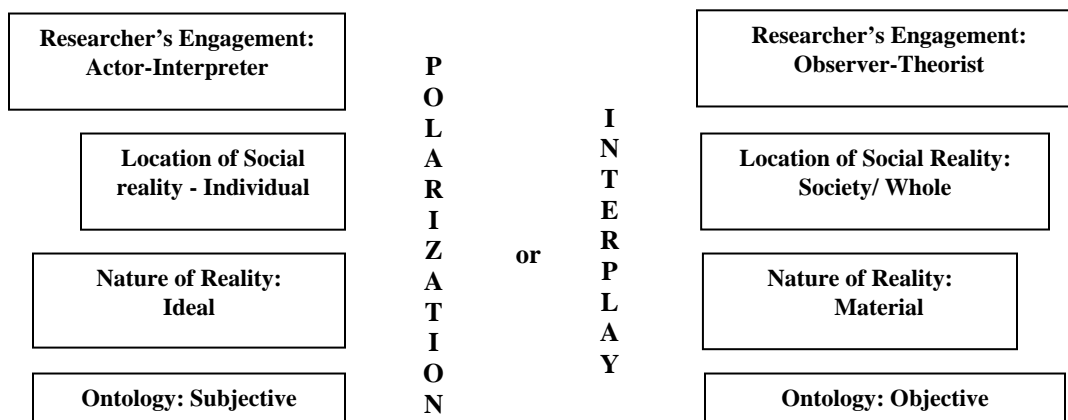


Figure 1. Metatheoretical Polarities in Organizational Studies

In this paper, I advance the *advaita* (non-dualism) philosophy as a metatheory which contains and transcends the paradox. I describe the *advaitic* ontology, epistemology, and praxis which together offer a metatheory. To describe this philosophy, I have drawn on the foundational work done by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a renowned Indian philosopher and statesman, Swami Vivekananda, a well-known nineteenth century Indian spiritual and social leader who has provided a series of translations and interpretations of major Hindu texts, and Gandhi, whose life itself was an experiment in the *advaitic* way of life (Saravanamuthu, 2006).

Advaitic Ontology

Most of the discussion about ontology in social sciences is derived from western philosophical tradition, which is imbued with a style of thinking based on dichotomy and binary opposition (Carr & Zanetti, 1999) and this has translated into a model of incommensurable paradigms. Embedded in this fundamental style of thinking, however, are not only oppositions, but also a hierarchy, in that one or the other polarity is more or less privileged (Carr & Zanetti, 1999). For example, the nature of reality can be either subjective or objective and these views are thought to be irreconcilable (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). However, a small but growing discourse of researchers has begun to address alternative conceptions (Alvesson & Skodberg, 2001; Benefiel, 2005; Bhaskar, 1970; Saravanamuthu, 2006; Tsoukas, 1994; Willmott, 1990). However, these attempts still remain marginal in our field and problematize research endeavors that aim to bridge this conceptual gap. I join this discourse by offering an alternative paradigm that has the capacity to embrace the paradox without having to resolve it through allegiance to one or other position.

Advaita philosophy rests on assumptions of non-dualism. The *Advaitic's* fundamental tenet is that that all forms of matters are interconnected by an all pervasive energy (Saravanamuthu, 2006). The central texts of this school are Samkara's commentaries on the principal Upanishads,

the Bhagavadgita and the Vedanta Sutra. This philosophy can be summed up in a single dictum, “*Tatsvam Asi*,” meaning “You are that,” *that* meaning the other. Another gem of this philosophy is “*Aham Brahman*,” “I am *Brahman*,” and therefore, it is not separate from me. Vivekananda (1992a, p. 359) writes, “All matter throughout the universe is the outcome of one primal matter called Akasha; and all force, whether gravitational, attraction or repulsion, or life, is the outcome of one primal force called Prana.”

This approach does not separate the spiritual from the mundane because they are all parts of the same ultimate reality. Radhakrishnan (2000, p. 32) writes, “It is the soul’s experience of the essential unity with the whole of being that is brought out in the words, “Thou in me and I in thee.”

This philosophy is concerned with understanding human existence as an integral part of a larger and interconnected whole (Saravanamuthu, 2006). This is a socio-ecological relational approach to reality – one that does not separate nature from other living creatures (Poonamallee, in press). All sentient beings are interrelated and part of the same ultimate reality. Saravanamuthu (2006) writes about advaitic philosophy as an appropriate model for sustainable development. It is predicated on the relationship that binds, people, animals, vegetation, and all forms of matter together and the personal responsibility of human beings to honor this relationship through *Ahimsa* (non-violence). *Ahimsa* was the concept Gandhi drew from Advaita philosophy to develop and deploy his non-violence strategies, which is addressed in more detail in a later section.

For the *advaitis*, the objective world exists. It is not an illusion. There are different orders of reality, Brahman being the Ultimate Reality and therefore the mental world or the world of consciousness is as much objective or unreal as the material. Vivekananda (1992b) writes,

Maya is not a theory for the explanation of the world: it is simply a statement of facts as they exist, that the very basis of our being is contradiction, that everywhere we have to move through this tremendous contradiction that wherever there is good, there must also evil. (p. 60)

The Ultimate is beyond paradoxes because it contains all the paradoxes. It is at once *nirguna* (devoid of qualities), *saguna* (possessing qualities) and is unconditioned and yet conditioned, determinate and non-determinate. In this framework, objective and existential realities are not to be set against each other as metaphysical contraries (Radhakrishnan, 2000). Nor do they finally diverge. In fact, in his exposition on the theory of *maya* (illusion), Sankara, one of the key exponents of the non-dualistic advaitic philosophy categorically lays out that the objective world or the empirical being (*vyavaharika satta*) is quite different from illusory experience (*pratibhasika satta*) and both co-exist. Advaita is cognizant of the contradiction between materialism and spiritual development and it asserts that spiritual-moral development is unlikely to occur until fundamental needs are satisfied (Saravanamuthu, 2006). However, both objective and subject realities are manifestations of the ultimate reality but are not of the same kind or order. Both subjective and objective realities are valid expressions of the Ultimate. But they are different kinds of reality and one cannot be reduced to the other.

Advaitic Epistemology

Ontological assumptions undergird epistemological positions about whether the nature of knowledge is hard, real and capable of being transmitted in a tangible form, or whether “knowledge” is a softer, more subjective, spiritual, or even transcendental kind, based on experience and insight of unique and essentially personal nature. The fundamental tenet of advaitic epistemology is *satchitananda* (Existence-Knowledge-Realization/Bliss). It is the process of experiential transformation (Gandhi, 1935) and is inseparable from developing greater sensitivity to the spiritual interconnectedness with the other (Saravanamuthu, 2006). *Advaita* is governed by non-cognition of duality (*davaitasyagrahanam*) because the ultimate reality is non-dual and the world of duality is the world of *maya* (Radhakrishnan, 2000). Freedom is the realization of the Brahman in the individual soul. Unchangeable reality expresses itself in the changing universe without forfeiting its nature. In the *Vedantaparibhasa*, it is said that all knowledge whether perceptual or conceptual, attempts to reveal reality or the ultimate spirit: “*pratyakasaparma catra caitanyam eva*” To know or to realize this is the ultimate goal of an *advaiti*. In this state, *vidya* (knowledge) and *ananda* (bliss) come together.

In the advaitic non-dualistic approach, knowledge is not just limited to codified, objectified knowledge but integrates multiple ways of knowing, action, experience, contemplation, and sense-making, all through witnessing of the self, because self is a microcosm of the universe. The assumption here is that everyone has the capacity to witness both empirical realities and subjective experiences and ultimately be free of both of them through knowing. All human development is about moving *adhyasa* (mistaken notions) and *avidya* (non-knowledge) to *vidya* (knowledge). *Advaita* values *anubhava* (experience) because the goal of *advaiti* is to discover the immanent principle within experience and not in a world beyond it. For example, Vivekananda (1992) characterizes experience as a key source of knowledge. In fact, God, in this framework can be considered a metaphor for the dynamics of the unknown: it refers to the workings of an interconnected ecosphere that creates, sustains and destroys in the process of regenerating life (Saravanamuthu, 2006b).

Critical inquiry is considered to be an essential path to examine that which is supplied to us by scripture or the evidence of the senses. Three sources of knowledge are perception, inference, and scriptural testimony. However, memory or tradition is not considered right knowledge because it has no novelty. Nature (*swabhava*) is the underlying object of a subject – the underlying principle of things. We need one to experience and understand the other. While realization of nature (object) of a phenomenon (subject) is a fact, a theory of reality is an inference (Radhakrishnan, 2000). While perception is the fruit of experience, inference is the fruit of analysis and sense-making through the intellect (*Buddhi*). Based on one’s stance, the internal processing organ could be *manas* (feelings), *chitta* (concentration), *buddhi* (thinking), or *ahamakara* (consciousness). This philosophy also distinguishes between *paravidya* (higher knowledge) pertaining to the ultimate reality and the *apara vidya* (lower knowledge) pertaining to the subjective and objective realities. However, in the state of *Caitanyam* (pure awareness) there is no differentiation between the knower and the known – ultimately the result of the interaction between the subject and the object.

Law of Karma (Cause and Effect) is a key element of *advaitic* philosophy. This law asserts that every action has a consequence (Saravanamuthu, 2006a) and demands personal accountability. For example, Gandhi (2001) writes about the means and ends using this theory, “They say, “means are after all means.” I would say, “means are after all everything.” As the means so the end. There is no wall of separation between the means is the end” (p. 65).

While deeply anchored in the law of karma, this philosophy paradoxically also recognizes that causal explanation can never be complete. Every finite thing presents the contradiction that it is not only finite but also relative in sense that it hangs on another (Radhakrishnan, 2000). Such is the nature of an interrelated universe. Therefore, truth is constantly discovered through a personal process of discovery. As Krishnamurthy (1969) writes, “Truth has no path, and that is the beauty of truth, it is a living concept.”

Advaitic Praxis

Advaitic knowledge is a lived reality – knowledge through praxis. Advaitic praxis is all about the interplay between the contradictions that naturally co-exist in every person (Vivekananda, 1992). He writes,

We must do our part, because that is the only way of getting out of this life of contradiction. Both the forces of good and evil will keep the universe alive for us, until we awake from our dreams and give up this building of mudpies. That lesson we shall have to learn, and it will take a long, long time to learn it. (p. 63)

Saravanamuthu (2006a) writes that Gandhi’s concept of Swaraj (Home Rule) refers both freedom from internal contradictions as well as structural ones. Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda’s mentor writes,

Man is born with two tendencies, Vidya guna and Avidya guna – the noble and the base – dormant in him. The former leads him Godward and the latter makes him earth-bound. In babyhood both the tendencies are in equilibrium . . . if he grows in the life in senses, the scale of worldliness goes down with that base weight . . . but if he emerges in spirituality, the scale in him of Godliness goes down toward Iswara (the whole) with that holy weight. (Chidbhavananda, 1991, p. 650)

However, this type of praxis is not merely about ritualistic religious practice. It is about accepting personal accountability for spiritual development. For example, Gandhi, a man full of godliness writes, “I recognize no God except the God that is found in the hearts of the dumb millions . . . and I worship the God that is Truth or Truth which is God through the service of these millions” (Gandhi, quoted in Tendulkar, 1960, p.58).

Advaita offers four avenues for spiritual development through praxis. They are: Jnana yoga or the knowledge path (Vivekananda, 1992), Raja or mastery of inner spirit (Vivekananda, 1990), Karma or service to other (Vivekananda, 1984), and Bhakti yoga or worship (Vivekananda, 1991). The term yoga refers to the means of transcending private interests. “Yoga means the process, as well as the result, of balancing the different sides of our nature, body, mind, and

spirit, the objective, and the subjective, the individual and the social, the finite and the infinite” (Radhakrishnan, 2003, p. 36). What is important to note here is that out of the four approaches, only one takes the religious route. Gandhi is considered to be one of the exemplars of advaitic practitioners in modern times and one who attained mastery of most of these forms of spiritual development, especially Raja and Karma Yoga (Sarvanamuthu, 2006b). His entire life was an experiment with truth and knowledge (Gandhi, 1993) through action and reflection.

Advaitic philosophy values the intellectual, ethical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of life. It describes the fourfold object of life (*Purusartha*). They are desire and enjoyment (*kama*), interest and wealth (*artha*), ethical living (*dharma*), and spiritual freedom (*moksa*). *Kama* caters to the emotional and instinctual needs of human life. *Artha* caters to the material, *Dharma* to the intellectual, and *moksa* the spiritual. Advaitic praxis is all about the struggle to know. However, without the action of knowing, knowing is not possible.

For this knowing process, reflexivity that emanates from spiritual consciousness is an important element. For example, Gandhi’s reflexive-spiritual development manifests as his refusal to adhere to imperialist norms and values (Sarvanamuthu (2006a). It is an ethic of personal responsibility for action combined with reflexivity. For example, Gandhi (1984, p. 67) himself writes, “Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evildoer, but it means the putting of one’s whole self against the will of the tyrant.”

Operating on the non-dualistic spiritual interconnectedness ontology demands personal responsibility for the other, and in the process transforming oneself and transforming the society. Parameshwar (2006) writes about how eleven renowned social leaders (including Gandhi) drew on their own suffering to transform the world for the multitudes. Gandhi’s strategy for practicing this was the *Satyagraha* (active fight for truth). *Satyagraha* is not passive resistance. Gandhi (1993) himself clarifies that passive resistance is not really resistance but a policy of communal suffering. On the contrary, *satyagraha* is about centralizing discipline for engendering change by bringing together the oppressed and oppressors in action, reflection, and dialogue (Sarvanamuthu, 2006).

Discussion

In this section, I use Ritzer’s (1988) exposition on metatheory to discuss how advaita can be a metatheory and its implications for research. The first one is to increase the “theoretical self-consciousness” because greater self-consciousness can lead to greater understanding of one’s own theory as well as of competing theories (Ritzer, 1988, p. 195). Advaita philosophy serves this function by providing a comprehensive constellation of ontology, epistemology and praxis and can be used to examine a theory developed using this methodology. In this paper, I have described how the philosophy of non-dualism can be a metatheory encompassing the paradoxes of social life. Ritzer (1988) also highlights that the objective-subjective continuum needs more exploration. Advaita philosophy as a metatheory throws new light on this topic. The holistic ontology which contains both the subjective and objective realities provides a socio-ecological relational framework for the interconnectedness of all matter in the world. Because of its holism,

it can accept the subjective and objective realities without having to privilege one over the other. This has epistemological implications for how we study human organizations.

Knowledge according to *advaita* philosophy is a personal search for the truth and integrates multiple ways and sources of knowing. It includes the sensory perception of a subjective actor, intellectual detachment of reason and logic, all nested within a spiritual consciousness cognizant of the spiritual interconnectedness. This knowledge values both ideal and material realities. Conventional dualistic approach that guides most research today operates under the assumption that material and ideal realities are irreconcilable and a researcher has to pick one or the other as the ultimate truth. Ideal or subjective reality contains entities like consciousness, discursive acts like conversations, stories, and metaphors. Entities that belong to the material realm are hard and tangible. In the model proposed by Burrell and Morgan (1979), interpretive and radical humanist paradigms operate under the assumption of subjective ontology. The functionalist and radical structuralist approaches belong to the objective ontology. However, *advaitic* holistic ontology allows co-existence of both subjective and objective realities because both of them are expressions of the ultimate reality of oneness. They exist simultaneously and influence each other. To an *advaitic* practitioner, both material and ideal realities exist and both are manifestations of the ultimate reality. To the uninitiated, these two positions may seem contrary but the *advaiti* acknowledges the contradiction and embraces it.

For example, Vivekananda (1893a), in his address to the Parliament of Religions, said, “It is bread that the suffering millions of burning India cry out for with parched throats...It is an insult to starving people to offer them religion. It is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics.”

In the same speech (Vivekananda, 1893b) he also said,

Here I stand and if I shut my eyes, and try to conceive my existence, “I,” “I,” “I,” what is the idea before me? The idea of a body. Am I, then, nothing but a combination of material substances? The Vedas declare, “No.” I am a spirit living in a body. I am not the body. The body will die, but I shall not die. Here am I in this body; it will fall, but I shall go on living. I had also a past. The soul was not created, for creation means a combination which means a certain future dissolution. If then the soul was created, it must die.

Similarly, much of Gandhi’s practical philosophy focused on economic self-reliance for the rural poor of India. The *chakra* (low-tech spinning wheel) became a symbol of a movement. At the same time, Gandhi galvanized the millions of oppressed Indians and inspired the oppressors through his spiritual, moral and political strategies. He uses the term “god” in a reformist sense (Saravanamuthu, 2006). Gandhi (1995, 9-10) writes,

To me God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above all of these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist. He is the searcher of hearts. He transcends speech and reasons. He knows us and our hearts better than we do ourselves (pp. 9-10).

The second area that metatheory can contribute to is the linkage between cognitive and communal aspects of a paradigm (Ritzer, 1988). Advaita philosophy is based on the assumption that it can transcend the communal dimensions. Gandhi as an advaitic practitioner has influenced multiple other communities and their transformation. Saravanamuthu (2006) argues that Gandhian-Vedic approach has universal relevance. The history of civil rights movement in the U.S (led by Martin Luther King), anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (led by Nelson Mandela) and a multitude of communal experiments toward social transformation show that these principles are transferable to other cultural contexts outside of India.

The third line of inquiry that Ritzer (1988) raises is the development, refinement, expansion, and application of metatheoretical tools like levels of analysis and micro-macro linkage. Advaita as a metatheory, especially its focus on praxis of dealing with personal and social contradictions offers a new way to look at the micro-macro linkage. Saravanamuthu (2006) provides an excellent example of the micro-macro linkage using Gandhi's advaitic practice. She writes that Gandhian-Vedic notion of freedom refers to emancipation from the circular dialectic of social contradictions, which arises when an individual engages with the structure. She cites Gandhi's life as an example of how structural contradictions and personal contradictions get engaged in the deepest way possible through spiritual development and service, thus resulting transformation of self and society.

Finally, this metatheory has the potential to shape and offer new tools for researchers in the action-research arena. In another paper, I have provided an example of how I developed a particular theory in an action-research context, grounded in the advaitic paradigm (Poonamallee, 2009). Advaita philosophy encourages reason, logic, and reflection. Traditions like phenomenology and action research offer frameworks for such self-reflexive process too. Marshall (2001) offers a useful model of "inquiring through inner and outer arcs of attention." Advaitic epistemology is based on the belief that a subject can view itself as an object. Recent cognition and consciousness researchers advance a similar argument. Grush (2000) writes that a first person perspective allows a system to conceive of itself as part of an independent, objective order, while at the same time being anchored in it and act as a subject. The conventional subjective-objective polarized notion of ontology denies a subject the capacity for objective reflection. From this point of view, most qualitative and especially naturalistic inquiry appears to be subject to subjectivity simply owing to its stance on a researcher's phenomenological presence. Advaitic philosophy and Gandhi's extensive reflection on his own spiritual development and struggle of wrestling with the personal and social contradictions offer promise.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the tenets of advaita philosophy and practice and have argued that this framework fits the requirements to be a metatheory. I have described the ontological, epistemological and practical implications of advaitic philosophy. Advaita ontology is predicated upon the belief that all life in the universe is interconnected and hence life is non-dualistic. Advaita epistemology is about experientially discovering this truth of interconnectedness through praxis. Finally, I have presented the contributions that this framework can offer to theory building in general.

However, there are three challenges in adopting *advaita* as metatheory. The first one is that assumptions underlying this approach are very alien to the mainstream western philosophies of science that still legitimize or delegitimize new ideas and discoveries. Further systematic research needs to be undertaken to find boundary objects, ideas, and practices that can help in communicating this seemingly esoteric but very practical framework to the mainstream scholars. The second challenge is that because *advaitic* philosophy privileges ontological complexity, paradox and multiple ways of knowing, it is not amenable to the more commonly understood notions of parsimony in theory building. New and deliberate methodological innovations need to be made to integrate and represent the complexities inherent in this approach. Finally, unlike most mainstream approaches to research, *advaitic* philosophy offers no off-the-shelf prescriptions. While there are general guidelines, there is no formulaic answer to research problems. Therefore, a scholar who wishes to adopt *advaitic* philosophy as metatheory needs also be willing to undertake a personal journey of truth through *advaitic* praxis. However, all these challenges are paradoxically rich and fertile grounds for further research.

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