

# The Parable of Two Birds: An Advaita Approach to Global IR

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

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DEEPSHIKHA SHAHI, AUG 17 2023

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The academic discipline of International Relations (IR) has come a long way in the process of comprehending the 'material gaps' (political and economic disparities) and 'knowledge gaps' (cultural and ideational discrepancies) between the numerous worlds geographically centred in the West and the non-West. While IR's 'rationalist science' remains overdetermined by the West-non-West material gaps, its 'reflectivist anti-science' remains overdetermined by the West-non-West knowledge gaps. But both these intellectual pathways – namely, rationalist science and reflectivist anti-science – remain fraught with a 'Kantian dualist consciousness': this dualist consciousness separates the subject/s and object/s of a knowledge-situation, thereby freezing the gaps between the subjective-experience of the West or the non-West (as theorist) and the objective-reality of world politics (as theorised). In effect, these intellectual pathways deepen the psychic distance among human beings living in different parts of the globe and solidify the imaginings of a temporally-spatially divided world. Alternatively, the emerging works on Global IR endorse a 'de-Kantian monist consciousness': this monist consciousness recovers the temporally-spatially indivisible flow of human life, thereby proposing an innovative model of theory-building and policy-making that goes beyond the geo-centric limits of knowledge-production and knowledge-application.

This article aims to explain how the Indian philosophy of 'Advaita' (literally meaning 'non-duality') – as illustrated through the parable of two birds contained in the Vedic text of *Mundaka Upanishad* – exemplifies this monist consciousness. As this monist consciousness not only transcends the geo-centric limits of knowledge-production and knowledge-application but also gives recognition to the temporally-spatially indivisible human condition on earth, it serves as a valuable resource to enrich the 'Global IR research agenda': i.e., the research agenda that seeks to reconcile the West-non-West binaries and de-center IR knowledge. The article is divided into three sections. The first section begins with the narration of the parable of two birds with a view to clarify the monist (or non-dualist) philosophical vision of Advaita. The second section proceeds to explicate how this monist philosophical vision of Advaita surpasses the Kant-inspired theoretical frameworks of conventional Western-centric IR. Finally, the third section discusses how the de-Kantian monist underpinnings of Advaita can reconcile the West-non-West binaries and de-center IR knowledge, thereby contributing to the Global IR literature.

### **Advaita: A Philosophy of Two in One**

Before setting out to grasp the intricate monist philosophy of Advaita, and assess its relevance for the theoretical and practical understanding of contemporary world politics, it is sensible to grip the parable itself, which goes like this:

There are two birds...who live in the very same tree...the first bird...is in the lower branches of the tree. Its view obstructed by the many branches of the surrounding trees, it hops around nervously, pecking at fruits both sweet and sour. So focused on eating fruits, it loses sight of the world around it and gets caught up in satisfying its immediate material desires. It is disconnected, in a way, from its environment and other beings and jumps from branch to branch...The second bird is perched atop the tree...on its main trunk. From this highest perch, it has the broadest view of the tree and the lower bird...It sees its feet attached to the tree, feels connected, and sees the lower bird moving

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frantically, following appetite after appetite, as it strips the tree bare of its fruits. The second bird does not eat fruits but simply watches, content to Be in its place at the top of the tree (Nidumolu 2013, 15).

Though the two birds seem distinctive at the beginning, their distinctiveness undergoes a radical transformation toward the end of the parable:

Even though seemingly two, they are one, for they are united always...existing together [as a 'monist being']...one bird ['disconnected self'] eats [or participates in the action of eating]...the other ['connected self'] witnesses [or shows a sort of relative inaction while observing]...In this co-existence there is a strange phenomenon – for there is taking place at the same time and on the same spot two utterly contradictory activities. There is witnessing in the midst of participation...the [monist being]...who neither indulges nor denies, who neither accepts nor rejects, who neither justifies nor condemns...alone knows how to be a witness in the midst of participation...[i.e., how to be a witness of] the experience of non-duality (Mehta 1970, 139-141).

Practically, the two birds in the parable symbolize two functional categories of the self: (i) participation-oriented; and (ii) witness-oriented. In addition, these two functional categories – i.e., participation-oriented and witness-oriented – come to life in the same non-dual monist self. As such, the parable of two birds straightforwardly conveys the central Advaita formula of a non-dual 'monist being' – that is, to be an active participant and yet at the same time to be an inactive witness of one's action (Mehta 1994). Also, this simultaneous process of action in the background of inaction involves a possible penetration into those realms of consciousness that go beyond the 'mind'. Evoking the parable of two birds, Archibald E. Gough (2000, 110) narrates the anatomies of consciousness that go beyond the mind:

In its natural state the mind is tainted with desires, aversions, and passions relative to external things, and like a tarnished mirror or a ruffled pool, is unprepared to mirror the [inner] self that is ever present to it...the senses must be checked...[the] turbid discoloration of the mind must be purged away, and that it may become an even and lucid reflecting surface, to [be able to] present the image of the [inner non-dual monist] self...this image is the last of the modes of the mind, arising only when the mind is ready to melt away in the fontal unity of the characterless self.

So, the mind-based rationalities must take a back seat to allow the extra-mental consciousness to capture the gist of the 'monist being': that is to say, the 'monist being' which is free from the initial dualism (i.e., 'participation-witness dualism') that originally made the two birds appear distinctive. Strikingly, this Advaita appeal to transcend the mind-based rationalities challenges the orthodox Kant-inspired theoretical-practical understandings of world politics. While Kant-inspired theoretical-practical understandings of world politics logically depend on the mind-based rationalities that temporally-spatially delimit the psychological complexities inherent in assessing personal identities (Ameriks 2000), the Advaita philosophy remains grounded in the general human consciousness that exceeds the time-space bounds, i.e., the human consciousness that is not confined to the 'mental realm', but presumes a connectedness between the 'mental and extra-mental realms' (as indicated in the parable of two birds).

## **Advaita and IR: Beyond Kantian Dualism**

How do, then, the philosophical insights of Advaita (as derived from the parable of two birds) strive to improve the conventional theoretical-practical understanding of Kant-inspired IR? As the conventional theoretical-practical understanding of Kant-inspired IR percolates through mind-based rationalities, they suggest rigid deviations between 'rationalist participation' and 'reflectivist witnessing'. Fred Chernoff (2007, 6) clarifies how these mind-based rationalities (or mind-based 'inside-outside' discussions) shape the 'rationalist-reflectivist debate' in IR:

Many scholars...make a fundamental distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' approaches to the study of IR. The 'outside' refers to the 'scientific' approach, which emphasizes causal reasoning and identifying regularities in the behavior of nation-states or other social actors. The 'inside' approach rejects the notion that human behavior, as individuals or in any sort of groupings – governments, banks, political parties – can be studied scientifically. These scholars...focus on getting 'inside' the mind of the actors, trying to understand the world the way they understand it, and trying to find meaning in the actions we observe. The inside approach is often viewed as 'interpretive': it views the study of the social world more like the process of decoding meanings of literature than like the hypothesizing of

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causal relationships...The outside approach has been dominant in the study of IR in the United States over the past half-century. But in the past twenty years it has run into a lot of opposition.

Evidently, a 'focus on getting inside the mind of the actors' informs reflectivist witnessing, whereas the emphasis on 'outside causal reasoning' (again through the mind of the scholars) notifies rationalist participation. Also, the rationalist participation is qualified as 'science', whereas the reflectivist witnessing is construed as 'anti-science'. However, from the standpoint of Advaita (as illustrated in the parable of two birds), the fixation with mind-based rationalities in IR's scientific rationalist participation as well as anti-scientific reflectivist witnessing delivers two 'misconceptions': first, a mistaken endorsement of the irreconcilability between rationalist participation and reflectivist witnessing (akin to the initial illusory irreconcilability between the functional orientations of the two birds); second, an unqualified support to the 'disconnected self' (first bird) at the expense of the 'connected self' (second bird) in regular workings of world politics. Let us examine the implications of these misconceptions.

Noticeably, the scholarly discussions in IR readily acknowledge rationalist participation in world politics as 'action', but demean reflectivist witnessing in world politics as 'inaction'. Cagla Luleci and I. Erkam Sula (2016, 52) elaborate:

According to Keohane (1988, 380) 'Most of us are children of the [Kantian ideas of] Enlightenment, insofar as we believe that human life can be improved through human action guided by knowledge.'...his rationalist commitment has probably led him to believe in the necessity to work [or 'act'] for human progress...He challenges the reflective scholarship from such standpoint...He poses a critique of what reflective scholarship does [or pinpoints what reflective scholarship 'does not do' – that is, it does not put forward a clear-cut 'programme of action'].

Against the backdrop of this seemingly irresolvable rationalist-reflectivist debate in IR, the theoretical and practical possibilities of a monist amalgamation of 'rationalist action' and 'reflectivist inaction' (as conceived in the parable of two birds) seem unachievable. Furthermore, these accustomed rationalist/ reflectivist attitudes toward action and inaction – that is, the notion of 'agency' in world politics – unavoidably necessitate a preference for 'disconnected self' (first bird), not 'connected self' (second bird). In order to explain the disconnected nature of 'self-identity' in IR, Brent J. Steele (2008, 55) mentions those instances in world politics wherein the state agents (as representatives of their attached nation-states) express 'shame', 'remorse', or 'regret' with regard to specific foreign policy actions. He notes:

We recognize shame as a discursive expression of remorse or regret...Shame strips away the ontological security that agents develop in their attachment to routines. It is therefore a radical disruption of the self...In the case of nation-states, this does not mean that a state agent issuing such regret is taking personal blame for such an identity disconnect, but it does imply that the speaker, as a member of the nation-state, experiences that disconnect and in turn seeks to see such self-identity 'disruptions' repaired in current and future foreign policy actions.

Steele refers to the occasions of 'shame', 'remorse', or 'regret' in the conduct of world politics as momentary experiences of disconnected self-identity – i.e., the momentary experiences when the state agents feel disconnected from their routine self-identification with particular foreign policy actions of the attached nation-state. However, even when the state agents do not go through such momentary experiences, their very routine self-identification with the attached nation-states finds expression in their non-self-identification with the others. In this context, one is reminded of Samuel P. Huntington's (1996, 20-21) observations:

We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against... For peoples seeking identity...enemies are essential ... unless we hate what we are not, we cannot love what we are.

Apparently, the state (and non-state) agents routinely approach their self-identity in terms of their non-identity with the others: as such, the continuous (not momentary) experiences of 'disconnected self' become naturalized in the sphere of world politics, thereby making the potential monist meeting of 'disconnected self' with 'connected self' unimaginable. Clearly, this situation is unlike the parable of two birds wherein the first bird ('disconnected self') meets the second bird ('connected self') in the same non-dual monist self. In fact, the customary rationalist and reflectivist conceptual matrices of disconnected 'being', 'self', 'identity', 'interaction', 'action', 'mentalities', 'consciousness' etc.

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have their geneses in the following three forms of Kantian dualism: (i) subject-object dualism; (ii) science-metaphysics dualism; and (iii) phenomena-noumena dualism. By contrast, the extra-mental/extra-rational inclination of the philosophical insights of Advaita is precisely about realigning these three forms of Kantian dualism and allocating a monist tilt to them, thereby making a significant contribution to the Global IR discourse.

## Advaita and Global IR: Toward De-Kantian Monism

Kant portrays human beings as *animal rationabile*: in other words, he believes that the 'reason' as an essential faculty of human mind is conscious of its separation from nature through its direct apprehension of its own freedom; this hypothesis of autonomous human freedom implies that the study of human beings has to use guidelines other than the study of nature that merely obeys the law of necessity. According to Jan Faye (2012, 3):

To a great extent this view has – until recently – established the ideological framework of humanities...It has been so pervasive that even later German thinkers have found it difficult to escape the idealist vision of humanities [and social sciences] in order to see things differently.

Noticeably, the rationalist IR theories deduce 'total externality of reality': the reality (object) is situated out there, outside the mind-based knowledge practices of human actors (subject). But the reflectivist IR theories presume 'relative internality of reality': the reality (object) is situated within, fairly inside the mind-based knowledge practices of human actors (subject). Yet, both rationalist and reflectivist theories locate reality somewhere in or between the mutually separated 'internalized subject' and 'externalized object', thereby endorsing an essential separation between the subject and object of a Kantian dualist knowledge-situation. In addition to the 'total externality' and 'relative internality' of reality (object), a more nuanced statement on the subject-object relations has been offered by Roy Bhaskar's 'critical realism'. Bhaskar (1998) suggests that the 'internality' of human actors (subject) with respect to their objects of study must be distinguished from the 'existential intransitivity' of those objects of study: here, an object's existence (or not), and properties, are considered quite independent of the act of investigation of which it is the putative object, even though such an investigation, once initiated, may modify that object. Alexander Wendt's (1999) 'social constructivism' gains stimulus from Bhaskar's critical realism, and, thus, attempts to attach an equal importance to both 'object-aspect' and 'subject-aspect' of reality. Nonetheless, like rationalist and reflectivist IR theories, Wendt's social constructivism maintains that the thoughts of human actors (subject) stand separated from the reality (object): indeed, the critical discussions on constructivist knowledge about reality have regenerated the same old contentions between 'rationalist constructivism' and 'reflectivist constructivism' (Hamchi 2011). Overall, the peculiarity of Wendt's social constructivism gets watered down by the commonality it shares with the rest of Western-centric IR theories: i.e., the approval of the same Kantian dualism that fabricates the subject-object, science-metaphysics, and phenomena-noumena separation.

How does, then, Advaita calls for allocating a monist tilt to this Kantian dualism, thereby seeking to contribute to the Global IR discourse? As the philosophical insights of Advaita take a de-Kantian turn, they restore the missing connectedness between the supposed binaries of subject-object, science-metaphysics, phenomena-noumena, self-other, West-non-West etc. Advaita accepts that the natural experience of the world is nothing other than a relationship between cognitive subject and its object/s, and that there is a fundamental distinction between the cognitive subject (whose range is the state of 'I-ness') and the object/s (whose range is the 'you-ness') (Ram-Prasad 2002). But the Advaitic approach to human consciousness (which encompasses both mental and extra-mental realms) distinguishes between 'I' and 'I-thought'. Arousing three distinct conditions of human consciousness – 'waking', 'dream', and 'sleep' – Arvind Sharma (1993, 26-27) simplifies how the Advaitic approach to human consciousness distinguishes between the 'I' and the 'I-thought':

Advaita claims that there is only one consciousness subsisting in the states of waking, dream and sleep. In sleep, there is no 'I'; thought arises on waking and then the world appears. Where was this 'I' in sleep? Was it there or was it not? It must have been there also, but not in the way you feel now. The sleeping 'I' is the real 'I' that subsists all through. That is consciousness. If that is known, you will see that it is beyond [mental or mind-based] thoughts ... [As such], the subject [as 'I-thought'] is always present in these three states of ordinary experience otherwise the experience cannot occur (as all experience involves an experiencing subject), yet it is [usually] never experienced as

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the pure subject [as 'I']...This creates the peculiar situation that the subject is both known [as 'I-thought' in the so-called 'scientific/phenomenal' sense] and unknown [as 'I' in the so-called 'metaphysical/noumenal' sense].

While Kant-inspired rationalist and reflectivist IR theories systematically get rid of 'I' as a metaphysical-noumenal 'monist being', and exclusively engage with the 'I-thought' as a scientific-phenomenal 'dualist being', they end up reinforcing an unbridgeable cognitive gap between the West (as the harbinger of the study of scientific-phenomenal-world) and the non-West (as the site for the investigation of metaphysical-noumenal-world) (Iwaniszewski 2009). Belying these Kant-inspired theories, Advaita prescribes a de-Kantian intellectual strategy of 'science-metaphysics conflation': since Advaita ascends from a 'blurry juncture between science and metaphysics' without rendering the phenomenal and noumenal realms and procedures of knowledge-production as mutually incommensurable, it calls for the need to find commonalities in scientific and metaphysical attitudes that otherwise seem to come from two disciplines at either end of the spectrum, specifically, Western science or Eastern religion; by bringing together the so-called scientific and metaphysical threads of Western science and Eastern religion, Advaita rebuffs the dualist divide between the presumably distinct ontological worlds of god (noumena/metaphysics) and worlds of man (phenomena/science) (Shahi 2019).

Intellectually, Advaita ties the theorist (subject) and the theorised (object) together with a world marked with 'single hidden connectedness' (or single continuous expanse of consciousness): in so doing, Advaita not only connects the 'subject/s' and 'object/s' of a knowledge-situation, but also interlinks the scientific-phenomenal-world with the metaphysical-noumenal-world, thereby reviving a 'scientific-metaphysical ethos' that proclaims the indivisibility of phenomenal-territorial-self and noumenal-de-territorial-self. By giving recognition to the indivisibility of phenomenal-territorial-self and noumenal-de-territorial-self, Advaita initiates an innovative scheme of theory-building and policy-making that aims to de-center IR knowledge and reconcile the West-non-West binaries (Shahi 2023). While Advaita initiates this innovative scheme to de-center IR knowledge and reconcile the West-non-West binaries, it pursues the intellectual strategy of 'dualism-monism reconciliation' which does not discard the existing rationalist or reflectivist theoretical frameworks of Western-centric IR, but further stretches them toward a monist direction, thereby echoing the atypical monist merger of rationalist participation and reflectivist witnessing as articulated in the parable of two birds.

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