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In the Shadow of the Infinite: The Relationship between God and the World in the Theology of Rāmānuja and Madhva

One of the salient challenges faced by Vedāntic traditions was the problem of how to characterise the relationship between *brahman* and the world of finite entities. Whilst this question is usually associated with the monistic system of the eighth-century Advaitin exegete and dialectician, Śāṅkara, in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries two Vaiṣṇava thinkers –Rāmānuja and Madhva- sought to systematically undermine the monistic interpretation of the Upanishads and reinterpret them along theistic lines. Although there are fundamental doctrinal continuities between the two theologians, the thinkers have never been the subject of sustained, systematic comparison. In this paper, I compare the models developed by both Vedāntins to describe the relationship between *Brahman* (*Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa*) and finite entities. Although both accepted a triangular ontology which stressed the reality of three distinct beings –God (*Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa*), the individual soul (*jīva*) and unconscious matter (*jagat*)- the conceptual framework they developed to relate these to one another, although fundamentally similar, displays implicative differences which point to deeper theological divergences.

Throughout this paper, I argue that we should understand these models primarily as hermeneutical concepts which served as the lynchpin of in the two thinkers' interpretive strategies. I compare the ways in which these general principles are employed in the interpretation of key Upanishadic passages. I concentrate particularly on Madhva's interpretation of the sixth *adhyaḥya* of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad which reveal interesting divergences in their conceptions of causality and cosmogony and their role in the relationship between God and finite beings. In this context, I also examine Madhva's views of the scope and function of language in the interpretation of this portion of scripture. I contend that a detailed reading of Madhva's TD yields a deeper understanding of this fundamental aspect of the text. Throughout, I concentrate particularly on the significant fact that Madhva –more so than Rāmānuja- sought to integrate his interpretation into an ontological framework which stressed the asymmetry of the two orders of being and reinterpreted the significance of causality to the interpretation of the passage.

I then turn to a discussion of two crucial features of the Upaniṣadic passage, namely the *mahāvāya* "tattvam asi". It is my contention that a careful analysis of the significance of Madhva's interpretation of the *śrṣṭi* component of the passage explains his apparently ambivalent understanding of this fundamental *śruti*. Finally, I analyse the way in which Madhva in his *Bhagavadgītātātparyanirṇaya* uses the narrative context of the text to bind the individual *dr̥ṣṭāntas* it supplies into a single, systematic pedagogic discourse, a fact which has not been previously considered by scholarship.