



Bridging the epistemic divide: A comparative ontological and epistemological analysis of advaita vedanta's sattātraya and kant's phenomenal–noumenal distinction

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Abstract

This paper conducts a comparative philosophical investigation of Advaita Vedānta's doctrine of Sattātraya and Immanuel Kant's phenomenal–noumenal distinction. Both traditions address the tension between appearance and ultimate reality. However, their approaches reflect radically different philosophical motivations. Śāṅkara constructs a graded ontology to guide aspirants from illusion to liberation, rooted in the soteriological imperative to realize Brahman, the non-dual ground of all being^[1]. Kant, by contrast, delineates the limits of human knowledge through a critical epistemology that confines cognition to phenomena structured by a priori categories, while positing noumena as necessary boundaries of thought^[2].

While both systems differentiate what appears from what truly exists, their aims diverge: Advaita seeks metaphysical unity, whereas Kant defends epistemic humility and moral autonomy. The paper critiques comparative approaches that conflate Māyā with Kantian categories or equate Brahman with the noumenon. It argues that these traditions express irreconcilable philosophical logics—soteriological monism versus epistemic dualism. This analysis challenges superficial analogies and offers a model for responsible comparative philosophy that preserves both structural insight and conceptual integrity.

Keywords: Advaita vedānta, transcendental idealism, sattātraya, noumenon and phenomenon, comparative philosophy, soteriological monism

Introduction

The philosophical tension between appearance and reality spans cultures and traditions. Both Indian and Western philosophies attempt to determine whether the world as it appears corresponds to how it ultimately is. Śāṅkara and Kant offer two of the most profound responses to this dilemma. Although both distinguish appearance from ultimate reality, they advance this distinction through incompatible ontological, epistemological, and ethical frameworks.

Śāṅkara, interpreting the Upaniṣads, posits a triadic ontological schema: Pratibhāsika (illusory), Vyāvahārika (empirical), and Pāramārthika (absolute) realities. This hierarchy operates via bādha (sublation), where each lower level is negated by a higher without denying its provisional function. Only Brahman—the non-dual, unchanging substratum—remains ultimately real^[1]. Liberation (mokṣa) arises through direct realization (aparokṣānubhūti) of this truth, which dissolves illusion generated by Māyā—an indefinable principle that veils reality and projects falsity^[3]. For Śāṅkara, knowledge removes ignorance (avidyā), reveals the identity of Ātman and Brahman, and ends saṃsāra.

Kant reconfigures the appearance–reality distinction through his “Copernican revolution.” He asserts that objects conform to human cognition rather than the reverse. The mind structures all experience using a priori intuitions (space and time) and categories (e.g., causality, substance)^[2]. These structures condition phenomena—the only knowable domain. Noumena, or things-in-themselves, exist beyond human cognition and serve as theoretical boundaries, not objects of knowledge. Kant later invokes the noumenon within his moral philosophy as the condition for freedom and autonomy^[4].

Some comparative scholars draw parallels between Māyā and Kant's cognitive apparatus or between Brahman and the

noumenon. However, such analogies neglect key differences. Māyā obstructs and eventually dissolves upon realization, while Kant's categories are necessary and inescapable conditions of experience. Brahman becomes directly realized, whereas the noumenon remains forever inaccessible. Thus, Advaita seeks metaphysical unity and liberation, while Kant upholds epistemic limitation and moral agency.

This paper argues that both thinkers respond to the same philosophical problem—appearance versus reality—from opposite directions. Advaita posits the absolute as knowable through non-conceptual awareness. Kant insists that reason cannot transcend empirical boundaries. Their contrasting aims—liberation in Śāṅkara, autonomy in Kant—express incompatible worldviews: one soteriological and monistic, the other epistemically dualistic.

The paper proceeds in four sections: Śāṅkara's Sattātraya ontology, Kant's transcendental idealism, a comparative analysis of both systems, and implications for comparative philosophy. Rather than flatten distinctions, this inquiry preserves conceptual integrity while seeking structural insight.

Advaita Vedānta: Sattātraya and the Architecture of Reality

Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta responds deeply to the metaphysical tension between appearance and reality. Rooted in the Upaniṣadic tradition, it advances a non-dualist ontology that denies all plurality at the level of ultimate reality. Central to this view is the doctrine of Sattātraya, the three levels of reality: Pratibhāsika (illusory), Vyāvahārika (empirical), and Pāramārthika (absolute). These are governed by the principle of bādha (sublation), wherein each lower level yields to a higher one, without nullifying the pragmatic functionality of the former^[1].

1. Pratibhāsika Sattā: Apparent Reality

Pratibhāsika *Sattā* includes individually projected illusions, such as mistaking a rope for a snake. Such errors disappear upon the acquisition of correct knowledge. Śaṅkara holds that “what is sublated by later knowledge is not real” [1]. These appearances have no ontological weight and exist only as superimposed errors resulting from *avidyā* (ignorance). Unlike Kant, who attributes error to cognitive limitation, Śaṅkara roots illusion in metaphysical ignorance that veils reality.

2. Vyāvahārika Sattā: Empirical Reality

The empirical world (*Vyāvahārika Sattā*) is validated through intersubjective verification and serves ethical and ritual functions. It is provisionally real and necessary for religious conduct, duties, and social life. However, this reality still rests upon *Māyā* and lacks independent existence. Śaṅkara remarks that “empirical knowledge and action hold good only until the rise of true knowledge” [3]. The Lord (Īśvara) appears within this realm, organizing the empirical world without being deluded by it. Yet even *Īśvara* functions within the bounds of *Māyā*, acting as the sustainer of a reality that is ultimately negated [1].

3. Pāramārthika Sattā: Absolute Reality

At the summit lies *Pāramārthika Sattā*, which signifies Brahman—pure consciousness and being, defined as “satyam jñānam anantam” (truth, knowledge, and infinity) [5]. Brahman alone is truly real. Unlike Kant’s noumenon, which remains inaccessible to human cognition, Brahman is knowable through *aparokṣānubhūti*—immediate, direct awareness [3]. Realization does not involve inferential reasoning but the dissolution of ignorance. The identity of *Ātman* and Brahman, expressed in the *mahāvākya* “Tat Tvam Asi,” culminates in *mokṣa* (liberation).

At this level, dualities such as subject-object, knower-known vanish. As Deutsch affirms, “To know Brahman is to be Brahman; knowledge and being converge in a unity beyond subject and object” [6].

4. Māyā: Concealment and Projection

Māyā functions as both concealer (*āvaraṇa*) and projector (*vikṣepa*) of reality. It gives rise to name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*), concealing Brahman and projecting multiplicity. Śaṅkara designates *Māyā* as *anirvacanīya*—neither real nor unreal, indefinable [4]. This principle distinguishes *Māyā* from Kant’s cognitive categories, which are necessary, transparent, and do not deceive. Kant’s structures enable knowledge; *Māyā* obstructs it. As Chakrabarti explains, “*Māyā* creates the illusion of ontological independence where none exists” [7].

5. Ontological Hierarchy and Sublation

Śaṅkara aligns the three ontological levels through the principle of *bādha*, where higher realities sublimate lower ones. The mistaken snake disappears upon recognizing the rope. Similarly, the empirical world dissolves upon realizing Brahman. This progression involves *adhyāropa-apavāda* (superimposition followed by negation), wherein one initially accepts duality only to negate it later [1]. Unlike Kant, who denies access to the noumenal, Śaṅkara asserts that human beings can transcend illusion and directly realize the absolute. His vision combines metaphysical insight with soteriological purpose.

Kant’s Critical Philosophy: Transcendental Idealism and the Boundaries of Knowledge

Immanuel Kant reoriented Western metaphysics by grounding the appearance–reality divide in epistemology. His project of transcendental idealism redefined the question “What exists?” into “How is knowledge possible?” He asserted that while objects exist, they appear only as phenomena—structured by the a priori forms of the mind. Noumena, or things-in-themselves (*Dinge an sich*), remain posited but unknowable [2].

Kant acknowledged the necessity of noumena as the ground of appearances but rejected all claims to their knowledge. This denial of metaphysical access stems not from scepticism but from a principled delimitation: knowledge arises only from the synthesis of intuitions and concepts within experience [2].

1. Sensibility and Understanding: The A Priori Framework

Kant identifies two distinct faculties: sensibility, the source of intuitions, and understanding, the source of concepts. Sensibility structures appearances through space and time, which do not belong to objects but to the subject’s mode of receptivity [2, p. A22/B37]. These pure intuitions condition all perception.

Understanding organizes this sensory manifold through twelve categories (e.g., causality, unity, substance). These do not arise from experience but constitute its possibility [2, p. A80/B106]. Kant asserts: “Concepts without intuitions are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind” [2, p. A51/B75]. Together, they produce empirical knowledge, not by reflecting reality, but by constructing it.

This shift marks Kant’s “Copernican revolution,” where the mind actively constitutes the form of experience. The world is not passively received but shaped by universal structures of cognition.

2. Phenomena: The Domain of Experience

Phenomena include all that appears within the a priori structures of sensibility and understanding. This domain constitutes the entirety of possible experience. Though empirically real, phenomena lack absolute status—they depend wholly on the mind’s contribution.

Kant emphasizes that appearance does not refer to the unreality of objects but to their relation to our cognitive faculties. “The concept of appearance,” he writes, “does not signify a property of the object in itself but only its relation to the subject” [2, p. A30/B45].

Thus, scientific knowledge and moral deliberation operate within the phenomenal world, retaining objectivity because all rational beings share the same cognitive framework.

3. Noumena: The Limit-Concept of Reason

Noumena function as theoretical boundaries—concepts without corresponding intuitions. Kant defines the noumenon as a “problematic concept” that marks the limit of theoretical cognition [2, p. A254/B310]. Though they must exist to ground appearances, noumena elude knowledge because they do not appear in space or time and cannot be subsumed under the categories.

Kant warns against attempting to describe the noumenal realm through inference or analogy. Such efforts produce metaphysical illusions or antinomies. Noumena are

thinkable but never knowable. They do not become legitimate objects of theoretical reason.

This epistemic restraint contrasts with Advaita, which holds that ultimate reality (Brahman) can be realized through non-conceptual awareness^[3].

4. Moral Freedom and the Noumenal Self

In the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant reintroduces the noumenal as a condition for moral agency. The phenomenal self, bound by causality, cannot be free. Freedom, therefore, requires a noumenal self—transcendent, undetermined by empirical laws. “The moral law,” Kant states, “leads directly to the concept of freedom” [4, p. 5:29].

The noumenal self becomes a postulate of practical reason. Kant also postulates God and immortality, not as knowable realities, but as conditions for moral striving [4, p. 5:30]. These postulates affirm moral autonomy, not metaphysical knowledge.

Unlike Advaita’s path of self-realization, Kant’s ethical framework preserves the duality between appearances and freedom. The self does not merge with the absolute; it acts under the moral law in autonomy.

5. The Transcendental Self and the Unity of Experience

Kant introduces the transcendental unity of apperception—the “I think” that must accompany all representations—to ensure the coherence of experience [2, p. B131]. This unity enables the subject to synthesize diverse intuitions into a single consciousness.

This transcendental self is not a metaphysical substance or soul. It lacks empirical content and functions merely as a logical condition. Kant denies it any metaphysical identity, calling it “nothing more than a logical function” [2, p. A346/B404].

This sharply contrasts with Śāṅkara’s view of Ātman as pure consciousness, identical with Brahman^[1]. Kant’s self grounds cognition but reveals no ontological truth. He decouples knowing from being.

Comparative Analysis: Structural Parallels and Foundational Divergences

Both Advaita Vedānta and Kant’s critical philosophy confront the appearance–reality distinction by constructing layered frameworks to explain the relation between what appears and what truly exists. However, despite superficial analogies, their metaphysical orientations and philosophical aims diverge profoundly. This section identifies key parallels and irreconcilable differences across four comparative axes: ontological structure, epistemological access, the nature of the self, and the purpose of philosophical inquiry.

1. Structural Parallels: Appearance and Its Mediation

Śāṅkara distinguishes three ontological levels—Pratibhāsika, Vyāvahārika, and Pāramārthika—each progressively sublated until only Brahman remains as the absolute^[1]. Kant, by contrast, draws a binary distinction between phenomena (empirical appearances structured by cognition) and noumena (things-in-themselves), which lie beyond experience [2, p. A255/B310].

In both systems, ordinary experience arises from mediating structures. For Śāṅkara, this mediation occurs through Māyā, which veils and projects reality. For Kant, the a priori

forms—space, time, and categories—structure all possible appearances [2, p. A51/B75].

This resemblance tempts comparison. Scholars like Chakrabarti have analogized Māyā to Kant’s cognitive apparatus [8, p. 66]. Yet such parallels collapse under scrutiny. Māyā is anirvacanīya (indefinable), functions through concealment and projection, and dissolves upon realization^[5]. Kant’s categories, by contrast, are fixed, necessary, and universally valid. They enable knowledge; they do not obstruct it.

2. Epistemology and Access to the Absolute

Śāṅkara asserts the knowability of ultimate reality. Through śravaṇa (scriptural hearing), manana (rational reflection), and nididhyāsana (contemplation), one realizes Brahman in aparokṣānubhūti—direct, non-conceptual awareness^[3]. This knowledge liberates and dissolves illusion.

Kant rejects all claims of cognitive access to the noumenon. He asserts, “Our reason must never presume to go beyond the field of possible experience” [2, p. A298/B355]. Noumena remain necessary but unknowable postulates. Theoretical reason, according to Kant, must stay confined to phenomena. Though he allows for moral postulates—God, freedom, immortality—they do not constitute metaphysical knowledge [4, pp. 5:29–31].

Thus, Advaita embraces soteriological optimism; Kant affirms epistemological modesty. Śāṅkara’s monism culminates in ontological unity; Kant’s dualism maintains the separation of knowledge and being.

3. The Self: Identity or Function?

Śāṅkara identifies the individual self (jīva) with Brahman. Realization of this non-dual identity reveals the self as eternal, changeless, and pure consciousness^[1]. He proclaims, “That which is the seer is the Self—it is changeless, eternal, and pure consciousness” [1, Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya, 1.1.4].

Kant denies all metaphysical identity of the self. His concept of the transcendental unity of apperception—the “I think” that accompanies all experience—serves merely as a logical requirement for cognition [2, p. B131]. He explicitly rejects any ontological interpretation of the self, stating that it is “nothing more than a logical function” [2, p. A346/B404].

Even in moral philosophy, Kant’s noumenal self grounds freedom, not metaphysical realization. It remains unknowable and distinct from appearances. Śāṅkara unites the self with the absolute; Kant preserves its unknowability in the service of moral law.

4. Final Purpose: Liberation or Autonomy

The two systems diverge most sharply in their respective aims. Advaita pursues mokṣa—liberation from the cycle of birth and death through realization of non-duality. Śāṅkara asserts, “Liberation arises from knowledge, not from action” [3, Upadeśasāhasrī, 1.1.5]. Here, knowledge transforms the seeker, not by informing but by dissolving illusion.

Kant’s purpose lies in securing moral autonomy. The noumenal self underwrites free will and responsibility. His vision is not one of metaphysical union but of ethical agency. “The moral law leads directly to the concept of freedom,” he writes [4, p. 5:29]. The dignity of the person lies not in escaping individuality but in legislating moral law.

Thus, Śāṅkara collapses duality; Kant secures it. Śāṅkara's metaphysical unity contrasts with Kant's moral dualism. The two systems represent not convergent philosophies but antithetical visions of human fulfillment.

Conclusion: Beyond Parallels – Reframing the Epistemic Divide

This study set out to examine whether Advaita Vedānta and Kant's critical philosophy respond to a shared metaphysical concern—the distinction between appearance and reality—and whether that shared concern reveals convergence or divergence. Both traditions develop multilayered frameworks to interpret ordinary experience in relation to ultimate reality. Both invoke mediating structures—*Māyā* in Advaita, and cognitive forms in Kant—to account for the coherence of appearances despite their lack of ultimate status [2, 5].

Yet a closer analysis discloses profound divergence. Śāṅkara affirms the direct knowability of Brahman, attainable through disciplined practice and non-conceptual realization [3]. Kant denies all such access to the noumenal, arguing that it lies beyond the bounds of theoretical reason [2, p. A254/B310]. Where Śāṅkara locates error in *avidyā* (ignorance) and dissolves it through *jñāna* (knowledge), Kant situates epistemic limitation within the structure of cognition itself, which he respects as the precondition for objective knowledge [2, pp. A50–A51/B74–B75].

The philosophies diverge in metaphysical orientation: Advaita promotes soteriological monism, wherein the self unites with the absolute; Kant preserves epistemic dualism, wherein the self never knows its noumenal ground but acts under moral law [1, 4]. Attempts to equate Brahman with the noumenon or *Māyā* with Kantian categories ultimately fail. They obscure key differences: the metaphysical confidence of Śāṅkara versus Kant's principled modesty; the unity of being and knowing in Advaita versus the separation of cognition and ontology in Kant.

These irreducible commitments call for caution in comparative philosophy. Structural parallels do not imply conceptual equivalence. A responsible comparative method must retain both difference and integrity. It must ask not only *how* traditions describe phenomena, but *why* they do so, what philosophical motivations they reflect, and toward what ends they lead. This paper has foregrounded those deeper logics—Advaita's metaphysical realism, Kant's critical idealism.

The implications extend beyond comparative metaphysics. In consciousness studies, the contrast raises the question: is consciousness inherently conditioned by structure, or can it transcend structure to reveal unity? In ethics, the divergence between moral autonomy and spiritual liberation poses new challenges for understanding selfhood and responsibility. In comparative methodology, the temptation to translate across traditions without ontological accountability must give way to philosophically grounded interpretations.

Future research may build on this model by exploring similar distinctions in other traditions—such as between Yogācāra and Kant, or between Advaita and German Idealism. Questions about negation, freedom, practice, and language may open further paths for inquiry. But the central claim endures: meaningful comparison must protect philosophical coherence even as it explores resonance.

Advaita and Kant do not converge into a shared metaphysics. They illustrate the breadth of philosophical

inquiry—the commitment to understanding not just what appears, but how we come to know it, and why that knowledge matters.

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