

**SARA GRANT AND THE QUESTION OF RELATION IN
ŚAṆKARA VEDĀNTA
A Philosophical Reappraisal**

Jacob Palaparambil

Life, Intellectual Formation, and Philosophical Orientation

Sara Grant (1922–2000), Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (RSCJ), stands as one of the most significant Christian philosophers of the twentieth century to engage *Advaita Vedānta* with sustained philosophical seriousness within the Indian context.¹ Educated in England in Western philosophy and theology, Grant’s intellectual orientation was decisively shaped by her long residence in India, where her teaching and research—most notably at Sophia College, Mumbai—brought her into close engagement with local intellectual traditions and into collaboration with Jesuit scholars committed to Hindu–Christian philosophical dialogue.² This lived and scholarly immersion enabled her to move beyond external comparison toward an internally informed interpretation of *Advaita*.

Grant’s philosophical formation reflects the convergence of three decisive influences. First, her grounding in the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysical tradition equipped her with conceptual resources for addressing questions of being, causality, and relation.³ Second, her sustained engagement with Indian philosophy—above all with Śaṅkara’s *Advaita Vedānta*—introduced her to a radically non-dual metaphysical vision in which the ultimacy of *Brahman* calls into question assumptions embedded in substance-based ontologies.⁴ Third, her intellectual mentorship under Richard De Smet proved formative at the methodological level. De Smet’s approach to comparative philosophy combined scrupulous fidelity to primary texts with philosophical precision,

¹ Sara Grant, *Śaṅkarācārya’s Concept of Relation* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999) vii–xii.

² Ivo Coelho, “Fr. Richard V. De Smet (1916–97): Reminiscences,” *Divyadaan: Journal of Philosophy and Education* 8/1 (1997): 3–15.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Q. 28–29; Richard De Smet, “The Aristotelian-Thomist Conception of Man,” in *Brahman and Person*, ed. Ivo Coelho (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2010) 161–172.

⁴ Śaṅkara, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*, tr. Swāmī Mādhavānanda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2018).

while resisting both syncretism and confessional apologetics.⁵ Together, these influences shaped Grant's distinctive approach to *Advaita* as a philosophical system worthy of interpretation on its own terms.

Although Grant is widely known for *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian*, her enduring philosophical importance lies less in constructive theology than in her interpretation of Śaṅkara's thought.⁶ Rather than treating Śaṅkara as a conceptual counterpoint to Christian theism, Grant sought to understand how non-duality itself accounts for the experienced reality of relationality without compromising the absoluteness of *Brahman*.⁷ Her concern was not to resolve tensions by conceptual assimilation, but to clarify how *Advaita* articulates the status and function of relation within its own metaphysical and soteriological framework.

This question is of particular significance given the long-standing controversy surrounding the interpretation of relation in *Advaita Vedānta*. Śaṅkara's uncompromising affirmation of non-duality has often been criticized for dissolving all relational structures into an undifferentiated Absolute, thereby rendering causality, moral agency, devotion, and ethical responsibility as ultimately illusory.⁸ Such critiques have arisen not only from rival Indian schools such as *Nyāya*, *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, and *Dvaita* but also from modern Western interpreters whose readings are shaped by post-Cartesian and post-Kantian assumptions about subjectivity and substance.⁹ These interpretations frequently overlook the nuanced stratification of discourse operative within *Advaita*.¹⁰

⁵ Richard De Smet, "Language and Knowledge of the Absolute According to Śaṅkara," in *Understanding Śaṅkara*, ed. Ivo Coelho (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2013) 32–74.

⁶ Sara Grant, *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) 1–12.

⁷ Grant, *Śaṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 45–78.

⁸ Rāmānuja, *Śrī Bhāṣya*, I.1.1; Madhva, *Anuvyākhyāna on Brahma Sūtra* I.1.1; Bimal N. Patel, "Advaita Vedānta and the Problem of Moral Responsibility," *Philosophy East and West* 37/4 (1987): 403–415.

⁹ Paul Hacker, *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedānta*, ed. Wilhelm Halbfass (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995) 17–40; Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988) 361–385.

¹⁰ De Smet, "The Fundamental Antinomy of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya's Methodology," in *Understanding Śaṅkara*, 75–82.

It is within this contested interpretive landscape that Sara Grant's contribution assumes particular importance. Her work represents a careful attempt to retrieve Śāṅkara's thought from both colonial misreadings and reductive apologetic frameworks, while engaging it in sustained dialogue with Western metaphysics. Central to this engagement is the problem of relation: how a philosophy that affirms the absolute non-duality of *Brahman* can nevertheless account for the relational structures that permeate knowledge, language, religious practice, and the path to liberation.¹¹

Grant's response is neither a denial of *Advaita's* non-dual claim nor an uncritical importation of Christian relational categories. Rather, through close attention to Śāṅkara's primary texts—especially the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* and the major *Upaniṣadic* commentaries—she highlights the functional, epistemological, and pedagogical necessity of relational discourse within the *Advaitic* path, even while affirming its sublation at the level of ultimate truth (*paramārtha*).¹² In doing so, she extends and deepens the interpretive insights of Richard De Smet, offering a philosophically rigorous framework for rethinking the place of relation in *Advaita Vedānta*.¹³

The De Smet Tradition of *Advaita* Interpretation and the Classical Advaitic Problem of Relation

Sara Grant's philosophical orientation is inseparable from the intellectual inheritance of Richard De Smet (1916–1997), whose scholarship marked a decisive turning point in modern interpretations of Śāṅkara's *Advaita Vedānta*.¹⁴ De Smet questioned the entrenched assumption that *nirguṇa Brahman* must be construed as impersonal and therefore intrinsically unrelated.¹⁵ Drawing critically upon Thomistic metaphysics, he proposed

¹¹ Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 19–32.

¹² Śāṅkara, *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, Introduction (*Adhyāsa Bhāṣya*), tr. Swāmī Gambhīrānanda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2018); Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 45–78.

¹³ De Smet, "Language and Knowledge of the Absolute According to Śāṅkara," in *Understanding Śāṅkara*, 32–74; Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 79–92.

¹⁴ Ivo Coelho, "De Smet, Richard (1916–1997)," in *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010) 382–385.

¹⁵ De Smet, "Śāṅkara's Non-Dualism (Advaita-Vāda)," in *Understanding Śāṅkara*, 83–98.

that the classical notion of person—originally articulated within Christian theological reflection on the Absolute—could be shown to be compatible with Śaṅkara’s conception of *Brahman*, provided that predicates such as personhood and relation are employed analogically rather than univocally.¹⁶ In this way, De Smet opened a philosophical space in which *Advaita* could be interpreted without reducing *Brahman* to an abstract, inert absolute.¹⁷

Grant appropriated this foundational insight while significantly reorienting its focus. Whereas De Smet’s primary concern lay with the metaphysical coherence of attributing personal predicates to *nirguṇa Brahman*, Grant shifted attention to the epistemological and methodological status of relation within *Advaita* itself. Her inquiry is less concerned with whether *Brahman* may be designated as personal and more with how Śaṅkara’s non-dualism operates concretely as a *jñāna-mārga*, a path of liberating knowledge that necessarily unfolds through relational configurations—such as those between teacher and disciple, scripture and interpreter, and knower and known.

This shift of emphasis constitutes Grant’s distinctive contribution. She demonstrates that the problem of relation in *Advaita* cannot be resolved solely at the level of abstract ontology. It also demands careful attention to Śaṅkara’s pedagogical strategy of *adhyāropa-apavāda* (provisional superimposition and subsequent negation) and to his sophisticated theory of language, particularly the function of *lakṣaṇā*. In this respect, Grant stands firmly within the interpretive tradition inaugurated by De Smet, yet her work represents a genuine development of that tradition rather than a mere reiteration of its conclusions.

At the core of *Advaita Vedānta* lies a well-known philosophical tension. On the one hand, Śaṅkara affirms *Brahman* as *ekam eva advītyam*, one without a second, pure being-consciousness (*sat-cit*), free from all internal differentiation and external relation.¹⁸ From the standpoint of ultimate reality (*paramārtha*), there is no subject-object

¹⁶ De Smet, “The Aristotelian-Thomist Conception of Man,” in *Brahman and Person*, 161-172.

¹⁷ Julius J. Lipner, “Richard V. De Smet, S.J. – An Appreciation,” *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin* 11 (1998): 51–54.

¹⁸ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.2.1; Śaṅkara, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*, tr. Swāmī Gambhīrānanda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2018).

polarity, no causal succession, and no relational structure whatsoever.¹⁹ On the other hand, Śāṅkara never dismisses the empirical world as irrelevant. His commentarial engagement with the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Brahma Sūtras* presupposes the meaningfulness of ordinary experience, moral agency, and the human quest for liberation. Acting, choosing, suffering, inquiry, and spiritual discipline all presuppose a web of relations that cannot be ignored.²⁰

The classical *Advaitic* response to this tension is articulated through the distinction between two levels of truth: *vyavahāra*, the empirical or transactional order, and *paramārtha*, the level of ultimate reality. Relation belongs unambiguously to the former and is absent from the latter. Critics, however, have often contended that this framework effectively relegates relation to the status of mere illusion (*mithyā*), thereby stripping it of any lasting philosophical or existential significance.

Grant contests this reductionist reading by offering a more nuanced interpretation of *mithyā*. She argues that it does not denote sheer non-being or simple deception, but rather a dependent and provisional mode of reality. Relationality, though ultimately sublated in the realization of non-duality, is neither arbitrary nor dispensable. On the contrary, it is the indispensable condition for the emergence of ignorance and, at the same time, the very medium through which liberation from ignorance becomes possible. In this way, Grant reframes relation as an essential, though non-ultimate, dimension of *Advaitic* philosophy.²¹

***Tādātmya* and Asymmetrical Dependence**

A central dimension of Sara Grant's interpretation of relationality in *Advaita Vedānta* is her careful analysis of *tādātmya*, a technical term that figures prominently in Śāṅkara's treatment of causality, especially in his commentaries on the *Brahma Sūtras* and the *Upaniṣads*. In much of the secondary literature, *tādātmya* is rendered reductively as "identity," a translation that obscures its philosophical nuance. Grant explicitly resists this reduction, arguing that the term more precisely signifies a relation of

¹⁹ Śāṅkara, *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* 2.4.14.

²⁰ Śāṅkara, *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* I.1.1.

²¹ Francis X. Clooney, "Restoring Hindu Theology as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 447–477.

non-otherness (*ananyatva*), one that affirms ontological dependence without collapsing the distinction between cause and effect. What is at stake here is not numerical sameness, but a structured asymmetry in which the effect has no reality apart from its cause, while the cause in no way depends upon the effect.²²

Grant underscores that, for Śāṅkara, the empirical world cannot be dismissed as sheer unreality (*asat*), nor can it be accorded autonomous ontological status alongside *Brahman*. Rather, the world exists only in and through *Brahman*, deriving its entire intelligibility and provisional reality from that absolute ground. The effect is said to be “not other than” the cause, yet this non-otherness does not imply mutual equivalence. *Brahman* infinitely exceeds the world, which remains circumscribed by limitation, contingency, and change. The relation is therefore strictly non-reciprocal: the effect depends wholly upon the cause, while the cause remains unaffected and unsurpassed by the effect. Through this account of *tādātmya*, Śāṅkara is able to affirm the meaningful reality of the world within the empirical order (*vyavahāra*) without compromising the uncompromising non-duality of *Brahman* at the level of ultimate truth (*paramārtha*).²³

Grant’s interpretation gains further philosophical depth when situated against the background of her engagement with the De Smet tradition. Her reading of *tādātmya* bears a notable formal resemblance to De Smet’s comparison between Śāṅkara and Thomas Aquinas on the relation between creator and creature. However, Grant is careful not to transpose Christian metaphysical categories into Advaita. Instead, she articulates asymmetrical dependence strictly within Śāṅkara’s own conceptual framework, drawing upon the language of superimposition (*adhyāsa*) and sublation (*bādha*).²⁴ In doing so, she demonstrates that Advaita possesses an internally coherent account of dependence and relation that neither reduces the world to illusion nor compromises the transcendence of *Brahman*. Through her analysis of *tādātmya*, Grant thus offers a philosophically robust account of how relation can be affirmed without reciprocity, difference without

²² Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya’s Concept of Relation*, 135–155; Śāṅkara, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*, 6.1-6.2.

²³ Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya’s Concept of Relation*, 156–168; De Smet, “The Fundamental Antinomy of Śrī Śāṅkarācārya’s Methodology,” in *Understanding Śāṅkara*, 75–82.

²⁴ Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya’s Concept of Relation*, 169–178.

dualism, and dependence without ontological competition.²⁵ In this way, she advances a nuanced understanding of *Advaita Vedānta* that preserves both the integrity of Śāṅkara's non-dual metaphysics and the experiential reality of the empirical world, while avoiding the pitfalls of both ontological monism and naive pluralism.²⁶

Relation, *Avidyā*, and the Structure of Ignorance

A further distinctive contribution of Sara Grant's engagement with *Advaita Vedānta* lies in her sustained analysis of *avidyā* (ignorance) as intrinsically relational. Against interpretations that reduce ignorance to a simple lack of cognition, Grant aligns herself closely with Śāṅkara's own diagnosis of *avidyā* as *adhyāsa*, a structured and positive cognitive distortion.²⁷ This distortion consists in the reciprocal superimposition of the self (*ātman*) and the non-self (*anātman*), and it cannot be adequately understood apart from the relational frameworks within which cognition, attribution, and self-understanding occur. Ignorance, on this account, is not simply the inability to know what the case is, but a fundamental disorder in the way consciousness is related to its objects and to itself.²⁸

Grant's interpretation is grounded in Śāṅkara's *Adhyāsa Bhāṣya*, where superimposition is defined as "the appearance, in one locus, of something previously experienced elsewhere" (*anyatra pūrvadr̥ṣṭāvabhāsaḥ*). Grant draws attention to the fact that this definition already presupposes a complex relational structure: memory mediates between past experience and present cognition; a locus provides the site of attribution; and consciousness performs the act of misplacement. Superimposition, therefore, is not a simple error about an object but a misconfiguration of relational belonging, in which consciousness is apprehended as qualified by bodily and mental attributes, while those attributes are simultaneously taken to possess subjectivity. The body is related to consciousness as if it were its locus, and consciousness is related to the body as if it were its property.²⁹

²⁵ Clooney, "Restoring Hindu Theology as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, 459–465.

²⁶ Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 187–194.

²⁷ De Smet, "The Fundamental Antinomy of Śrī Śāṅkarācārya's Methodology," in *Understanding Śāṅkara*, 75–82.

²⁸ Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 207–215.

²⁹ Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 225–232.

On Grant's reading, this relational misidentification is constitutive of empirical subjectivity itself. The emergence of *ahaṃkāra*, the ego-function, is inseparable from the fusion of pure consciousness with limiting adjuncts (*upādhi*), a fusion that is intelligible only within a network of relations.³⁰ Subject–object polarity, knower–known distinction, and self–body identification are not accidental features added onto ignorance; they are the very conditions under which ignorance becomes operative. Without such relational structures, *avidyā* would lack both content and efficacy. Relation, therefore, is not a secondary or derivative aspect of ignorance, but its necessary structural condition.³¹

At the same time, Grant decisively rejects the conclusion that *Advaita* thereby renders relation meaningless or dispensable. She insists instead on the functional necessity of relation within the empirical order (*vyavahārika-sattā*). Moral agency, karmic continuity, ritual obligation, and spiritual practice all presuppose a provisional but operative sense of relational identity.³² Grant finds strong textual support for this position in Śaṅkara's insistence that scriptural injunctions and prohibitions have authority only within the sphere of ignorance. Far from devaluing relation, this restriction precisely delineates its domain of validity and significance.³³

Grant further emphasizes that the overcoming of ignorance (*avidyā-nivṛtti*) does not involve the crude negation or annihilation of relational structures. Rather, liberating knowledge (*jñāna*) effects a reorientation of relation by dissolving false identifications while allowing functional distinctions to continue insofar as empirical existence persists. The world is not abolished by knowledge; what is undone is the misapprehension of relational belonging that binds consciousness to limitation and agency. This interpretive move enables Grant to respond forcefully to the recurring charge that *Advaita* entails ethical quietism or nihilism. Relation, though ultimately sublated at the level of *paramārtha*, plays an indispensable and transformative role within the soteriological process itself.³⁴

³⁰ Śaṅkara, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* 1.4.7; Grant, *Śaṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 233–240.

³¹ Grant, *Śaṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 241–248.

³² Śaṅkara, *Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* 3.26; *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* I.1.4.

³³ Grant, *Śaṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 249–256.

³⁴ Grant, *Śaṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 266–273.

Through this analysis, Grant articulates a philosophically rigorous account of *avidyā* as relational misorientation rather than ontological illusion. Her reading deepens Śāṅkara's own insights by demonstrating that relation is at once the site of bondage and the medium of liberation. In doing so, she offers a compelling framework for understanding how *Advaita Vedānta* can affirm the necessity of relational structures without compromising its commitment to non-duality.³⁵

Lakṣaṇā and the Pedagogy of Non-Duality

Sara Grant makes a substantial and original contribution to *Advaita Vedānta* scholarship in her sustained analysis of *lakṣaṇā*—secondary or indirect signification—as the decisive linguistic and pedagogical medium through which non-dual knowledge is communicated. Śāṅkara repeatedly affirms that *Brahman* cannot be apprehended through primary denotation (*abhidhā*), since *Brahman* transcends all categories of objectification, predication, and conceptual delimitation.³⁶ Any attempt to grasp *Brahman* as an object of thought inevitably reintroduces duality. Yet the *Upaniṣadic* revelation, which aims at liberating knowledge (*brahmavidyā*), must nevertheless operate through language. Grant's analysis addresses this apparent paradox by situating *lakṣaṇā* at the very heart of *Advaitic* pedagogy.³⁷

Grant demonstrates that *lakṣaṇā* functions through an intrinsically relational structure that mediates between linguistic expression and non-conceptual realization. Words are not discarded but reoriented i.e., the teacher relates verbal formulations to intended meanings, provisional conceptual distinctions to transformative insight, and the disciple to a truth that ultimately exceeds discursive thought. This relational mediation is exemplified in the canonical *mahāvākya tat tvam asi* (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7), where an initial grammatical and semantic relation is established between *tat* (*Brahman*, conceived as the cosmic cause) and *tvam* (the individual self, conceived as an embodied subject). Through the operation of *jahad-ajahat-lakṣaṇā*, mutually incompatible attributes—such

³⁵ Clooney, "Restoring Hindu Theology as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, 459–465.

³⁶ Śāṅkara, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* 2.3.6; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya* 6.2.1.

³⁷ Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 292–300.

as limitation and omnipotence—are negated, while the essential identity of pure consciousness is preserved.³⁸

Grant emphasizes that this hermeneutical movement presupposes a highly developed pedagogy of differentiation and negation. Non-dual realization does not arise from the immediate collapse of all distinctions, but from a carefully guided interpretive process in which distinctions are provisionally maintained in order to be later sublated.³⁹ Without the initial relational differentiation between teacher and disciple, text and meaning, seeker and sought, the *Upaniṣadic* teaching would dissolve into ineffable abstraction. Śaṅkara himself underscores this point by insisting on the indispensability of the teacher-disciple relationship as a condition for liberating knowledge, even though this relation, like all others, is ultimately transcended in realization.⁴⁰

What is philosophically decisive in Grant’s reading is her insistence that *lakṣaṇā* is not a merely technical device of semantics, nor a rhetorical strategy for bypassing conceptual difficulty. Rather, it is an epistemological method grounded in the structure of human cognition. Knowledge advances through relational mediation: understanding emerges through the progressive reconfiguration of meanings, and liberation is attained not by the suppression of cognition but by the dissolution of false relational identifications. In this sense, *lakṣaṇā* exemplifies the broader *Advaitic* pattern in which relation is neither simply affirmed nor abruptly negated, but skilfully employed and gradually interiorized until it is rendered transparent.⁴¹

By foregrounding the role of *lakṣaṇā*, Grant also offers a compelling response to modern critiques that portray *Advaita Vedānta* as anti-linguistic, anti-rational, or hostile to philosophical inquiry. On the contrary, her analysis reveals in Śaṅkara a subtle and sophisticated philosophy of language, one that recognizes the indispensability of relational meaning for the transcendence of conceptuality itself. Non-duality, on this account, is not reached through silence alone, but through

³⁸ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7; Grant, *Śaṅkarācārya’s Concept of Relation*, 301-312.

³⁹ Grant, *Śaṅkarācārya’s Concept of Relation*, 313-320.

⁴⁰ Śaṅkara, *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, I.1.1.

⁴¹ De Smet, “The Fundamental Antinomy of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya’s Methodology,” in *Understanding Śaṅkara*, 75–82.

disciplined hermeneutical engagement in which language, relation, and understanding are carefully aligned and ultimately surpassed.⁴²

Philosophical and Dialogical Significance

The philosophical importance of Sara Grant's interpretation of relation in Śāṅkara's *Advaita Vedānta* extends far beyond questions of internal exegesis or technical disagreement within *Advaita* scholarship. At a fundamental philosophical level, her work unsettles a deeply entrenched assumption shared by much of Western metaphysics and by several rival Indian traditions, namely, that relation must be construed as either fully real in an absolute sense or dismissed as sheer unreality. Grant demonstrates, through sustained engagement with Śāṅkara's texts, that *Advaita* articulates a more complex and philosophically subtle position. Relation is shown to be functionally operative within experience, epistemologically indispensable for knowledge, and soteriologically effective within the path to liberation, even though it is ultimately sublated in the realization of non-duality. This account resists both naive realism and reductive illusionism.⁴³

Such an interpretation carries significant implications for comparative metaphysics. Grant's analysis makes clear that *Advaita Vedānta* cannot be adequately characterized as a form of substance monism in which all differentiation is simply denied. Rather, it presents a philosophically articulated path in which relational structures are constitutive of the process by which non-dual knowledge is attained.⁴⁴ *Advaita*, on this reading, does not bypass mediation but works through it, employing relational distinctions as indispensable instruments of understanding. In this respect, Grant's work enters into implicit conversation with broader philosophical concerns regarding the limits of objectifying reason, the mediated character of knowledge, and the role of negation in metaphysical inquiry, while remaining firmly anchored in the classical *Advaitic* corpus.⁴⁵

⁴² Clooney, "Restoring Hindu Theology as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, 459–465.

⁴³ Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 372–380.

⁴⁴ De Smet, "The Fundamental Antinomy of Śrī Śāṅkarācārya's Methodology," in *Understanding Śāṅkara*, 65–82.

⁴⁵ Grant, *Śāṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 381–390.

The dialogical significance of Grant's contribution is particularly evident in the context of Hindu-Christian philosophical engagement. Christian theology accords a central and irreducible role to relation, most notably in its doctrines of creation, grace, and Trinitarian communion.⁴⁶ *Advaita Vedānta* has therefore often been judged incompatible with a relational ontology, frequently being dismissed as indifferent to personal, ethical, and historical dimensions of existence. Grant neither denies the real tensions between these traditions nor seeks to resolve them through superficial harmonization. Instead, she clarifies with precision the sense in which relation operates within *Advaita*, thereby disarming critiques that arise from categorical misunderstanding rather than substantive philosophical disagreement.⁴⁷

By carefully distinguishing between ontological ultimacy (*paramārtha*) and pedagogical or empirical necessity (*vyavahāra*), Grant opens a space for more rigorous and honest dialogue. She shows that *Advaita*'s affirmation of non-duality does not negate relational experience, but situates it within a graded account of truth and reality. This clarification enables Christian philosophers to engage *Advaita* seriously without either rejecting it as ethically or existentially vacuous or assimilating it uncritically into theistic frameworks that obscure its distinctive metaphysical claims.⁴⁸ Equally noteworthy is Grant's methodological contribution to comparative philosophy. Her scholarship exemplifies a disciplined mode of inquiry that combines scrupulous textual fidelity with sustained philosophical analysis. Rather than using one tradition to judge another by external standards, she allows each to interrogate the other at points of genuine conceptual tension.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Sara Grant's sustained philosophical engagement with the problem of relation in Śaṅkara's *Advaita Vedānta* constitutes one of the most significant contributions to twentieth-century *Advaitic* interpretation and

⁴⁶ Richard De Smet, "Śaṅkara and Aquinas on the Absolute," in *Understanding Śaṅkara*, ed. Ivo Coelho (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2013), 119–146.

⁴⁷ Grant, *Śaṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 391–402.

⁴⁸ De Smet, "The Fundamental Antinomy of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya's Methodology," in *Understanding Śaṅkara*, 75–82.

⁴⁹ Grant, *Śaṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation*, 441–448.

comparative metaphysics. Drawing creatively upon the foundational insights of Richard De Smet while extending them in original directions, Grant demonstrates with textual and philosophical precision that relation in *Advaita* cannot be classified either as absolutely real or as merely illusory. Instead, she shows that relational structures are epistemologically indispensable for the constitution of empirical subjectivity and soteriologically operative within the path of liberating knowledge, even though they are ultimately sublated in the realization of non-duality.

By situating relation within a graded ontology of truth, Grant decisively challenges long-standing caricatures of *Advaita Vedānta* as a philosophy that negates the world, dissolves ethical responsibility, or evacuates relational meaning. Her interpretation reveals Śāṅkara as a thinker acutely sensitive to the conditions of human knowing, linguistic mediation, pedagogical guidance, and spiritual transformation. Far from dismissing relation, Śāṅkara is shown—through Grant’s careful reading—to deploy it with philosophical rigor as both the site of bondage and the indispensable means of liberation.

Grant’s work thus invites a reassessment of *Advaita Vedānta* within the broader landscape of modern philosophy. By clarifying the functional, epistemic, and pedagogical necessity of relation, she opens new avenues for comparative inquiry that avoid both reductionist critique and uncritical assimilation. In this respect, her scholarship exemplifies a mature form of comparative philosophy in which fidelity to classical sources is combined with sustained philosophical interrogation.

In the context of contemporary Hindu-Christian dialogue, Grant’s contribution remains especially enduring. Without minimizing real doctrinal differences, she provides the conceptual clarity necessary for meaningful engagement by distinguishing between ultimate ontological claims and the provisional structures that govern lived experience and spiritual practice. For these reasons, Sara Grant may be regarded as one of the most careful, subtle, and intellectually faithful interpreters of Śāṅkara’s *Advaita Vedānta* in the modern period, whose work continues to shape scholarly understanding of non-duality, relation, and liberation.

ABSTRACT

Sara Grant (1922–2000), influenced by Ādi Śāṅkarācārya and shaped by Richard De Smet, rethinks key metaphysical categories—relation, non-duality, and

personhood—without reducing Advaita to Western monism or Christian theism. This article examines her account of relation (*sambandha*) in Śaṅkara's thought, situating it within the De Smet School and engaging concepts such as *tādātmya*, *avidyā*, *adhyāsa*, and *lakṣaṇā*. It argues that Grant develops a philosophically rigorous account of relation as epistemologically necessary and soteriologically significant, though not ultimately real, thereby opening new avenues for comparative philosophy and Hindu–Christian dialogue.