



Beyond Realities: Exploring Metaphorical Connections between the concept of Metaverse and Advaita Philosophy

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Abstract

The concept of Metaverse has been born out of the rapid growth in technology. It is a virtual space where individuals can experience a parallel digital existence interact with each other and do almost everything that can be done in the actual world. In essence, Advaita Philosophy teaches non-duality which means that ultimate truth goes beyond the apparent multiplicity of the material world and is one and indivisible. This unity is known as Brahman which is an infinite, formless, and boundless consciousness. The Metaverse, despite its digital landscapes and interconnected experiences, represents a sense of oneness amidst the multiplicity of virtual realms. In line with the idea of Advaita Philosophy, an undivided reality beyond the seeming plurality of the material world, different entities merge into a single digital cosmos in the Metaverse. Additionally, both Metaverse and Advaita Philosophies share illusion and perception as their common themes. According to Advaita, the material world is an illusion created by the mind (Maya) and true wisdom comes from breaking this matrix to realize the underlying unity. Similarly, though it seems real in its digital richness, the Metaverse is a constructed reality dependent on code and algorithms that challenge users to discern between virtuality and actuality. The present study attempts to shed light on the metaphors that unite the Metaverse and Advaita Philosophy. It also invites reflection on the nature of reality in both the digital and philosophical domains.

Keywords: Metaverse, Advaita Philosophy, non-duality, virtual reality, Brahman, Maya (Illusion).



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Introduction

The concept of Metaverse has gathered significant attention in recent years. The term was first used by Neal Stephenson in his science fiction novel "Snow Crash" (1992) and since then the concept and possibilities of the metaverse as depicted in the novel have been tried and made into a reality. Metaverse uses Virtual Realities, Augmented Realities, and Avatars to create a virtual world where users can interact and perform activities as those in the real world. The term gained

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further popularity when Mark Zuckerberg renamed Facebook to Meta and talked about the possibilities of the Metaverse. This futuristic tech has stirred up the imagination of both scholars and tech enthusiasts about the possibilities and the societal and philosophical effects of the concept.

Advaita Philosophy is one of the central tenets of Indian Philosophy. Advaita Philosophy, created, proposed, and advocated by Adi Shankaracharya, talks about and tries to understand the nature of reality and proposes the existence of a supreme consciousness called "Brahman". Shankaracharya through the theory of Advaita Philosophy fosters that the world and the self are both illusions and the true reality lies in the non-dual (Advaita) nature between the individual soul (Atman) and the universal soul (Brahman). This study aims to understand the metaphorical connections between Metaverse and Advaita Philosophy. By studying the basic principles and underlying metaphysical aspects of both topics, this paper seeks to draw parallels between these two seemingly distinct realms.

Metaverse – The Future of Digital Interaction

Sutherland believes that the idea of a virtual world "can be traced to the 1960s when scholars proposed a kinaesthetic human-computer interface with interactive graphics, force-feedback, body movements, and sound." (Sutherland, 1965, as cited in Zhu, 2022). Coined by Neal Stephenson in his science fiction "Snow Crash" (1992), the 'metaverse' represents a virtual space that can merge physical and virtual realities. The term "Metaverse" is a compound word comprising of two words- "meta", meaning 'transcendence' and 'virtuality', and "universe", meaning 'world' and 'universe'. (Kye et al., 2021) With the progress of technology, the vision of a fully immersive and interconnected digital space is becoming possible.

The term 'metaverse' refers to the concept of an "immersive and persistent virtual world where users can interact with other users and the surrounding environment and engage in social activities, similar to interactions in physical world." (Zhu, 2022). Metaverse goes beyond social media and online gaming. This creates a virtual world where users are interconnected and can interact in real time. High-speed internet, Artificial Intelligence, and VR/AR hardware are a few technologies that are resulting in the rapid growth of the metaverse towards reality. Metaverse works using a complex network of techs and use of hardware components that are used as a tool to provide an immersive experience to the users beyond the physical reality. The key tech components of Metaverse, as described by Jeko Iqbal Reza, are – Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality, Blockchains, AI and Machine Learning, 5G, Cloud and Spatial Computing (Reza, 2023). These hardware and software with their ever-changing algorithms help us transport into an entirely digital environment by offering immersive experiences. HTC or Oculus VR headsets, the game Pokémon Go, Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), and AI tools like ChatGPT are some of the hardware or software that we might have come across or used which makes almost all of us members of the Metaverse. Metaverse has opened Pandora's box of possibilities in various fields through its immersive simulation characteristics. Park and Kim in their article about Metaverse claim that "most of the research on Metaverse is aimed at marketing and investment purposes, emphasizing social utility. The domains where Metaverse is popularly serviced are games and some office applications." (Park & Kim, 2022). The virtual world in Metaverse can bring about revolutions in the area of not just Gaming and fun but also various medical, social, marketing, and educational applications.

Advaita Philosophy – The Non-Dualistic Approach towards Reality

Advaita Philosophy is a profound school of Indian Philosophy, which is well-known for its exploration of the nature of reality and consciousness. The term “Advaita” means non-duality which aims at transcending the multiplicity of the world which is considered as virtual by the followers of the concept of Advaita, and being one with the ultimate consciousness. Finding the roots of the Advaita Vedanta in the ancient Indian Vedic texts, Adi Shankaracharya gave the full-fledged theory of Advaita Vedanta through his commentaries written on the *Upanishads*. “Shankara finds it difficult to reconcile the Upanishadic statements about creation, taken in the literal sense, with those denying the world of multiplicity.” (Chatterjee & Dutta, 2021, p. 336)

Advaita philosophy proposes the existence of the ultimate reality or the supreme consciousness called Brahman which is unchanging, formless, and permeates the entire universe. Sangeeta Menon in one of her articles describes Brahma as the fundamental reality underlying all objects and experiences. Brahman is explained by her as having pure existence, pure consciousness, and pure bliss. All forms of existence presuppose a knowing self. Brahman or pure consciousness underlies the knowing self. (Vedanta, Advaita | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). Brahman is also described as “nirgun” that is without qualities. According to Dasgupta, since Brahman is qualityless, both its being and its absence cannot be denied which makes Brahman indefinable. (Dasgupta, 2018, p. 417)

The world is considered by Advaita as an illusion (Maya) which is not real but just a superimposition of the undivided Brahman. “Vedanta thinks that the illusion is not merely subjective, but there is actually a phenomenon of illusions as there are phenomena of actual external objects...” (Dasgupta, 2018, p. 486). “Maya as a power of God is indistinguishable from Him, just as the burning power of fire is from the fire itself. It is by this that God, the Great Magician, conjures up the world show with all its wonderful objects. The appearance of this world is taken as real by the ignorant, but the wise who can see through it finds nothing but God, the one reality behind this illusory show.” (Chatterjee & Dutta, 2021, p. 337)

Non-duality and Interconnectedness

Adi Shankaracharya through his theory of Advaita posits that the world and existence are interconnected and the differences between them are just perceived and illusory. The followers of Advaita believe in the existence of the ultimate reality of Brahman which is ever-present and all-encompassing. As already discussed in the previous section, Brahman is indivisible, formless, and cannot be perceived due to the limitation of the senses. Everything that exists in this world is just a manifestation of Brahman which is formed due to superimposition of it. This shows that the differences between the elements of existence are illusions. Non-duality, as explained in Advaita philosophy, implies the interconnected nature of all beings and phenomena within the ultimate reality.

Metaverse, on the other hand, is a virtual space where people can interact, socialize, and perform various activities in a seemingly real world, without the limitation of physical distance or materiality. The questions posed by the concept of Metaverse regarding the nature of reality and its interconnectedness are interesting. Metaverse is an immersive and interactive virtual world that transcends the physical reality.

The ancient Indian philosophical concept of Advaita Vedanta and a new and emerging concept of Metaverse seem to have primarily no connections at all. However, if we analyze both ideas closely, we can find intriguing similarities. Both concepts deal with the idea of transcending individuality and recognizing the greater unity. Advaita philosophy deals with giving up the idea of individual self to understand the greater unity and metaverse helps us transcend the self in the physical realm and enjoy being in a virtual world.

In the metaverse, people can interact with one another using their individual avatars which can be controlled by the users:

To the extent there is a common understanding of the Metaverse, it could be described as follows: a never-ending virtual world where everyone dresses up as comical avatars and competes in immersive VR games to win points, jumps into their favourite franchises, and acts out their most impossible fantasies. (Ball, 2022, 33).

We can interact and mingle with the other individual avatars. Though the avatars appear different and exist separately, all these are guided by a complex network of software, codes, and relevant algorithms. This resonates with the Advaita Philosophy which claims that the world is an illusion and the ultimate truth is Brahman which is one. Hence, we can propound that everything in existence is connected by that greater consciousness, and the differences are mere illusions (Maya) created by the nature of Brahman.

From the perspective of the avatar, it is real and different from other avatars present in the virtual world. However, the backend users are the ones controlling them and know the connected nature of the world that the avatars are a part of. This is quite similar to the concepts discussed in Advaita where we consider ourselves as different individuals and masters of our own self. The non-dual proposition of Advaita disagrees and considers all things as one, that is Brahman.

Illusion of Reality

The idea of the concept of illusion of reality holds a significant position in Advaita Philosophy. As already discussed above, Advaita Philosophy talks about the existence of the ultimate truth called Brahman and everything else that we perceive in this world are illusions. Advaita Philosophy proposes that our regular experiences are similar to a dream where the distinction between subject and object, observer and observed, reality and illusion blurs into unity. According to O. Fort, Shankara believed that faith in any cause or effect other than Brahman can be considered ignorance and Brahman is the only real factor. So, both waking and dreaming often seduce us into thinking that the limited appearances we perceive are real. (Fort, 1985) The illusion of duality, according to Advaita Philosophy, is the result of our identification with just the physical aspect of life and not the reality beyond perceptions. Thus, the illusion of reality is an inherent characteristic that prevents us from realizing the true nature of reality and the interconnected state of being.

Again, a striking parallel can be drawn between the concept of illusion in Advaita Philosophy and the concept of Metaverse. Metaverse is not just a simulation, it refers to a virtual realm of existence that might intertwine with the physical reality. The connection between the concept of Advaita and the Metaverse is established by the notion of their emphasis on the illusory nature of reality. As Advaita claims that the world is a deception and reality is beyond this deception, Metaverse too creates a deceptive world due to the use of software, programming, and algorithm, the user of which would consider the virtual world as real and never realize the illusion and the presence of a world beyond the virtual realm.

There are other aspects that can be explored to draw similarities between the two concepts. Perceptions play a major role in creating the illusion in both of the concepts. Advaita Philosophy believes that the mind and senses are instruments that create a distorted picture of reality. This is done by the concept called "Maya". Maya is defined as that force of nature that conceals from us the true nature of reality and shows us a seeming reality of differences in individuals. Similarly, in the metaverse, the role of the Maya is taken up by digital interferences and augmented realities, which makes us believe that the world we are living in in the digital space is real and the only world we can thrive. Augmented reality can make us believe that the virtual world is real using underlying programming and digital 3D rendering. Augmented reality can be utilized to either change natural environments visually or to provide additional information to users in some way or the other. The primary benefit of AR is that it manages to blend digital and three-dimensional (3D) components with an individual's perception of the real world. The avatar or character of the metaverse would never realize the ultimate truth of the existence of some reality beyond the digital space. Both these concepts extend beyond the idea of individual experience and can be used to analyze metaphysical questions. As the metaverse inspires us to question reality and consider the consequences of the intermingling of the physical and virtual world, Advaita Philosophy too stirs up our belief system on the nature of reality and our perceptions and pushes us further to delve into the journey of liberation. This will be further discussed in the next section of this paper.

Self-Realisation and Liberation

Advaita Philosophy talks deeply about the idea that the individual self (jiva) and the universal self (Brahman) are one fundamentally. The realisation of this unity is referred as self-realisation in Advaita Philosophy. As pointed out by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "the aim of the Vedanta is to lead us from the human self to the reality of one absolute self." (S Radhakrishnan & Mohanty, 2008, p. 554) This self-realisation leads to the transcending of the individual ego and perception of a connection with the entire cosmos. Liberation, on the other hand, is a liberty from the cycle of birth and death (Moksha) which can be attained by giving up worldly attachments as attachments are the root cause of suffering. Self-Realisation is the fundamental requiring of Liberation too in Advaita Philosophy.

Quite similarly, the metaverse can be used as a tool to experience a virtual environment that can allow an individual to transcend their physical limitations and shortcomings and experience things beyond their capabilities in augmented reality. Through advanced technologies, AR and VR setups, Artificial Intelligence, and near-realistic simulations, the users can feel a sense of liberation from their mundane existence and explore the depths of their consciousness. As already discussed in the sections above, Metaverse offers a platform where users have connected to each other and the inherent programming language and AI, the realization of this notion, like self-realisation can lead to the dissolution of individual ego and embrace a more expansive version of self.

Self is an illusion and can be transferred or transcended through self-realisation and liberation. This idea holds a key place in Advaita Philosophy. In a similar fashion, the idea of self in the metaverse too is not concrete and can be changed. One can take up avatars and explore alternate identities. Metaverse can be used to explore and understand one's own self and its relationship with the world around more deeply. This is metaphorical to the idea of self-realisation in Advaita philosophy. Though both concepts seem different in nature, the common ground of the pursuit

of transcending the limited state of self and striving to meet or be something higher and more perfect version is similar in both concepts.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to explore the metaphorical connections between the concept of the metaverse and Advaita philosophy. By studying the underlying principles and fundamental elements of both concepts, we have pointed out various similarities and parallels that can lead to a deeper understanding of the concept of the metaverse through the lens of Advaita Philosophy. Through the course of our analysis, we have found that both concepts share a common focus on the idea of reality, consciousness, and the interconnectedness of all things around us. Both these concepts challenge the traditionally believed nature of individuality and stress upon the interconnected and interdependent nature of life. Metaverse creates a virtual reality where individuals coexist but are connected through programs and algorithms which echoes the notion of a unified consciousness of all beings, despite their seeming individuality.

This article has explored the concept of Maya which is one of the central ideas of Advaita Philosophy and drew a metaphorical connection of Maya with the illusory world created in the Metaverse beyond which lies the real world. The users are surrounded by illusions and are unaware of the real world till the illusion is broken and the ultimate reality is revealed. This in turn made us aware of the concept of self in both Advaita Philosophy and the Metaverse and how it isn't concrete but can be transcended in both the concepts to attain perfection. It has also explored the concept of non-duality in Advaita Philosophy and tried to draw a parallel with the undifferentiated nature of self in the metaverse. As the ultimate reality in Advaita Philosophy aims at realizing the unity of self with the ultimate consciousness, in Metaverse too we can transcend the self and the imperfections and can merge with the ultimate unified reality created by programs and AI. This also shows the interconnected nature of life in both concepts. In conclusion, we can say that there are ample similarities between the underlying principles of the Metaverse and Advaita Philosophy. Both concepts challenge the traditional beliefs about the self, reality, and individuality and provide a way to explore the deeper and more universal nature of these concepts. We can also gain a deeper appreciation for the potential of Metaverse and are in awe that an age-old concept can have such contemporary relevance.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

I declare no potential conflicts of interest.

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