

# The Omniscience of Brahman-God in Indian and Western Thought–I

GOPAL STAVIG

**T**he Indian Viewpoint: The Upanishadic explanation of the omniscience (*ananta-jnāna, kevala-jnāna, sarvajna, sarvajnatva*) and omnipotence (*ananta-virya, sarvakartritva, sarvashakti*) of Brahman-God is unique, largely unknown to the rest of the world. ‘He is never seen, but is the Seer; He is never heard, but is the Hearer; He is never thought of, but is the Thinker; He is never known, but is the Knower’ (*Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad* 3:7.23; cf. 3:4.2). ‘It [Brahman-Ātman] is the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, the Speech of the speech, the Life of the life and the Eye of the eye’ (*Kena Upanishad* 1:2; cf. *Br. Up.* 4:4.18). ‘That which is not comprehended by the mind but by which the mind comprehends, know that to be Brahman’ (*Kena Upanishad* 1:6). ‘Know the Self [Ātman] to be indestructible, eternal, unborn, and immutable’ (*Bhagavad-Gītā*, 2:21).

The Advaita Vedanta (non-dualistic) approach is expounded upon by the seer-philosopher Ādi Shankara (c. 688/788-720/820), ‘That Reality is the knower in all states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep.... It gives intelligence to the mind and the intellect, but no one gives It light.... By Its light, the universe is revealed.... The Ātman reveals this entire universe of mind and matter.’ ‘There is a Self-Existent Reality, which is the basis of our consciousness of ego. That Reality is the witness [Sākshin], of the three states of our

consciousness, and, is distinct from the five bodily coverings. That Reality is the knower in all states of consciousness—waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep. It is aware of the presence or absence of the mind and its functions. It is the Ātman.’<sup>1</sup> ‘That Reality [Ātman] sees everything by Its own light. No one sees It. It gives intelligence to the mind and the intellect, but no one gives It light.... The universe shines with Its reflected light. That Reality pervades the universe, but no one penetrates It. It alone shines. It is consciousness itself.’<sup>2</sup>

Swami Vivekananda adds more on the self-luminous omniscience of non-dual Brahman-Ātman, ‘Tremendous power is manifested everywhere in nature, but it is not self-luminous, not essentially intelligent. The Purusha [Transcendental Self, Pure Consciousness] alone is self-luminous, and gives Its light to everything. It is the power of the Purusha that is percolating through all matter and force. If the mind were self-luminous it would be able to cognize itself and its objects at the same time, which it cannot. When it cognizes the object, it cannot reflect on itself. Therefore the Purusha is self-luminous, and the mind is not.’ ‘For the mind that has realized omnipresence there is no succession. Everything has become present for It; to It the present alone exists, the past and future are lost. Time stands controlled, all knowledge is there in one second. Everything is known like a flash’ in the

Eternal Now. 'It is the only Knower—the only self-luminous—the Light of consciousness. Everything else shines by light borrowed from It. Everything else knows inasmuch as it reflects Its knowing.'<sup>3</sup> 'The Self [Ātman] is the illuminator, and the mind is the instrument in Its hands, and through that instrument It gets hold of the external instrument, and thus comes perception.... Indriyas, and they carry sensations to the mind, and the mind presents them further back to another state of the mind, which in Sanskrit is called Chitta, and there they are organised into will, and all these present them to the King of kings inside, the Ruler on His throne, the Self of man. He then sees and gives His orders. Then the mind immediately acts on the organs, and the organs on the external body. The real Perceiver, the real Ruler, the Governor, the Creator, the Manipulator of all this is the Self of man.'<sup>4</sup>

Additional statements on omniscience include the Indian Buddhist, Nāgasena (c. fl. 150 B.C.) who taught that Gautama the Buddha was potentially all-knowing. According to the concept of 'Potential Omniscience,' though Buddha's knowledge was limited, he possessed the capacity to know whatever he wanted to comprehend. 'The insight of knowledge was not always and continually with him. The omniscience of the Blessed One [Buddha] was dependent on reflection. But if he did reflect, he knew whatever he wanted to know.'<sup>5</sup>

The Yoga commentator Vyāsa (c. 400-500) clarified, 'There must be the highest limit of the expansion of the seed of omniscience, inasmuch as there is a larger or smaller manifestation of intelligence, just as it is in the case of a dimension. Wherever knowledge reaches the highest limit that is the omniscient there is a distinct Purusha [Transcendental Self].'<sup>6</sup>

According to Jadunath Sinha, Jayanta Bhatta (c. 9th century) of the Nyāya-Vaisheshika school from Kashmir developed this idea,

Herein lies the difference between the human knowledge and Divine omniscience; the former is produced, while the latter is eternal; the former is acquired, while the latter is natural and essential. Divine knowledge is not diversified by many cognitions; it grasps all objects of the universe, past, present, and future, subtle and remote, by a single all-embracing intuition. Were it not so, God [Brahman] would have many cognitions either successively or simultaneously. But He cannot have them in succession, for, in that case, He would have discrete, discontinuous cognitions, and consequently, He would be unconscious at intervals, and thus would bring about a collapse of the universe at intervals, which would make all human activities impossible.... Divine knowledge is perceptual in character as it consists in direct and immediate apprehension of the whole universe. Divine perception is not produced by the intercourse of the sense organs with their objects, as God has no sense organs at all. In fact, Divine perception is not produced at all; it is beginningless and endless; it is eternal. Divine perception, therefore, is not of the nature of sensuous perception, but of the nature of 'creative intuition.' God evolves the materials of His consciousness by the Divine Will, and perceives them all by a single all-embracing intuition, even as the sun illumines all objects of the universe, though it is not produced by them. Thus the knowledge of God is not determined by its objects; but the objects are determined by the knowledge of God.<sup>7</sup>

Indian Jain philosopher Prabhacandra (fl. 1040) realized (as explained by Jadunath Sinha) that omniscience 'is a single intuition of the whole world. It does not depend upon the external sense organs or the mind; so it

need not be diversified by many cognitions. Our perception is produced by the external organs or the internal organ; so it cannot apprehend past, distant future, and subtle objects. But the perception of the omniscient self is not produced by the external sense organs or the mind; hence it can apprehend all supersensible objects. The pure intuition of the omniscient self is not produced successively; it knows all objects of the universe simultaneously by a single stroke of intuition since it transcends the limits of time and space which are the necessary conditions of all sense-perception.<sup>8</sup>

For Madhva (1190/1238-1276/1317), Brahman-God's 'creatorship presupposes full knowledge of the effects to be, its accessories, nature of effort, the expected results. ... The all-creator must be all-knowing.... He is the One Lord present in all creatures though invisible, all-pervading, controlling all, presiding over all our Karma, and witnessing everything, the knower, without a physical body.'<sup>9</sup> 'God's omniscience includes the knowledge of all subjects. Even as the things falling under the sunlight are illumined by the sun's light, in the same way God's knowledge is all-comprehensive and includes within it all subjects. Having the comprehensive knowledge is the very nature of God.... He hears everything. He thinks over everything. He sees everything. He directs everything. He is the best speaker. He is all-knower. He has special knowledge of everything. He is the indwelling person in the minds of all beings. He, who is your indwelling controller, is also the indwelling controller of all Jivas [individual souls or selves].'<sup>10</sup>

To quote Swami Abhedananda:

That eternal energy is not an unintelligent energy, but is intelligent. Wherever we cast our eyes, either in the external or internal world, we find the expression, not of a

fortuitous or accidental combination of matter and mechanical forces, but of regular laws guided by definite purpose. This universe is not a chaos but a cosmos, one harmonious whole. It is not an aimless chain of changes which we call evolution, but there is an orderly hidden purpose at every step of evolution. Therefore, that energy is intelligent. We may call this self-existing, intelligent, eternal cosmic energy the Mother of the universe. She is the source of infinite forces and infinite phenomena. This eternal energy is called in Sanskrit *Prakriti* (Latin *procreatrix*), the creative power of the universe.... As all the forces of nature are but the manifestations of this Divine Energy, She is called all-powerful. Wherever there is the expression of any force or power in the universe, there is the manifestation of the eternal Prakriti or the Divine Mother.<sup>11</sup>

#### The Western perspective

As the Italian Catholic St. Bonaventure (1221-74) put it, 'The first Principle, because He is first and supreme, has a knowledge which is utterly simple [undivided] and perfect.... Therefore it is in Himself and through Himself that the first Principle knows all things that are distinct from Him. From this it follows that He knows, second, created things uncreatedly; third, dependent things independently; fourth, temporal things eternally; fifth, future things presently; sixth, mutable things immutably; and seventh, contingent things infallibly.... As God produces in time through a single power all things in their complete fullness, even so He expresses them all in eternity through a single truth.'<sup>12</sup> Frederick Copleston pointed out that Bonaventure apprehended, 'God's act of knowledge is infinite and eternal, so that all things are present to Him, even future events: there is no succession in the Divine knowledge. ... God knows all things by one

eternal act and there is no temporal succession in that act, no before and after; but God knows eternally, through that one act, things as succeeding one another in time.' Etienne Gilson adds that Bonaventure taught it is not the case 'that He [God] could only know things in turning Himself towards them and receiving their imprint upon His intellect. Now, if it were so, the Divine intellect would clearly depend on things since it would be in potency as regards them and would owe to them its perfection.... the ideas of things are not in God distinct from His very nature. Knowing things, and knowing them down to their least individualizations, God nevertheless never turns away from Himself, for, if He knows by His ideas, He knows of Himself, and, in such a mode of knowing, the things receive their perfection from the knowing subject while He Himself owes nothing to the objects known.'<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) indicated that God is simple (undivided), His act of understanding and the object understood are identical. 'Since, therefore God has nothing in Him of potentiality, but is pure act, His intellect and its object must be altogether the same.... In God intellect, the object understood, the intelligible species, and His act of understanding are entirely one and the same.'<sup>14</sup> 'The Divine Intellect is never potentially but always actually understanding. Therefore It does not understand things successively but rather understands them together.'<sup>15</sup> 'In God, however, the intellect and its object are one and the same, because by understanding Himself, God understands all other things.'<sup>16</sup> Knowledge in God is one and undivided without multiplicity and is identical with the Divine Essence. 'We say that God sees Himself in Himself, because He sees Himself through His Essence; and He sees

other things, not in themselves, but in Himself, inasmuch as His Essence contains the likeness of things other than Himself.'<sup>17</sup>

He continues, God is the first cause of all things through His intellect and will, which extends as far as His causality extends. 'The knowledge of God is the cause of things. For the knowledge of God is to all creatures what the knowledge of the artificer is to things made by his art.... God causes things by His intellect, since His being is His act of understanding; and hence His knowledge must be the cause of things, in so far as His will is joined into it.'<sup>18</sup> 'The likeness of every effect somehow pre-exists in its cause ... If, then, God is the cause of certain things, since according to His nature He is intellectual, the likeness of what He causes will exist in Him in an intelligible way. But what is in something in an intelligible way is understood by it.... God knows Himself and all the intervening causes between Himself and any given thing.... By knowing Himself, God knows whatever proceeds from Him immediately.'<sup>19</sup>

Christian philosophers of the Thomist [Aquinas] School hold that God created and knows the happenings of the universe in one instance in the Eternal Now. W. Norris Clarke, S.J. explains it this way, God

freely decides in His Eternal Now to create this world and sensitively registers in His consciousness all that goes on within it.... but without successive temporal change.... God is always knowing—not from an eternal past, but from His Eternal Now ... for St. Thomas [Aquinas] (and on back to St. Augustine, who first made the point), the whole of time itself is part of this created world, is itself therefore created. God stands completely outside the whole realm of time. Time is not some overarching entity or framework including both God and creatures in some common measure. God is simply not in created time at all, and there is

no other. Hence God in His Eternal Now is simply present to each event in our time, neither before or after it, but simply as it actually occurs. What God knows is embedded in the flow of created time, but in no way does that imply that His own process of knowing is also caught in the same flow of time within His own being. Our flow of time is based on constant physical changes or motion in matter. It makes no sense to say that God's own inner action of knowing is locked into this process of physical (or any kind of created) motion.<sup>20</sup>

#### **The basic characteristics of Divine omniscience**

What is the extent of the Divine Mind's omniscience? It involves possessing maximum possible understanding of everything that can be known. This includes all spiritual and secular knowledge of both Brahmaloaka-Heavenly events and those in the entire physical universe. Certainly it includes three things: complete immediate cognitive knowledge and perception of all external events in the universe; a total comprehension of the internal mental events of every thought of every conscious being; and a perfect understanding of how to accomplish any task (knowing how combined with the omnipotent skill to perform the action). This is possible since Brahman-God being omnipresent is not only externally, but also internally pervading the consciousness of every person.

According to the Spanish Luis de Molina (1535-1600) an omniscient God possesses 'Middle Knowledge' of what the results would have been if any possible event had occurred. For example, we know the results of World War II. An omniscient God also knows all the results in their entirety that would have occurred, had there been no World War II. We do not have this exact knowledge, since a controlled

experiment cannot be performed in this case.<sup>21</sup>

It (or He or She) possesses conceptual and practical knowledge innately and immediately without having to acquire it. Brahman-God knows all things intuitively, utilizing nonpropositional modes of apprehending truth about reality. The Divine mode of knowing involves a single intellectual act attaining intimate epistemic acquaintance with every concrete occurrence. Consequently, Its penetrating knowledge extends to more than the genus, but to the very individual and singular aspect of an entity that It causally sustains.<sup>22</sup> If its cognitions were discrete and discontinuous, during the gaps the universe would cease to exist. Divine perception is not due to the contact of sense organs with their objects and does not receive the imprint of objects upon the intellect. By contrast, human knowledge of things is mediated through and dependent upon a cognitive apparatus that grasps things incompletely through universal concepts, not knowing the thing in itself.

During his human existence the Divine knowledge of Sri Ramakrishna was based on direct spiritual experience, rather than intellectual abstractions. If he wanted the answer to a question, he could ask the omniscient Divine Mother and likewise Jesus would converse with the Father in Heaven. At other times they could relate to their own Divine nature to receive an answer.

Nevertheless, an all-knowing Being has to have a perfect understanding of what induction and deduction are and how they operate, else it would not be omniscient. It knows all ideas and events both concretely and abstractly, in logical succession from cause to effect, utilizing inductive inference and deduction from prior knowledge.

The problem is that it is difficult to determine the nature of the Divine mode of

knowing, because it differs considerably from that of humans. Our knowledge of human cognitive psychology at best only roughly gives us some analogous idea about the mental structure of the Divine Mind.<sup>23</sup>

As expressed by Thomas Aquinas, 'But, since God is infinite, comprehending in Himself all the plenitude of the perfection of all being, He cannot acquire anything new,

nor extend Himself to anything whereto He was not extended previously.'<sup>24</sup> According to Aquinas, in God's omniscience there is no cognitive temporal sequence, no before or after, not the slightest change in His consciousness. God is always infinite in the fullness of His knowledge and cannot acquire any new knowledge from an external source that He did not previously have.<sup>25</sup>

(To be continued)

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Shankara, *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination (Viveka-Chudāmani)*, tr. Swami Prabhavananda (Hollywood, CA : Vedanta Press, 1947), pp. 62-64; 125-27, 129, 133, 135.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 62-63.
- 3 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (hereafter *CW*) (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1962), V, p. 434, I, pp. 299-300, 304; V, p. 432.
- 4 *CW*, II, p. 233.
- 5 Jadunath Sinha, *Indian Psychology* (3 vols.; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), I, pp. 499-500.
- 6 Rama Prasad, tr., *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1912, 1988), 1:25; Sinha (1986), I, pp. 367-68.
- 7 Sinha (1986), I, pp. 368-69.
- 8 Sinha (1986), I, pp. 364-65.
- 9 B. N. K. Sharma, *Madhva's Teachings in His Own Words* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1979), pp. 118-19.
- 10 Madhva, *The Brahamasutras*, tr., S. G. Mudgal (Mumbai: Archish, 2005), I:3.32, pp. 74-75; II:1.23, p. 110.
- 11 Swami Abhedananda, *Divine Heritage of Man* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1903, 1947), pp. 99-100.
- 12 Bonaventure, *The Works of Bonaventure: II. The Breviloquium, V. Collations on the Six Days*, tr. Jose de Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guide Press, 1963, 1970), II, pp. 59-61.
- 13 Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy* (9 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1985), II, pp. 260-62.
- 14 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica* (hereafter *ST*), tr. Anton Pegis (2 vols.; New York: Random House, 1945), I, 14.2, 4. For another translation of *Summa Theologica* see, Web: [dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/](http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/)
- 15 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (hereafter *CG*), ed. Vernon Bourke (5 vols.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), I, 55. For vol. 1 and another translation of vols. 2-4 of *Contra Gentiles* see, Web: [dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles.htm](http://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles.htm)
- 16 *ST*, I, 28.4.
- 17 *ST*, I, 14.5.
- 18 *ST*, I, 14.8.
- 19 *CG*, I, 49-50.
- 20 *Charles Hartshorne's Concept of God*, ed. Santiago Sia (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), pp. 113-14.
- 21 Web: [www.iep.utm.edu/middlekn](http://www.iep.utm.edu/middlekn)
- 22 *ST*, 14.7, 14; 16.2; *CG*, I, 57.
- 23 Some of these ideas are derived from William E. Mann, 'Epistemology Supernaturalized,' *Faith and Philosophy* (1985), pp. 436-63; Thomas Sullivan, 'Omniscience, Immutability, and The Divine Mode Of Knowing,' *Faith and Philosophy* (1991), pp. 21-36.
- 24 *ST*, I, 9.1.
- 25 *ST*, I, 14.13.

\* Dr Gopal Stavig is a regular contributor to the *Bulletin*. A scholar and author of repute, he is a member of the Vedanta Society of South California since 1962.

