

Tagorean Absolute and Personality

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Philosophers frequently raise the problem of the Absolute in their quest for the ultimate explanation of the universe. The 'Absolute' of philosophers is usually characterized by various attributes of perfection, infinitude and unity, but seldom by the attribute of personality.

In India we have a dominant Vedantic tradition in which the non-dual Brahman or the Absolute is regarded as an impersonal Reality. Naturally, this has created an impression of incompatibility between Absoluteness and personality. The poet-philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, who did not enter the domain of philosophy through its doors of technicalities and subtleties, nevertheless addresses himself to the perennial problem of the ultimate explanation of the universe. Though he rarely uses the expression 'Absolute' in his writings, his world-view leads him to a conception of the Advaitin, the all-comprehensive One or the Absolute.

The ultimate Reality or the Absolute, according to Tagore, is the all-comprehensive one which he variously describes as Supreme Reality, Supreme One, Supreme Soul, Eternal Spirit or *Satchidānanda*. All these expressions refer to the Absolute which is the central truth of the universe. Using the traditional Indian expression *Satchidānanda* for the Absolute he says, 'The meaning is that Reality, which is essentially One, has three phases. The first is *Sat*; it is the simple fact that things are, the fact which relates to all things through the relationship of common existence. The second is *Chit*; it is the fact that we know,

which relates us with all things through the relationship of knowledge. The third is *Ānanda*; it is the fact that we enjoy, which unites us with all things through the relationship of love.¹

Tagore thus characterizes the Absolute with the three phases of existence, knowledge and love and interprets the meaning of *Satchidānanda* as emphasizing the truth that a deeper relatedness is inherent in the very nature of the Absolute. The Absolute through its three phases of existence, knowledge and bliss forges an inter-relatedness and establishes the truth of unity. He says,

The Supreme Reality is the Supreme One—the *Advaitam*. The *Advaitam* is an all-comprehensive unity which brings all diversity into an order by an inner perfection that permeates as well as exceeds the contents. As the beauty in a lotus is inexplicably more than the elements of which it is composed, the perfect harmony of the Absolute also reveals itself in the surplus of joy and love.²

The *Advaitam* or the Absolute is also *ānandam*—'The infinite One is infinite Love.'³ The Supreme One reveals its infinity in our love and joy. 'Wherever our heart touches the One, in the small or the big, it finds the touch of the Infinite.'⁴ Tagore maintains that the true infinity does not belong to the region of time and space, but is inherent in the Absolute. The quality of the infinite is discovered not in the magnitude of extension but in the completeness of the *Advaitam*—the all-comprehensive unity of the Absolute.⁵

Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, making a distinction between Absolute and God in his philosophy writes: 'We call the supreme the Absolute, when we view it apart from the cosmos, God in relation to the cosmos. The Absolute is the pre-cosmic nature of God, and God is the Absolute from the cosmic point of view.'⁶ 'The Absolute is conceived by him as an impersonal Reality and is characterised by pure consciousness, pure freedom and infinite possibilities. When the Absolute is seen from the point of view of one specific possibility, the Absolute appears as the Personal God and is characterised by supreme Wisdom, Love and Goodness.'⁷

While interpreting Tagore, Dr Radhakrishnan suggests a similar distinction between the Absolute and *Ishvara* in Tagore's philosophy also. He writes, 'The first existent out of the Absolute is Ishvara with the not-self over against him. Ishvara is the Personal God who represents the ideal of godness to the finite minds.'⁸ It is difficult to say how far it is a fair interpretation of Tagore's views and to which extent it is only a projection of Radhakrishnan's own point of view.

Tagore rarely uses the term 'Absolute'. But wherever he speaks of the Absolute, he means the all-comprehensive unity, the supreme One, which is for him the Supreme Person also. Tagore does not question the validity of the impersonalistic conception of the Absolute. He refers to the Advaita Vedantic tradition according to which Brahman is an 'impersonal It' and is beyond the distinction of *this* and *that*, the good and the evil or the beautiful and its opposite.⁹

Tagore concedes that in our country there is a time-honoured tradition which advocates realization of a state of distinctionless consciousness and says that it carries in it 'The positive evidence which cannot be denied by any negative argument

of refutation.'¹⁰ 'There is none', Tagore remarks, 'who has the right to contradict this belief; for it is a matter of direct experience and not of Logic.'¹¹

But without questioning the truth of the transcendental Reality, Tagore draws attention to an equally dominant tradition which affirms the personalistic view of the Supreme Reality. The impersonalistic tradition takes its stand on the testimony of a transcendental experience which is beyond the range of logical refutation. Tagore does not come forward with any argument to disprove their testimony, but he shows his clear preference for the tradition which preaches the goal of oneness with a personal Being in an everlasting relationship of love (*lilā*). 'While accepting their testimony as true', Tagore proclaims, 'let us at the same time have faith in the testimony of others who have felt a profound love, which is the intense feeling of union for a Being who comprehends in himself all things that are *human* in knowledge, will and action. And he is God, who is not merely a sum total of facts, but the goal that lies beyond all that is comprised in the past and the present.'¹² The transcendental experience, which discovers the evaporation of individuality in the impersonal unity of Brahman is characterized by Tagore as 'an extreme form of mysticism'.¹³ Tagore does not accept such an impersonalistic interpretation of the Reality. The Supreme Reality for him is a personal Being.

Tagore approaches philosophy through religion. The Religion of Man is his chief concern and our view of Reality must be in accordance with the ideals and aspirations of the men of religion. Tagore says, 'I maintain that mysticism may be valuable as a great psychological experience, but all the same it is not Religion, even as the knowledge of the atom is of no use to an artist who deals in images in which atoms have taken form.'¹⁴ The scientists and the artists speak from two

different levels of experience and the scientist's discoveries have no relevance to an artist's appreciation of beauty. Without questioning the validity of scientific conclusions, the artist can move unperturbed in his own realm of art. Tagore believes that religion derives its inspiration from a different level of experience which cannot be falsified by referring to an extreme mystical experience which may be valuable in its own realm but has no relevance to religion. The religious quest is always for a personal Being with whom the religious soul can come into communion and in whom he can find the explanation for the entire range of human experiences and values. Tagore says in his *Religion of Man*: 'This absolute conception of Brahman is outside the subject of my discussion.'¹⁵ He claims that the human reality is the highest reality and, any discussion of a reality which completely transcends this world would be futile.

Tagore puts faith in a Supreme Reality whose divinity is characterized by personality. Though he does not come forward with an explicit rejection of the impersonalistic position, he is fairly clear in denying any superior reality to the Impersonal Absolute. Tagore, however, concedes that the experience of the distinctionless impersonal Reality is reached

at a later stage of mystical journey, but it does not confer on that Reality any higher perfection. According to him, Reality assumes a more perfect form when it appears as a personal Divinity. To quote him, 'A certain condition of vacuum is needed for studying the state of things in its original purity . . . but the original state is not necessarily the perfect state. The concrete form is a more perfect manifestation than the atom, and man is more perfect as a man than where he vanishes in an original indefiniteness.'¹⁶ Tagore is not in favour of pushing the mystical journey to that extreme point where the individual soul lapses into indefiniteness. In his view and understanding, the individual soul attains his perfection not by abandoning humanity, but by realizing his humanity fully. Hence, the ideal of perfection should be not to divest the man of his individual selfhood, but to realize the perfection of the eternal self of man in union with the Supreme Person.

The foregoing discussion leads us to the conclusion that Tagore identifies Absolute with God and he does not accept any impersonal Absolute enjoying any superior reality over the personal God. If by Absolute is meant the all-comprehensive Supreme Unity, then Tagore does not believe in such an Absolute. ■

REFERENCES

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