

The Omnipotence of Brahman-God in Indian and Western Thought (I)

GOPAL STAVIG

Indian thinkers hold that omnipotent Brahman is the totality of Existence of which we are a part.

According to Rāmānuja (c. 1017-1137), Brahman (God) is omnipotent (*Ananta-vīrya*, *Sarvashakti*) being the only creator, maintainer, and destroyer of the universe. Divine providence rules the world because we are all modes of Brahman. ‘All sentient and non-sentient beings together constitute the body of the Supreme Person, for they are completely controlled and supported by Him for His own ends, and are absolutely subordinate to Him.’ ‘The Divine Supreme Person, whose wishes are eternally fulfilled, who is all-knowing and the ruler of all . . . having Himself entered into those souls as their inner Self abides within them, controlling them as an animating and cheering principle.’¹ ‘The entire universe, composed of spiritual and non-spiritual entities, is pervaded by God who is its inner ruler . . . and He does so in order to reign and maintain them, although they themselves are unable to see Him. In this way all beings depend on God because they constitute His body. But God does not depend on them for they serve no purpose in maintaining His being; nor does God contain these beings like a jug contains water. How, then, does God pervade them? In virtue of His will. Behold His yoga, miraculous and peculiar to Him alone: God supports all beings, but no being is of use to Him. It is His will which originates, sustains and rules the beings.’²

The world and individual souls are completely dependent on Brahman (God) who is their supporter and controller.³ Spiritual progress involves the realization that we are all modes of Brahman, always under His control and absolutely dependent on Him. In time the soul realizes its likeness to Brahman and is no longer bound by universal ignorance (*avidyā*) and its karmic consequences.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) expressed the idea that, ‘She [Divine Mother] is the power of all causation. She energizes every cause unmistakably to produce the effect. Her will is the only law, and as She cannot make a mistake, Nature’s laws—Her will—can never be changed. . . . She is the fructifier of every action.’⁴ ‘God is the omnipotent supporter of the universe. What is called “law” is the manifestation of His Will. He rules the universe by His laws.’⁵ ‘The totality of all souls, not the human alone, is the Personal God. The will of the Totality nothing can resist. It is what we know as law.’⁶ ‘*Ishvara* [Personal God] is the sum total of individuals, yet He is an Individual, as the human body is a unit, of which each cell is an individual. . . . Omnipotence and omniscience are obvious qualities and need no argument to prove from the very fact of totality.’⁷ God is thus, both omnipotent and omniscient, the only free individual who is the first cause in the chain of events. He creates the world because He desires too and is not bound by

any law or necessity. We cannot desire something unless we first know the object and thus, there is no willing that is not preceded by knowing. Divine Intellect modifies into the Divine Will, which manifests as desires that combine to produce the cosmos.⁸ In one quote Vivekananda uses the pronoun 'She' and in another 'He' for Brahman-God. At a higher level, It transcends gender, but manifests in both female and male form. Each manifestation is equal in status and power, each providing a different path to Brahman-God.

Divine all-powerfulness is described by Swami Abhedananda (1866-1939) as a whole-part relationship. He says, 'Each individual soul is related to God as a part is related to the whole. As a part cannot exist independently, so our souls cannot exist independent of the Soul of the universe. Therefore we live and move and exist in and through the whole, or *Ishvara* [Personal God].'⁹ 'The whole universe may be considered as one universal whole, and each separate individual is like a cell in the Cosmic Body. Each individual has consciousness, has life of its own, but the sum total of these make up the consciousness of the Universal Being.' Worship the 'supreme Lord of the universe, who dwells in all beings and who is the life and soul of all animate and inanimate objects of the world. . . . His will is the Cosmic Will of which our individual will is but a fractional part. He is called in Vedanta *Ishvara*, which means the Creator ie, projector of the phenomenal universe and the governor of all.'¹⁰ 'Our individual will which we have so long thought to be ours, is not ours, but a part and parcel of that one Cosmic Will, which is moving the universe from the minutest atom to the biggest solar system, and our bodies are nothing but so many small instruments through which that all-pervading Cosmic Will is expressing or

manifesting Itself.'¹¹

Ishvara is the omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal Universal Mind and Body, of which our mind and body is a fragment. Every individual is a quantum of the universe with its individual characteristics. *Ishvara* manifests Its nature in the system of its parts, expressing Itself in a particular way, thereby determining the characteristics of each of its components. Some lesser unities (individual minds and physical objects) reveal more of the characteristics of *Ishvara* to which they belong than others. There are no completely isolated independent causes and effects in the universe; each component of the system is completely determined by its connections with all other events and entities. Being complete in Itself, *Ishvara* forms a single and direct experience, while Its component experiences are fragmentary and less immediate. The magnitude of saintliness and goodness of an individual is proportionate to the degree of correspondence between the individual mind and the Cosmic Mind.¹²

All things are a part of the totality, *Ishvara* (God), which is the ultimate source of all forms of existence. It is essentially omnipotent and omniscient, while Its fragments participate in *Ishvara*'s Being to varying degrees. A plant participates in *Ishvara*'s power and knowledge to a lesser degree than a human, which varies from one person to the next. Everything is through another except for *Ishvara* that exists through Itself. By analogy, fire is hot by its nature, while water becomes hot by participating in the fire's heat. Ontologically, Brahman-God's power is first subtle and subjective and then manifested and objective. Physical energy is an imperfect copy of the *Shakti* (Power) of Brahman-God. When a cue ball makes contact with an object ball, the kinetic energy that is transferred is the *Shakti* in a

lesser form. Similarly, this *Shakti* energizes the human will.

The relationship between *Ishvara*'s omnipotence and the power of humans is not univocal (having the same meaning) or equivocal (having different meanings). It is analogical because there must be some similarity between the power of *Ishvara* the cause, and Its effects in the universe.¹³

Because of the whole-part relationship between the omnipotent and omniscient *Ishvara* and humans, a fundamental psychological drive is an innate desire to express power (*prāna*), energy, and force, and to acquire knowledge. The desire for omnipotence is an important source of psychological motivation in all phases of life. The 'will to manifest *prāna*' (power, energy) is expressed in humans physically through the body, mentally through the mind, spiritually through the Spirit, socially, and in other ways. It provides motivation for every kind of success in every area of endeavour along with an accompanying feeling of self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence. The opposing psychological state is Sigmund Freud's 'Death Instinct (Thanatos)', the desire to return to the *tāmasic* powerless inert and inorganic state found in alcoholism, drug addiction, and depression.¹⁴

The Oxford University biochemist Arthur Peacocke has worked out a detailed scientific model of the interaction of God as the whole on the part—the world-System. In brief, 'A number of terms have in recent years been applied to this effect of the higher level whole on the behaviour of its constituents, for example "downward causation" or "top-down causation" or my preferred term, "whole-part influence". . . . Here the term whole-part influence will be used to represent the net effect of all those ways in which a system-as-a-whole, operating from its higher level, is a causal

factor in what happens to its constituent parts, the lower level. . . . If God interacts with the world-System as a totality, then God, by affecting its overall state, could be envisaged as being able to exercise influence upon events in the myriad sublevels of existence of which it is made without abrogating the laws and regularities that specifically apply to them. In this model, the proposed kind of interactions of God with the world-System would not, according to pantheism, be from "outside" but from "inside" it. The world-System is regarded as being 'in God.'¹⁵

Western thinkers hold that Omnipotent God is the First Cause of all events. Indian thinkers emphasize a whole-part causal relationship between *Ishvara* and humanity. This relationship covers both the gross body in physical space and the subtle body of *Ishvara* and humans in mental space. Power exists in both realms. Western writers focus in on a temporal causal relationship between God, the first cause, and humanity. In other, according to various interpretations, creation proceeds from the whole (totality) to the part, first cause to secondary causes, and from unity to diversity, perfect to imperfect, original to copy, and Existence to participation in It.

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), the Jewish thinker born in Spain, who migrated to Egypt in 1160, stated, 'Everything that passes from potentiality to actuality has something other than itself that causes it to pass, and this cause is of necessity outside the thing.' 'This series of cause or factors cannot continue on to infinity. There is no doubt that, in the last resort, one must come to something that causes the passage from potentiality to actuality, that is perpetually existent in one and the same state, and in which there is no potentiality at all. I mean to say that in it, in its essence, there is nothing in potentia. . . . Now the being that

is separate from matter, in which there is no possibility whatever, but that exists in virtue of its Essence, is the Deity.’¹⁶

The causal series begins with God, the first mover who is unmoving, unchanging, one, eternal, undivided, and incorporeal. He exists necessarily while everything else is only possible and requires an external cause in order to come into being. ‘This first cause does not fall under time because it is impossible that there should be movement with regard to It . . . the first cause to which its being set in motion is due, is not a body or a force in a body; and that this first cause is one and unchangeable because its existence is not conjoined with time.’¹⁷ Since God is the first cause of all existence, if He came to an end, all things would immediately cease to exist. On the other hand, if the created world terminated, God would remain and would not be diminished one iota.¹⁸

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) emphasized, ‘It is possible for an effect to happen outside the order of some particular cause, but not outside the order of the universal cause. . . . As God is the first universal cause not of one genus only, but of all being, it is impossible for anything to occur outside the order of Divine government.’¹⁹ ‘Something may escape the order of any particular agent cause, but not the order of the universal cause under which all particular causes are included. . . . Since . . . the will of God is the universal cause of all things, it is impossible that the Divine Will should not produce its effects.’²⁰ He also stresses that God is omnipotent because He is the first cause that controls all secondary causes. ‘All things are subject to Divine providence, not only in general, but even in their own individual being. . . . The causality of God, who is the first agent, extends to all beings not only as to the constituent principles of species, but also as to the individualizing principles.’

‘His effect is always less than His power.’²¹ Nothing except God could be ‘the efficient cause of itself: for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible.’²² ‘It is impossible to go [back] on to infinity, there must exist a Necessary Being which is the cause of all things that can be and not-be.’²³ Creatures exist only in as far as they participate in God’s Being, while God is the Self-Existent first cause. There is no force that exists prior to God who is First Being, which can determine or limit His actions. There is nothing outside of God or anterior to Him on which His existence depends. Thus, God is the first uncaused efficient cause of a finite series of world events. Due to His omnipresence, God’s potency and providence extend to all people and all events, while a less formidable power controls fewer things. His potency is boundless and unlimited and is not acted upon by any other entity. God can produce miracles because, ‘If we consider the order of things according as it depends on any secondary cause, thus God can do something outside such order. For He is not subject to the order of secondary causes, but, on the contrary, this order is subject to Him, as proceeding from Him, not by natural necessity, but by the choice of His own will; for He could have created another order of things. Therefore God can do something outside the order created by Him, when he chooses.’²⁴

It appears that Aquinas believes God’s actions are not limited by the law of causation and the history of an event as we are. In the psychology of Aquinas, ‘Power implies the notion of a principle putting into execution what the will commands and what knowledge directs. . . . the knowledge and will of God precedes the consideration of His power as the cause precedes operation and the effect.’²⁵ If a person wants to make a change, first the will commands and the

knowledge directs, but this is to no avail unless there is power to initiate the event.

Following the idea of Occasionalism developed by the French Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), God is the only true efficient cause of every event. 'God wills without cessation, but without change, succession or necessity, all that will take place in the course of time.' It is God who moves my arm on the occasion that I will to do it. No power can place the arm 'where God does not place it.' Concerning the laws of physics that follow a natural order, on the occurrence of event x God always causes event y to follow, but x is only the occasion, not the true cause of y. Similarly, the soul (mind) and body of a person cannot directly act on each other. Natural causes are only occasional causes brought on by the power of God's will.²⁶

Are there limitations on Brahman-God's omnipotence? Possible limitations are that Brahman-God cannot: 1) perform a logically impossible action such as creating a seven-sided triangle on a two-dimensional surface or 2) contradict Its own essential nature such as performing an evil act.

Thomas Aquinas adds that God's omnipotence is incapable of certain things, such as acts that involve a logical contradiction. Yet, He is not subservient to the principle of non-contradiction, but rather it is derived from God's internal nature. God does not perform acts that are contrary to His own nature such as making: 'one and the same thing to be and not to be . . . , opposites exist in the same subject at the same time and in the same respect . . . a thing to lack any of its essential principles while the thing itself remains in being, . . . a man to be without a soul, . . . three angles of a rectilinear triangle not to be equal to two right angles, . . . the past not to have been . . . [God] make a thing equal to Himself . . . , [God] make a thing be preserved in being without Himself . . . [God] make Himself not

to be, or not to be good or happy . . . [or to] will any evil.'²⁷

Lutheran and Reformed (Calvinistic) Scholastics (primarily of the 16-17th century) affirmed that God's omnipotence, 'refers to the Divine activity *ad extra* [externally] and never to a change or a potential for change in the Divine Essence, which is by definition, both perfect and immutably so.' God 'can do all things that are not contrary either to His will or His knowledge.' His omnipotence 'is limited only by the Essence or Nature of God Himself and by nothing external to God. Thus, the fact that God cannot do evil, cannot die and cannot cease to be Father, Son, and Spirit is not a limit on or a contradiction of His omnipotence.'²⁸ There is 'a concurrence of Divine primary and creaturely secondary causality . . . a continuous inflowing or influence of God upon creatures.'²⁹ God's Divine providence and His regenerative activity, generally function within the framework of the laws of nature and the decrees that He has established. Conversely, God's power is absolute and unlimited when He acts apart from the causal laws He has created. Examples occur when He creates something new like a human soul, or performs a miracle like raising the dead or bringing about a virgin birth. These acts are possible because, 'He who has freely established the laws of nature does not bind Himself by the laws and order of nature.'³⁰

That Brahman-God can do everything does not mean that It does everything It is capable of doing. There are two forms of omnipotence: The potential power to perform every logically possible form of action and what is actually done. Brahman-God might have the potential power to perform an evil act, but has the perfect purified will not to exercise that power.³¹ For an impeccable Brahman-God to commit an

evil act is a paradoxical logical contradiction. There are two defective causes of an evil action, ignorance (lack of understanding) and weakness (lack of will power). An omniscient and omnipotent Being possesses neither of these traits. For Plotinus (c. 205-70) evil is not a positive entity, but is a privation, the absence of good or being. It is the negation of existence and goodness, the inability to create.³²

Though Brahman-God is omnipotent, as an Avatār (Divine Incarnation) It possesses the ability to take on a human nature and consciousness with its limitations. Motivated by compassion for suffering humanity, an Avatār temporarily renounces much of its power and the bliss of heavenly existence in order to face the hardships of earthly life. Accepting the self-imposed *limitations of human birth* and suffering, they are able to temporarily renounce their omnipotence and omniscience. They *conceal much of their divinity during their sojourn on earth*. Many believe that the Avatārs retain their Divine transcendence even during their life period as an Incarnation on earth. Western writers state that God, being omniscient, cannot think of something new, or being incorporeal cannot scratch his ear. But Brahman-God as an Avatār-Divine Incarnation can do these things.

Augustus Strong emphasized that God possesses the power to restrict His own activity. 'His power is under the control of wise and holy will. God can do all He wills, but He will not do all He can. Else His power is mere force acting necessarily, and God is the slave of His own omnipotence. All-powerfulness in God does not exclude, but implies, the power of self-limitation.'³³ By means of His 'permissive will,' God voluntarily renounces some of His power, providing humans with free choice that allows (permits) them to sin.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), the French philosopher and mathematician, held the

extreme view of God's unlimited omnipotence. For him the laws of logic, arithmetic, and geometry are true only because God willed them so. All-powerful God was entirely free to create any logical or mathematical truths He so desires (referred to as 'universal possibilism'). He stated, 'It is because he willed the three angles of a triangle to be necessarily equal to two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise.' God could have willed differently.³⁴ In a letter sent to Mersenne in 1630 Descartes wrote, 'The metaphysical truths which you call eternal have been established by God and depend entirely upon Him just as all the rest of creation. . . . We can be well assured that God can do what we can understand, but not that he can do what we cannot understand, for it would be rash to suppose that our imagination has as wide an extension as His power.'³⁵ 'They could never say without blasphemy that the truth about something is antecedent to God's knowledge of it; for in God knowing and willing are but one thing; so that from the very fact of His willing something, He knows it, and for this reason alone is such a thing true.' Fourteen years later He wrote to Father Mesland, 'God's power cannot have any limits; and also by considering that our mind is finite, and was created of such a nature that it can conceive the possibility of the things that God chose should actually be possible, but not of things that God could have made possible, but in fact chose to make impossible. . . . Although God has chosen that some truths should be necessary, that is not to say that He chose them necessarily; for it is one thing for Him to choose that they should be necessary and quite another for Him to choose this necessarily, or be necessitated to choose this.'³⁶ This means there are no pre-existing necessary truths, since God could have made true any contradictions that can be thought of. ■

(To be continued)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 M. Yamunacharya, *Ramanuja's Teachings in His Own Words* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1970), pp. 74, 90-91.
- 2 J. A. B. Van Buitenen, *Ramanuja on the Bhagavad Gita* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), 9:4-6, pp. 113-14.
- 3 S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* (2 vols.; Delhi: Oxford University, 1923, 1992), II, pp. 682-86, 697-701; S. Chatterjee and D. Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1984), pp. 417-25.
- 4 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (hereafter *CW*) (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1962), V, p. 434.
- 5 *CW*, VI, p. 56.
- 6 *CW*, VIII, p. 266.
- 7 *CW*, V, p. 269.
- 8 *CW*, I, p. 351; VI, pp. 55-56.
- 9 Swami Abhedananda, *Divine Heritage of Man* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1903, 1947), p. 55.
- 10 Swami Abhedananda, *Path of Realization* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1946), pp. 23, 36-37.
- 11 Swami Abhedananda, *Religion Revelation and God* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1968), p. 51.
- 12 For more details on this subject see Gopal Stavig, 'Swami Vivekananda's Akasha-Prana Universe and Samuel Alexander's Space-Time Universe,' *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* (Oct. 2014), pp. 459-60.
- 13 The idea of Analogical Predication was taught by St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (hereafter *CG*), ed. Vernon Bourke (5 vols.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), *CG*, I, 29.2; 32.2.
- 14 For more details see Gopal Stavig, 'Swami Vivekananda's Scientific Cosmology, Einstein's Relativity, and Quantum Physics,' *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* (July 2013), pp. 331-32.
- 15 Arthur Peacocke, *Paths From Science Towards God* (Oxford: One World, 2001), pp. 52, 108-11, 138-40. To find out in more detail how omnipotent Brahman-God is immanently and continuously creating the events within the universe, see Gopal Stavig, 'Swami Vivekananda, the Modern Panentheism Movement, and the New Biology,' *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* (June 2017), pp. 35-39, (July 2017), pp. 19-27, in which a much longer version of this quote appears.
- 16 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (hereafter *GTP*), tr. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), II, pp. 238, 249.
- 17 *GTP*, II, pp. 246, 248.
- 18 *GTP*, II: Introduction, pp. 235, 243-47.
- 19 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica* (hereafter *ST*), tr. Anton Pegis (2 vols.; New York: Random House, 1945), I, 103:7.
- 20 *ST*, I, 19:6.
- 21 *ST*, I, 22:2; 25:2.
- 22 *ST*, I, 2:3.
- 23 *CG*, I, 22; II, 15.
- 24 *ST*, I, 105:6.
- 25 *ST*, I, 25:1.
- 26 Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy* (9 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1985), IV, pp. 188-90.
- 27 *CG*, II, 25; cf. I, 25:1-6; 103:5; II, 22.
- 28 Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 208.
- 29 Muller (1989), p. 64.
- 30 Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), pp. 106-07.
- 31 *Understanding the Attributes of God*, eds. Gijsbert van den Brink and Marcel Sarot, 'The Omnipotence of God' (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 146.
- 32 *Enneads*, I, 8.3, 5; V, 9.10.
- 33 Strong (1976), pp. 287-88.
- 34 Daisie Radner, *Malebranche* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum Assen, 1978), pp. 57-59.
- 35 Gottfried Leibniz, *The Monadology of Leibniz*, tr. Herbert Carr (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1930), pp. 84-85.
- 36 *Descartes Philosophical Writings*, ed. E. Anscombe and P. Gleach (Nelson, 1963), pp. 260, 291.

* 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 Southern California since 1962.