

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

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Along this line, John Calvin (1509-64) taught, 'If we heard God speaking to us in His majesty, it would be useless to us, for we would understand nothing. Therefore, since we are carnal, He has to stutter or otherwise, He would not be understood by us.' Swami Vivekananda concurred stating, 'Even if a book were given by God which contained all the truth about religion, it would not serve the purpose because nobody could understand the book.'³⁷ We might think of the logic of a child or of an adult's night dream, where events are connected in a sequence following a logic we are not familiar with.

Following Descartes' logic, as the infinite first cause Brahman-God ontologically precedes and transcends all of the limitations of human reason, including the laws of logic and mathematics. Since our minds are bound by the limitations of the principles of human reason, we assume that Brahman-God is also. Thus, Brahman-God is able to perform acts that run counter to the principles of logic and of non-contradiction or any other mathematical or empirical law. In other words, according to this idea, Brahman-God transcends the intellect and is not bound by any of its principles or limitations. Omnipotence determines what will be a necessary truth and existent. Take a necessary truth such as a rectangle must have four sides on a two-dimensional surface. Is this state of affairs created by Brahman-God or is it something that occurs

without any act being performed?

This implies that for Descartes, God's Divine Will ontologically precedes His intellect. All forms of intelligibility and the logical restraints of understanding are a creation of God's free will. Since there is no objective standard external to God, not only truths but ideas of goodness as well are created by God's will. We might add, if God can freely create any logical structure He so desires, then there could be other realms existing at this very moment, each with people with radically different forms of thinking that consider valid what we regard as logical contradictions. Even if they spoke our language, their modes of thinking would be totally unintelligible to us. Opponents of Descartes who hold that God's understanding is prior to will (not vice versa), believe that there cannot be a will without an intellect to direct it. As the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) wrote, 'Every act of willing supposes some reason for the willing and this reason, of course, must precede the act.'³⁸

Contra Descartes, most religious philosophers believe that Brahman-God cannot perform an act that violates the law of non-contradiction or goes against the necessary truths of logic and mathematics, e.g., Brahman-God cannot make a false proposition true, virtue a vice, or create a two-dimensional round square. An omnipotent Brahman-God cannot violate Its

own essential nature by ceasing to exist, making mistakes, permanently doing away with Its omnipotence, or making a stone so heavy that even Brahman-God cannot lift it. Being omnipotent, it is logically impossible for It to create a stone It cannot lift.

Since Brahman-God is Existence-Itself (*Sat*), It cannot begin to or cease to exist. Leibniz indicated, 'We are not to suppose as some philosophers have imagined, that since the eternal truths are dependent on God, they are therefore arbitrary and dependent on His will. . . . It is contingent truths alone which can be said to depend on God's will for the principle of these is fitness, they imply power to choose the best. Necessary truths depend solely on God's understanding of which they are the internal objects.'³⁹ Brahman-God's acts are free in the sense that no external force can work on the Divine Will without Its consent. Yet, Brahman-God's actions are determined by Its rational internal nature.

It is possible in the next cosmic cycle of the universe that synthetic propositions based on empirical existence like the values of physical constants (e.g., possibly the speed of light) and the laws of nature could vary from the present ones. But we do not expect the analytic propositions such as the laws of logic, arithmetic, or geometry to change. They appear to be necessary truths, in which case their denial would involve a contradiction. It is an epistemological necessity due to the rational structure of the human mind to accept the law of non-contradiction, and that $2 + 2 = 4$. If they were to change, the principles of human reason would have to be altered also.

There are three ways to view the relationship between Brahman-God and omnipotence (and also omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnibliss). 1) From an anthropomorphic standpoint Brahman-God has maximum power and knowledge

but is different from them. This would mean if power or knowledge did not exist apart from Brahman-God, It would be without these qualities. Also if Brahman-God relies on and is dependent on external power and knowledge they are greater than It is. 2) Some might believe that Brahman-God creates (not *is*) power and knowledge. This leaves us with the question what is the nature of a powerless and knowledgeless Brahman-God prior to creating these entities? What is the nature of Brahman-God apart from the creation? Another problem is how can Brahman-God create power, when 'to create' requires pre-existing power that involves causation? 3) From another perspective Brahman-God and Its power are one and the same entity. That is, Brahman-God as Person, Intellect (Reason), Will (Power), and Feeling (Love) are four equal aspects or components of the same Being. They are part of Its internal nature. At a higher ontological level of simplicity they are identical with one other, but in the creative process at a lower level they separate into diverse characteristics that the human intellect can comprehend. Like most Westerners, Descartes considers God to be a Personal being with a will that is separate from the laws of logic and mathematics and the moral law. This is a humanizing anthropomorphic conception of God.

Vivekananda mentions, 'Religions that have held on to the idea of an extra-cosmic deity, that he is a very big man and nothing else, can no more stand on their feet.'⁴⁰ An alternative view is that Brahman-God is a Personal being and is also the laws of logic and mathematics and the moral law. They are different aspects of a single entity. In this way, Brahman-God does not alter the laws of logic since they are part of Its nature.

Even then the powers remain relatively, not absolutely, different, since they are actively and conceptually interrelated. For

example, Brahman-God's omnipotence includes the power of knowledge, love, and goodness. Actualizing power requires knowledge. In order to lift a weight the person needs not only power, but also some rudimentary knowledge of how to accomplish this task. Therefore, omnipotence implies omniscience. Not only does Brahman-God have the power but also possesses the knowledge to perform an action.

Brahman-God is omnipotent because It is power Itself. Power, knowledge, goodness, and bliss are not entities separate from Brahman-God's internal nature. As forms of knowledge, Brahman-God and the laws of the intellect (of logic, arithmetic, geometry, and noncontradiction) and the Divine Will are part of the intrinsic nature of Brahman-God and cannot be altered. If they were separate (as Descartes and many people assume), then Brahman-God would be subservient to these laws and would not be all-powerful and all-knowing. For Brahman-God to do away with these laws would be Self-destructive. Therefore, reason is not an external factor that impinges on the freedom of Brahman-God and limits Its omnipotence. Otherwise, Brahman-God would be dependent on and conditioned by the world. Leading to the absurd conclusion that if ideas did not exist, Brahman-God would have no ideas and obviously would not be omniscient nor have a Divine Intellect. These are necessary characteristics of Brahman-God, and not accidents that could or could not exist or could be different from what they are. Omnipotence applies to Brahman-God's manifestation of power both in the *Brahmaloka*-Heaven and in the entire universe.

The fact that Brahman-God (Ultimate Reality) is the First Cause implies that all events in the universe are determined by the will and power of the Supreme Being. All

apparently random and chance events that occur in the natural world are the effects of secondary causes (the concern of the various sciences), which are ultimately determined by Brahman-God who is the First Cause. All power is ultimately Brahman-God's power, empowering everything that exists as the potency of every action. Power might operate directly or indirectly in successive stages by actualizing a state of affairs that brings about the desired outcome. According to Thomas Aquinas, God the First Cause, is the power that moves the leg, but He is not the cause of the defect in the leg of a limping person. 'The act of sin is both a being and an act; and in both respects it is from God. Because every being, whatever the modes of its being, must be derived from the First Being. . . . Therefore God is the cause of every action . . .; this defect is not reduced to God as its cause, but to free choice, even as the defect of limping is reduced to a crooked leg as its cause, but not to the moving power, which nevertheless causes whatever there is of movement in the limping. Accordingly God is the cause of the act of sin, and yet he is not the cause of sin, because He does not cause the act as a defect.'⁴¹

An atheist or agnostic writes a book but does not realize that his/her power of intellect comes from Brahman-God. If the Lord withdrew this power the atheist would be unable to think. This misunderstanding is due to 'universal egoism' which we all have, the feeling that we are the first cause of our thoughts and actions. Actually, Brahman-God is the First Cause who works through secondary causes. The physical, social, and behavioural science study secondary causes in order to control and predict events. What we think is our power is Brahman-God's power to a limited degree. The milder view is that Brahman-God is the source of our power of intellect, and the more extreme

view is that Brahman-God is also the source of the content (form) of our thoughts. God's manifestation of omnipotence differs in degree from one person to the next and is subject to change. For most people it is easiest to worship Brahman-God as a person, but this does not appeal to everyone. If an atheist or agnostic does not like the word *God*, they can think of this omnipotent and omniscient power as the First Cause, ultimate Reality, or the source of Existence including their own. This source is far greater than we are having maximal power and knowledge. Through participation we can make some contact with this power that will make us a transformed person. For example, while Albert Einstein rejected a personal God, he referred to his belief system as 'cosmic religion.' He recognized a 'miraculous order which manifests itself in all of nature as well as in the world of ideas.' A cosmic religion is necessary for science. 'I have nothing but awe when I observe the laws of nature. There are not laws without a lawgiver, but how does this lawgiver look? Certainly not like a man magnified.'⁴²

In the free will vs. determinism debate there are four possible alternatives: (1) Determinism both originating at the Divine level and within nature. Brahman-God acts directly through the deterministic laws of nature. (2) Divine determinism combined with free will within nature. Human events are determined only at the Divine level and not by the laws of nature. (3) Brahman-God does not determine our activities, yet we are still subject to the deterministic laws of nature. (4) Free will both at the Divine and natural level.

Can there be more than one coexistent omnipotent and omniscient Being? According to the Christian Trinity, there are three, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴³ The aspects of the one Brahman-God can be both omnipotent and omniscient and

consequently more than one Hindu deity can possess these characteristics. Being omniscient, the deities are likeminded, which is necessary so they work in complete harmony with each other.

Whether omnipotence (like omnipresence and omniscience) is infinite, or finite of a limited maximal quantity or magnitude is debatable. In an infinite world power must be unlimited, but in a finite world omnipotence (all-powerfulness) would have a finite upper limit. Origen (c. 185-254) believed God's power is finite because, 'If the Divine power were infinite, of necessity it could not even understand itself, since the infinite by its nature is incomprehensible.'⁴⁴

The omnipotence of Brahman-God is unlimited and supreme

According to the doctrine of omnipotence, there are absolutely no independent external restraints on Divine power, the internal nature of Brahman-God must be capable of maximum power, and it is the only source of all power in the universe. Thus, no person can possibly exemplify or exercise any ability, capacity, or power, whose existence is not ultimately derived from Brahman-God.⁴⁵

Madhva (1190/1238-1276/1317) designated, 'All imperfection is absent in the all-powerful God. He is said to be "endowed with all powers, always and at all times".' 'There is no difference between the powerful and His powers. Though His power is one and immediate it takes additional different forms like will, intelligence and effort so necessary for His creative activity.'⁴⁶ Brahman (God) alone is the supreme all-powerful determining cause, and inner mover of all entities and events. 'There is no independent potency anywhere in the Universe (in *Prakriti* [Primal Nature], *Purushas* [individual souls], etc.). It is

Ishvara [Personal God] Himself that directs properly the various potencies of Nature and of the souls for production, growth, development, etc, which are always dependent on Him. The *Prakriti*, *Purushas* and their respective capacities, their very presence, cognizability and functioning, all these are controlled by *Ishvara*, eternally, through His eternal power.⁴⁷ ‘The Supreme Being, possessed of infinite powers, enters into various stages of evolution of matter and brings about each and every stage of such manifestation of things, Himself. . . . The supremacy of God should not be compromised.’⁴⁸ Through His cosmic power and will, Brahman (God) creates, preserves and dissolves the universe. The Lord is the independent all-doer (*sarvakartritva*), while the world is a dependent (*paratantra*) derived reality. Brahman (God) voluntarily places a limitation on His omnipotence, which allows for the expression of free will by all people, in accordance with their accumulated *karmas*. All sentient and insentient entities depend on Brahman (God) for their existence, and may cease to exist if He so wills it. To egotistically think that we are an independent doer is the root source of human misery. Spiritual awareness requires that we realize that we are totally dependent on the Lord’s will.⁴⁹

For Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), Brahman, the Absolute, is pure freedom that creates the universe and is not determined by anything else. There is nothing outside of the Absolute that can limit Its omnipotence. ‘The Absolute has an infinite number of possibilities to choose from [when creating the world], which are all determined by Its nature. It has the power of saying yes or no to any of them. While the possible is determined by the nature of the Absolute, the actual is selected from out of the total amount of the possible, by the free activity of the Absolute without any

determination whatsoever. It could have created a different world in every detail from that which is actual.’⁵⁰

In the West the German Protestant Reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) stressed, ‘The almighty power of God . . . must be essentially present at all places, even in the tiniest tree leaf. The reason is this: It is God who creates, effects, and preserves all things through His almighty power . . . He must be present and must make and preserve his creation both in its innermost and outermost aspects.’⁵¹ God is the primary causal agent who determines all events. Personal and impersonal forces are the secondary causes, the tools through which God works in the world. He is not subject to another authority that is above Him, and consequently is not governed by any form of law. ‘All creatures are God’s masks and disguises; He permits them to work with Him and help Him create all sorts of things—even though He could and does create without their cooperation.’ God is under no law and is not subject to any authority over Him. He is His only authority. Whatever He wills must be good since He wills it out of His Own being and holy nature.⁵²

The property of being all-powerful, according to Augustus Strong (1836-1921), the American Baptist theologian, implies that morality is grounded in the nature of God and is not something apart from Him. Consequently, ‘He is subject to no law but the law of his own nature.’ ‘The ground of moral obligation is the holiness of God, or the moral perfection of the Divine nature, conformity to which is the law of our moral being.’⁵³ ‘By the decrees of God we mean that eternal plan by which God has rendered certain all the events of the universe, past, present, and future.’ ‘Providence is that continuous agency of God by which He makes all the events [group and individual]

of the physical and moral universe fulfill the original design [decrees] with which He created it. As Creation explains the existence of the universe, and as Preservation explains its continuance, so Providence explains its evolution and progress.⁵⁴

Practical applications

One of Sri Ramakrishna's (1836-86) many practical contributions is stressing the spiritual importance of realizing that Brahman-God is all-powerful, which he brings out in the following teachings. 'A man verily becomes liberated in life if he feels: "God is the Doer. He alone is doing everything. I am doing nothing." Man's sufferings and worries spring only from his persistent thought that he is the doer.' 'Not even a leaf moves except by the will of God.' Realize 'I am the machine and God is the Operator. I act as He makes me act. I speak as He makes me speak.'⁵⁵ God 'who makes a law can unmake it if He so desires, or He can replace it with another law.'⁵⁶ "I am the doer of this virtuous act," and "I am the doer of this vicious act." This attitude is the cause of the continuation of the wheel of birth and death. But when one realizes God, one is freed from the feelings of agency and bondage. One remains convinced in the truth that God is the real doer of everything.' 'He who comes to know that he is only an instrument in the hands of the Lord has no egoistic feelings. He is aware that he is only a tool with which God has His work done. Such a man causes harm to no one.' 'When egoism goes all miseries vanish along with it. When the devotee gets fixed in the conviction that whatever happens is by the will of the Lord and that he is merely an instrument in His hand, mukti [liberation] is ensured for him in this very birth.'⁵⁷

A devotee should strive for the spiritual understanding that they are an instrument in the Lord's hands, and that whatever happens

to them is the Lord's will. God is the ultimate source of all power, and we are His instruments. If the religious seeker is truly convinced that God is the only doer and that everything occurs by the Lord's will, then they will be free from worry, anxiety, and sin; they will never take a false step; and at death will attain to liberation.⁵⁸

He adds, 'But you must remember that everything is possible for God. He is formless, and again He assumes forms. He is the individual and He is the universe. He is Brahman and He is *Shakti* [Power]. There is no end to Him, no limit. Nothing is impossible for Him.' 'He is the Lord of all. He can do everything. He who has made the law can change it.' 'All that you see is the manifestation of God's power. No one can do anything without this power. But you must remember there is not an equal manifestation of God's power in all things.'⁵⁹

Swami Abhedananda emphasizes the practical aspect of these teachings, 'As long as we think that our individual will is a separate will and is not related to the universal Cosmic Will, and believe that by following our imperfect will, we shall gain the highest benefit, the result of this benefit is suffering, misery, and sorrow, which we experience in our everyday life.'⁶⁰ 'If we once understand that God is the source of all existence and power and is the one Reality, that outside of God no existence is possible, then we begin to feel the presence of divinity everywhere. In every action of our lives we realize that the power is working through us, and at every moment of our earthly existence we feel ourselves to be like so many instruments through which the Divine Will is manifesting Itself and doing whatever He ordains. All the actions of our lives are then turned into acts of worship of the Supreme Deity.'⁶¹ Freed from the bondage of ignorance, all fear and selfishness vanish and all sins are absolved. The soul realizes

its spiritual unity with the Divine and attains to Brahman-God consciousness, becoming one with the Universal Spirit.

Ramakrishna's statement that 'God is the Doer' is well supported by the insights of Meister Eckhart's religious experiences. Eckhart revealed, 'It should be understood that to know God and to be known by God, to see God and to be seen by God, are one according to the reality of things. In

knowing and seeing God, we know and see that He makes us see and know.' 'God makes us know Himself, and He makes us know Himself by His act of knowing, and His Being is His knowledge. For Him to make me know and for me to know are one and the same thing. Hence, His knowledge is mine, quite as it is one and the same in the master which teaches and in the disciple who is taught.'⁶² ■

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