

The Main Tenets of Advaita Vedanta Ontology

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The word 'Vedanta' literally means the end of the Veda. The 'Upanishad' happens to be the end of the Vedas in two senses, literary and philosophic. Strictly speaking, in these two senses, the Upanishad is the Vedanta.

Now it may be noted that the Upanishad contains the wisdom of the Veda. Wisdom is knowledge of the highest truth. Thus wisdom is the highest form of human knowledge. Hence the Upanishad is the most glorious part of the Veda. However, this may be pointed out here that though the name 'Vedanta' stands for the Upanishad, yet it includes something more. It includes the *Gītā* and the *Brahmasutra* in the context of the Vedanta Philosophy. The Upanishad, the *Gītā* and the *Brahmasutra* actually serve together as the basis of Vedanta. These three are called *Prasthānatraya*. The Upanishad is the *Shrutiprasthāna*, the *Gītā* is the *Smritiprasthāna* and the *Brahmasutra* is the *Nyāyaprasthāna*. Upon these three pillars rests our Vedanta philosophy.

There are of course ten schools of Vedanta Philosophy of which the most important and most significant is Advaita Vedanta. The name of Shankarāchārya is inseparably related to this school.

Shankara happens to be the celebrated commentator on the principal Upanishads such as *Katha*, *Kena*, *Prashna* etc and the *Gītā* and the *Brahmasutra* or *Vedāntasutra* of Bādarāyana, the ancient sage. In his short life of thirty-two years, Shankara did tremendous work, both academic and

religious, in his zeal to establish the essential aspect of the Veda, the basic scripture of Sanātana Dharma, popularly known as Hindu Dharma. Shankara firmly believed that wisdom is the essential aspect of the Veda. For the good of Sanātana Dharma wisdom should therefore be explored. He therefore dedicated his life to bring out the philosophic jewels embedded in the Upanishad. He found with a heavy heart that people by and large were keen on performing Vedic sacrifices and thus wisdom had already taken a back seat. In order to draw people's attention to the essence of Sanātana Dharma, he employed his remarkable philosophical talent to the task of writing valuable *bhāshyas* on the scriptures. As we all know, language of the Upanishad is usually very much difficult and obscure. Therefore, in his commentaries Shankara used clear and simple Sanskrit in order to enable us to understand the essence of the Veda. In this context we are certainly reminded of Jesus Christ and Buddha. English language used in the Holy Bible is clear and simple. Pāli used by Buddha was similarly a language of the common people.

Preya and shreya

Now Shankara in his commentaries repeatedly tells us that true path of good (*nishshreyasa*) is wisdom alone; *karma* or action and devotion or *bhakti* are only subservient to wisdom. Hence one has to arrive at wisdom for the sake of attainment of good. For the sake of precision, we would

now draw a distinction between *relative* good and *absolute* good. In the language of the *Katha Upanishad*, relative good is *preya* and absolute good is *shreya*. Earthly and heavenly good is relative good as it is mixed with pain and restricted in scope. In other words, worldly good is good under certain conditions. There is no pure good on earth or in heaven.

One may wonder why the attainment of heaven is considered to be merely a relative good. The Advaitin points out that the attainment of heaven cannot ensure enjoyment of benign pleasure forever. Heavenly pleasure can be enjoyed as a fruit of satisfactory performance of Vedic sacrifices. As the fruit is produced, it will come to an end obviously in course of time. Moreover, performance of Vedic sacrifices needs killing of animals as part and parcel of a sacrifice. This also results in inevitable suffering. Hence heavenly pleasure can hardly be an absolute good (*shreya*).

Shankara therefore draws our attention to *shreya* or the absolute good. This is good beyond all restrictions and conditions. This good is liberation or absolute release from suffering in life. Our suffering may cease temporarily in heaven; therefore it is not the real good. Absolute cessation of suffering is absolutely good—good universally and necessarily.

Shankara assures us that the path of wisdom alone leads to the attainment of good absolute. So the question that at once crops up here is: What is wisdom? Wisdom primarily means the highest form of human knowledge. There are no doubt grades or degrees of human knowledge, namely ordinary knowledge, scientific knowledge and wisdom. Ordinary knowledge is knowledge of things around us. Value of such knowledge in our everyday life is undeniable. But its value is limited and

restricted to the ordinary level where suffering is inevitable. Application of ordinary knowledge can at best give us relief. But this cannot remove one's suffering permanently. Scientific knowledge is obviously superior to ordinary knowledge about the world around us. It is more precise and accurate. Not only that, technological advancement based on scientific knowledge stands us in good stead in everyday life. It makes our life more and more comfortable. But in spite of all these, science and technology together can hardly solve the basic problem of life, namely suffering. Relief and release are two things a man should seek. The worst drawback of scientific knowledge is that it is departmental knowledge of the world at large. Physics deals with physical things, chemistry is concerned with chemical objects, biology takes into account life (bio) of beings. The world is thus divided into different parts and each science is concerned with a part. But such a compartmentalized knowledge does not satisfy a penetrating mind. He seeks to know the world and life as a whole, he loves to arrive at a synoptic view of the world. Such knowledge is wisdom which is the highest form of human knowledge.

Synoptic view of the world

How is it possible to arrive at a synoptic view of the world of diversity? This is possible through knowing reality or the ontological principle. Those who explain the world as a whole in terms of many reals or many principles, are called the Pluralists. The Nyāya-Vaisheshika system in its ontology believes in pluralism. Sāṅkhya-yoga system is frankly dualistic accepting two ontological principles. Now, Shankara is an uncompromising Monist who believes in Self or Brahman as the Reality. The Self or

Brahman transcends all possible distinctions and thus Shankarite Monism is Pure or Absolute Monism as distinguished from the Qualified Monism of Rāmānuja.

Monism is an ontological theory according to which the reality is one without a second. It is in conformity with the Law of Parsimony. The Monist argues, if one can explain the world and life in terms of one principle satisfactorily, why should one accept two or more than two realities? A Monist is therefore in an advantageous position. In connection with the above, we may point out that in their zeal to explain diversity, some thinkers accept Pluralism in which several reals are admitted. The Nyāya-Vaisheshika school in Indian Philosophy, for example, believes in several realities. But the Advaitin points out that the world is a cosmos and not a chaos. Reals that are distinct from one another can hardly explain a cosmos satisfactorily.

Dualism like the Sāṅkhya system is no better. When the two reals such as *Prakriti* and *Purusha* are two distinct realities, there is no good reason why they should cooperate with one another for the sake of manifestation (*abhivyakti*) of the world of diversity from *Prakriti*. The tale of a blind man and a lame man, as it is offered by Sāṅkhya, cannot actually explain the so-called cooperation of the two reals. *Prakriti*, the insentient principle, cannot be compared with the blind man who is obviously conscious and capable of following the instruction of a lame man in the story.

With reference to the above, we are certainly reminded of two great Western thinkers, namely, Leibnitz and Descartes. Leibnitz is a Pluralist, according to whom the countless monads (conscious atoms) are real. Those being 'windowless' are substances capable of independent activities.

But the monads, being so, can hardly explain the cosmos in spite of the 'pre-established harmony' emphasized by the pluralist Leibnitz.

Descartes defines a substance in terms of independent existence. Such an existence is enjoyed by Matter and Mind in his ontology. But Descartes as a dualist ultimately finds it difficult to offer a satisfactory explanation for the mind-body relation and many other problems. Thus the Dualistic ontology of the father of modern philosophy finally falls short of reason.

Problem of Monism

Again, Monism has a serious problem of its own. How can one explain diversity which is undeniable? Shankara does not of course deny diversity. But he does not also accept diversity as real. He only argues that diversity is only a false entity that is superimposed upon the One and only Reality. He holds that diversity is not real like the Self or Brahman but it is only a false appearance projected upon the Self or Brahman.

We are now in a position to discuss briefly the main tenets of Advaita Vedanta ontology. In this context we have indeed the following words of Shankarāchārya:

*Slokārdhena pravakshyāmi yaduktam
granthakotibhih;
Brahma satyam jaganmithyā jivo brahmaiva
nāparah.*

In this verse, Shankara tells us very convincingly that he will reveal in half a verse the truth contained in crores of treatises. What is the truth? Brahman is the Reality; the world is only a false appearance projected upon it and *jiva* is none other than Brahman. With reference to these words of Shankara, we would propose to discuss the

basic ontological tenets of Advaita Vedanta.

Ontology literally means a systematic study (*logos*) of reality (*ontos*). Reality, as the Advaitin points out, is one eternal principle. Eternity is the other name of Reality. The name of this principle is Brahman or Ātman. Whatever be its name, the principle is spirit in its nature. In other words, the Reality is of the nature of consciousness. Here we need to mention that the Advaitin convinces us that Pure Consciousness constitutes the essence of Self or Brahman. Consciousness is pure in the sense that it is unintentional and that it is not any particular state (*nirvishaya* and *nirvishesha*). As a matter of fact, ordinary knowledge or consciousness is necessarily awareness of this or that object. Such knowledge is also a particular state of consciousness. The Naiyāyika actually believes in such knowledge or consciousness as the only kind. But the Advaitin goes a step further and declares that Pure Consciousness is the Reality upon which ordinary knowledge or consciousness is projected. The Self or Brahman is the only Reality. In fact, non-duality of Truth is unequivocally declared in the Upanishad. ‘*Ekam sat viprāh bahudhā vadanti*’, ‘*neha nānāsti kimchana*’—these oft-quoted Vedic statements convey the ontological truth that the Reality is one without a second.

As a matter of fact, the Reality is necessarily there and again the Reality is one without a second. It is meaningless to suppose that a Reality is not there. Whatever is unreal, such as a square-circle, is not there at all. But the real cannot cease to be there, as otherwise a reality ceases to be a reality. Leibnitz points out that the mathematical points cannot be real because those do not really exist. In fact, eternity is the other name of Reality, as the Advaitin tells us

repeatedly. Thus he tells us that a Reality is necessarily there (*Sat*).

This may also be mentioned in connection with the above that the Reality does not simply exist, but It is Existence Itself. Whatever is existent may cease to exist. A jar, a mountain, or a river is existent. But its not being there is conceivable very easily without getting involved into contradictions. But negation of reality is logically impossible. To think of a reality not being there is to invite serious contradiction in thought, the Advaitin asserts. The Self is that Reality.

Having discarded Pluralism and Dualism as two rival theories, the Advaitin now tells us emphatically that the reality is but one without a second. Why does he say so? The Reality is necessarily beyond all limits. A reality limited in any way is no reality. Thus there can hardly be two or three realities. In that case one reality is limited somehow by the other. The Naiyāyika may argue that *ākāsha* (space), time, and the soul are all ubiquitous substances having no limit. But the Advaitin does not find their argument cogent. When we say that space is not time or *ākāsha* is not self, we do limit them. Otherwise there should have been no mutual exclusion (*anyonyābhāva*). Hence it has to be admitted that when a reality is necessarily beyond all limits, there can hardly be more than one reality. That the Reality is one without a second, is therefore ontologically the most satisfactory theory.

After convincing us that the Reality is one without a second, the Advaitin now tells us that the Self or Consciousness is the Reality. A materialist may very well be a Monist accepting a material principle as the only reality. The ancient Greek philosopher, Thales, was an advocate of Materialistic Monism. He accepted water as the only

reality. Thus he is a Materialistic Monist. But such a view is untenable for the simple reason that everything including consciousness can never be explained in terms of a material principle. The most fundamental point here is that Consciousness can hardly be explained in terms of materialism. Consciousness, or to be more precise, Pure Consciousness, is self-revealing (*svapprakāsha*) while matter is dependant upon consciousness for its revelation. Moreover, any material principle is limited in its scope, as we have already seen. As Leibnitz says, no material principle is eternal for the reason of its being extended at least in thought. A material principle therefore is infinitely divisible and, consequently, non-eternal. But eternity is the other name of Reality. Hence the Advaitin refuses to accept matter as a reality. In fact, in this scientific age matter has been actually dematerialized.

The Advaitin tells us that the Self or Consciousness is the Reality since It is eternal. Consciousness does not have any part. In other words, Consciousness does not admit of inner distinctions (*svagata bheda*). Thus Consciousness being simple is not divisible at all, as Leibnitz also points out. Hence the Advaitin concludes that the Self or Consciousness is the only Reality. Advaita Monism is therefore called pure Monism.

Let us now turn towards the Advaita theory of the non-self, namely the world. As a staunch advocate of Monism, the Advaitin cannot regard the non-self as a reality over and above the self. The Advaitin does not, however, discard the world as an absolute naught like the nihilist. Here the Advaitin puts forward his famous doctrine of falsity of the world. The material world of diversity cannot be real since it is inevitably subject to

change and decay. The world is not also an absolute naught since it can be cognized at each and every step by countless individuals. The world cannot also be both real and unreal. Hence, according to the Advaitin, the world is only a false appearance or a presented unreality that is projected upon the Self or Brahman.

In connection with the above discussion, we have to mention that the nihilistic account offered by the Mādhyamika School of Buddhism is explicable in terms of a *hallucination*. The Advaita account, on the other hand, is explicable in terms of an *illusion*. The difference between a hallucination and an illusion is obvious. A rope is falsely taken to be a snake in the case of an illusion. In this case something (*adhishtāna*) is taken to be something else (*adhyāsta*). How does an illusion take place?

The Advaitin holds that an illusion takes place because of nescience which is positive (*bhāvarupam*) in nature. The *adhishtāna* is first concealed (*āvarana*) and the illusory or false something is also projected (*adhyasta*) upon it. In the case of a rope-snake illusion, the rope is concealed. In other words, one is prevented from knowing the rope and the illusory snake is projected. In other words, an illusory snake is made known to the man under illusion. Thus an illusion does actually take place. In this connection we may also mention that unlike the Naiyāyika, the Advaitin believes in the positive nature of *ajnāna*. It cannot be a mere negation of knowledge (*jnānābhāva*) as the Naiyāyika thinks. The cognition of *ajnāna* actually presupposes *jnāna* just as knowledge of the absence of a jar presupposes the knowledge of a jar. The Naiyāyika himself admits that knowledge of the counter-entity (*pratiyogin*) is a prerequisite for knowledge of negation.

(Continued to page 20)