

Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman and the Creation of the Universe-I

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Intrinsic Nirguna Brahman

Transcending space (*desha*), time (*kāla*), and causation (*nimitta*) the Indian Nirguna Brahman and Christian Essence of God (Divine Substance) are nondual-undivided (Simple) without form or division, Self-existent (Aseity) not receiving existence from or being caused by another entity, infinite without parts, timelessly eternal, and immutable. They are unknowable transcending space, time, causation, the primary categories of finite existence, and all forms of knowledge; and are independent of all other beings and entities including the universe. These characteristics are free of all imperfections and limitations. In the traditional classification system, these intrinsic characteristics are described as being absolute and not relative (Nirguna Brahman in-Itself), immanent (indwelling), intransitive (characteristics remain within Nirguna Brahman), and incommunicable (not shared with other entities).

These characteristics are sometimes described by negation (*neti neti; via negativa*), since they are not found in the phenomenal world. Following this approach Nirguna Brahman is defined as nameless, formless, spaceless, timeless (eternal), causeless, partless (simple), changeless (immutable), beginningless, birthless, endless, deathless (immortal), and limitless (infinite); or nontemporal (eternal),

nondivided (simple), nonchanging (immutable), and nonfinite (infinite). Swami Vivekananda makes the distinction between existence and Existence-Itself and between qualities (attributes) and essence. 'The Purusha [Ātman] does not love, it is love itself. It does not exist, it is existence itself. The Soul [Ātman] does not know, It is knowledge itself. It is a mistake to say the Soul loves, exists, or knows. Love, existence, and knowledge are not the qualities of the Purusha, but its essence. When they get reflected upon something, you may call them the qualities of that something. They are not the qualities but the essence of the Purusha, the great Ātman, the Infinite Being, without birth or death, established in its own glory.'¹

There are two levels of predication for each of the Divine characteristics. First is to ascribe particular characteristics to Brahman-God. More demanding is to attempt to prove that it is logically impossible for Brahman-God not to have this characteristic. Is it impossible for intrinsic Brahman-God not to be metaphysically nondual-undivided, Self-existent, infinite without parts, timelessly eternal, or immutable? Is this absolutely necessary, not contingent, and something that cannot be different?

Since It is beyond and transcends duality, in the Ultimate State Nirguna Brahman-Ātman-Essence of God is unknowable In-Itself, being that It has no

qualities (attributes), or relationship with any human ideas or words. It has been described from the negative standpoint: the Indian *Neti, Neti* (not this, not this) and the Western Apophatic (*Via Negativa*) method. The intrinsic characteristics of Nirguna Brahman-Ātman-Essence of God are describable from the positive and affirmative standpoint: the Indian *Anvaya* and the Western Cataphatic (or Kataphatic) (*Via Positiva*) method. This is the Penultimate State, i.e., comprehended from the standpoint and perspective of the understanding of the human intellect (*sub specie intellectus, buddhi*) and from the phenomenal world (*vyāvahārika*).

Nirguna means ‘without qualities or attributes,’ yet in this qualified sense from our temporal standpoint Nirguna Brahman-Essence of God can be described. We think of Nirguna Brahman-Essence of God as always existing in the past, present, and future implying the nature of both existence and eternity (or Existence-Itself and Eternity-Itself). In this manner the Penultimate State points the way to Nirguna Brahman-Essence of God. Another example, Nirguna Brahman is ontologically prior to (transcends) causality and therefore cannot be explained in terms of cause and effect. But, from our standpoint Nirguna Brahman is the foundational cause, the ontological first cause of the universe. Why, because without Nirguna Brahman there would be no universe. Nirguna Brahman transcends all relations (apophatic), yet we can explain how we are related to It (cataphatic). Both Shankara and Vivekananda affirm that we can advance from this plane of existence to the Nondual realm, meaning that they are in some ways connected with each other. Since our ideas of these characteristics are derived from the things of the world, they only indirectly describe Nirguna Brahman. The Ultimate state of perfect understanding

from the standpoint (*sub specie*) of Nirguna Brahman can only be attained through *nirvikalpa samādhi*.

Shankara describes the essential nature of Nirguna Brahman from the Absolute (*Svarupa-lakshana*) and Positive (*Via Positiva*) standpoint as being *Sat* (Existence), *Chit* (Unchanging and homogeneous Consciousness), and *Ānanda* (Unchanging and homogeneous Bliss). From the relative (*Tatastha-lakshana*) standpoint, relational characteristics such as Brahman being the source and support of the phenomenal world, are superimposed on the non-relational, essential nature of nondual Nirguna Brahman. This is necessary to gain some understanding of the nature of Brahman.²

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) explained the difference between God as He is and our conception of Him. ‘These relations have no real existence in God, and yet are predicated of Him, it follows that they are attributed to Him solely in accordance with our manner of understanding ... For all other things, such as wisdom and will, express His essence; the aforesaid relations by no means do so really, but only as regards our way of understanding. Nevertheless, our understanding is not fallacious. For, from the very fact that our intellect understands that the relations of the Divine effects are terminated in God Himself, it predicates certain things of Him relatively; so also do we understand and express the knowable relatively, from the fact that knowledge is referred to it... it is not prejudicial to God’s Simplicity if many relations are predicated of Him, although they do not signify His essence; because those relations are consequent upon our way of understanding. For nothing prevents our intellect from understanding many things, and being referred in many ways to that which is in Itself simple [undivided], so as to consider

that simple reality under a manifold relationship.³ Aquinas mentions a 'relation of reason' (*relatio rationis*) that is not objectively real in God, but is attributed to Him by the human intellect.⁴

Vedanta teaches that *Sat* (Existence-Itself)-*Chit* (Consciousness-Itself)-*Ānanda* (Bliss-Itself), all three are on an equal level. Nirguna Brahman 'is,' not 'has' existence, consciousness, and bliss. For Aquinas they form a hierarchy. He indicated that, 'The intellect first apprehends Being Itself [*Sat*]; secondly, it apprehends that it understands Being [*Chit*]; and thirdly, it apprehends that it desires Being [*Ānanda*].'⁵ To explain the sequence, an entity can exist without consciousness or bliss, but they must exist for them to occur. Consciousness can be without bliss, but not bliss without consciousness. Existence is dichotomous (exists or does not exist), while consciousness and bliss at least on the human level are continuous with degrees.

Applying Baruch (or Benedict) Spinoza's (1632-77) terminology, '*Sub specie aeternitatis*' ('from the perspective of the eternal') Nirguna Brahman is real and '*Sub specie temporis*' ('from the perspective of the temporal') the phenomenal world that is involved in time is real. This compares to the Sanskrit *Paramārthika-drishti* (from the Absolute point of view) and *Vyāvahārika-drishti* (from the pluralistic universe point of view).⁶

The Indian Ontological-Cosmological Theory for the Existence of Nirguna Brahman-Essence of God is strongly supported in the Upanishads by the statements, 'He is never seen, but is the Seer [Pure Intelligence]; He is never heard, but is the Hearer; He is never thought of, but is the Thinker [Inner Controller]; He is never known, but is the Knower. There is no other seer than He, there is no other hearer than He, there is no other thinker than He, there

is no other knower than He' (*Br. Up.* 3:7.23; cf. 3:4.2). 'It [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 Up.* 1:2; cf. *Br. Up.* 4:4.18).⁷

Extrinsic Saguna Brahman

The limited human intellect cannot comprehend the infinite Divine Nature by a single conception that explains all of Its many characteristics. Consequently, Saguna Brahman-God is apprehended by a number of distinct attributes (qualities, properties) that form the Divine Nature. They are omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, omnipresence, and omnibliss, each being eternally and necessarily inseparable from Saguna Brahman-God. Following the logic of Divine Perfection, Saguna Brahman-God possesses every attribute in its most maximum extent (omni-). The Divine Nature is essentially these attributes and cannot be otherwise, unless an aspect of It such as an Avatāra (Divine Incarnation) exercises its freedom by temporarily renouncing being all-powerful and all-knowing (*kenosis*). Ontologically, Saguna Brahman, the Manifestation of God is knowable, complex, infinite with finite parts, eternal within time (omnitemporal), and mutable.

These omni-attributes imply each other. Having perfect knowledge, goodness, presence, and bliss are four forms of power. An omnipotent Being has the intellectual power to know everything and the moral power to always be good. An omniscient Being has the knowledge to attain maximum power, goodness, presence, and bliss. Divine characteristics are characterized as relative (Saguna Brahman in relation to heavenly existence, the universe, and humans), emanating (flowing out externally), transitive (attributes proceed from Saguna Brahman such as love), and

communicable (shared with humans to limited degrees).⁸

In contrast to the intrinsic Nirguna Brahman characteristics that tell us ‘What Brahman-God is, the That,’ the extrinsic Saguna Brahman operational attributes describe ‘What Brahman-God does, the What.’ Each attribute is an expression of what the Deity does, encompassing all power, knowledge, goodness, presence, and bliss. These communicable properties that are perfect in Brahman-God manifest in imperfect and to a lesser degree in humans and worldly things. Every finite entity possesses a given virtue in a limited degree, pointing beyond itself to a source that manifests the same quality in all its fullness. Brahman-God’s knowledge unlike ours is not caused by external things that It knows; rather Its knowledge is the cause of their existence (involving power); meaning knowledge and power are highly interconnected. Also, It knows all things by knowing Itself. If objects and ideas existed prior to Brahman-God creating them, then It would be subservient to them. Nirguna and Saguna Brahman are comparable as: Absolute-Relative, Being-Becoming, Essence-Existence, Static-Dynamic, Substance-Attribute, That-What, and the Unmanifested-Manifested.

While the Nirguna and Saguna forms of Brahman differ in many ways, both are Self-existent, necessary existence (they cannot not exist), eternal, perfect, one in number, transcendent, immanent, omnipresent, omnipotent, and impassible but in different ways. Conversely, the world is not self-existent, necessary existence, perfect, or transcendent. Brahman-God is absolute, independent, and the cause, while the world is relative, dependent, and an effect.

Brahman-God as a Necessary Being has two components. Historically the emphasis has been placed on It having necessary

existence (thatness). But It also has a necessary nature (whatness), meaning that Brahman-God could not differ from what It is. Due to Its perfection It must be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent necessarily. It cannot be otherwise. These necessary characteristics of Brahman-God have always existed and cannot cease to exist, unlike accidents (properties that are not essential to a thing’s nature) or contingent properties (dependent on something else, possible). For humans there is only one kind of existence (Thatness, Haecceity), while there are many varieties of characteristics (Whatness, Quiddity).

To think of Saguna Brahman-God as only a Person (anthropomorphic) is to limit the infinite. It is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipresent, and omniblissful because It is power, knowledge, goodness, presence, and bliss. It and Its attributes are one and the same thing. For example, It is omnipotent not because it gains power that is external to Itself, but because It is power. We are separate from knowledge and gain it through participation while Saguna Brahman-God is omniscient because It is knowledge.

If knowledge were separate from Saguna Brahman-God, It would participate in it, and would be influenced by it and thus not fully independent. Its understanding would be subject to change, progressing from a condition of potential (lacking omniscience) to actual knowledge. If Brahman-God learned about things separate from Itself, then It would not be the first cause and creator of those events. Its knowledge is through Its own Essence, and not from participation in something external. When these attributes manifest in reduced quality and quantity in the universe, they are under Saguna Brahman-God’s control.

If Saguna Brahman-God and the Moral Law were considered to be two separate

entities, then all of Brahman-God's activities and ideas concerning morality would be determined by an external source. Brahman-God would not be what It is through Itself (*per se*) but through another (*per aliud*). This is to deny Its sovereignty over all things. In fact in the realm of ethics, Brahman-God the Supreme Being would be subservient to the Moral Law, whose dictates It is obliged to obey.

In addition, Saguna Brahman-God is identical and one and the same not only with Its personality but with Its perfect principles, practices (ethical and mystical activity), properties, and places (*Brahmaloka*-Kingdom of Heaven, Divine realms). The Divine nature is identical with perfect knowledge that includes the Transcendental *Vedas*, which are the Eternal Truths (Latin *Veritas*), Moral Law, the Platonic Ideals, and logical truths such as the law of non-contradiction. This is not pantheism since Saguna Brahman-God is these entities only in their perfect state.

If Saguna Brahman-God cannot create a world where $2 + 2 = 5$ or where the part is larger than the whole, it is because that would violate the law of non-contradiction. Then Brahman-God must be the law of non-contradiction or this law is part of Its nature, else It would be controlled by something external to Itself.

Vedas as knowledge and wisdom is a cognate of the Latin *veritas* meaning truths. *Veritas* was the Roman Goddess of Truth. All religious scriptures are approximations to varying degrees of the Transcendental *Vedas*-Eternal Truths. As Vivekananda noted, 'But by the *Vedas* no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times.'⁹ When Jesus says, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (Jn. 14.6) he refers to himself as the truth (Principle), not that truth is something

separate from him that he participates in. Sri Ramakrishna told his devotees, 'God and his name are identical ... There is no difference between Rama and His holy name.' 'God is not different from His name.'¹⁰

Existence, consciousness, bliss, goodness, substance, form, meaning, etc. in their most perfect state are not separate from the Divine Mind, they are Brahman-God in another form. In recent times Brahman-God has been considered in more than Its Personal aspects. For example, It has been equated with the World Soul, cosmic energy, and mathematical entities.

It is often believed in the West that Hindus are polytheists worshiping a plurality of separate and independent gods. In such a case even the chief deity has a limited number of functions and would be under the influence of the other deities. Actually, Hinduism is monotheistic as is Christianity. One omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God (Saguna Brahman for the Vedantists, *Ishvara*) manifests in innumerable forms (Polytarian Monotheism). Each is a separate representation and Divine personality of the one Brahman-God. Christianity teaches Trinitarian Monotheism ('one essence of God and of the three Persons or modes of existence'¹¹), Hinduism Polytarian Monotheism, and Judaism and Islam Unitarian Monotheism. The Indian Polytarian Monotheism view is pluralistic in that it recognizes other religions of the world as various aspects of the Divine, as paths to God. Of course, one must differentiate between the Higher Deities (*Devas*) such as Mother Kāli, Durgā, Shiva, and the Divine Incarnations; and the lower nature deities who have specific limited functions. As Christians object to the tritheism (three separate gods) interpretation of the Trinity, Indians reject polytheism as the highest ideal. Swami Abhedananda maintained that Hindus 'are not polytheists.

They worship One God under different names and forms.... In their spiritual essence they are one and the same, but in their manifestations they are different... Shiva and Vishnu again, are one and the same in their spiritual essence; they are two manifestations of the One Infinite Being who is called Brahman in the Vedas.¹² There is also the Infinitarian concept that Brahman manifests in an infinite number of aspects and forms. This view that is held by some philosophers requires a universe infinite in dimension and/or infinite in time. This might be considered to be a version of the Principle of Plenitude that God manifests in every possible way.

A religious philosopher is apt to conceive of the Divine Mind as purely rational. For example, Georg Hegel (1770-1831), the German philosopher, taught, 'The real is the

rational and the rational is the real.' A pragmatist is apt to think of the Divine Mind as practical. But for Sri Ramakrishna, Brahman-God is like a playwright freely creating the world drama as experienced by humans. Being like a play, future events are often difficult to predict and the precise laws of human history have not been discovered. Ramakrishna expounded, 'God has created the world in play, as it were.' 'The Divine Mother is always playful and sportive. The universe is Her play.' 'Infinite are the ways of God's play.' 'This world is the lila [Divine play] of God. It is like a game. In this game there are joy and sorrow, virtue and vice, knowledge and ignorance, good and evil.'¹³ There is a difference between a Divine Play and a Divine Plan based on rational and practical thought. ■

(To be continued)

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