

NANDINI IYER ‘It Ain’t Necessarily So’

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This acceptance of the category-dependent nature of our descriptions of the world does not imply a complete relativism on all matters. We have seen that it certainly does not imply a wholly subjective view of truth; nor does it mean that no view of the world can be rejected, either wholly or in part, as false. We certainly do not have to accept, e.g., moral relativism.

Samkhya-Yoga and Vedanta both believe that the “True Self”, each person’s true identity, lies in that which is the locus of pure consciousness — *purusha* in the one case, *atman* in the other. But once again each system approaches it from a different point of view. As pointed out earlier, Samkhya-Yoga chooses to view it essentially from the standpoint of our ordinary, everyday experience of separation between consciousness and matter and of the separation between oneself and others. These experiences are not to be lightly dismissed, and, as we saw, are crucial in helping an individual to examine life more deeply from the point at which he or she stands, without having, from the start, to question radically, and all at once, everything we take for granted and believe in. How would it help to pull the rug out from people’s feet suddenly? And, from the moral point of view, as we saw, Samkhya-Yoga, by not regarding the entire phenomenal world as *maya*, helps to make the moral life more comprehensible and easier to practise.

Vedanta, by contrast, seems to believe that, to gain spiritual knowledge, we need to begin to walk the path that is ‘like a razor’s edge’ by questioning immediately our whole approach to the world, to life. This does not mean that we will be able to see the invalidity of our usual assumptions and presuppositions, the fallibility of our most cherished ordinary beliefs, all at once. But we should become aware that there is something seriously and radically wrong with our taken-for-granted, ‘common sense’ views of the world, our value system, our ordering of issues, goals and ideals, our principles of living, and the principle of separateness on which we ground our thoughts and behaviour. We may then proceed gradually to straighten out and undo the kinks and knots in our thinking bit by bit. Here Vedanta offers us the consoling doctrine that the world is *not* completely unreal or non-existent. It is only *relatively* so. After all, with Brahman as its ground, how could it be completely false or illusory? It is not so much the world itself, as our perception of it, that is the illusion. The doctrine of *adhyasa* allows us to hope that we can recognise the superimposition and remove it, since we are ourselves essentially the light of the pure consciousness that can dispel the darkness of ignorance and illusion. And further, we are assured that it is not a question of there being a sharp distinction and gap between the lowest (or greatest) level of illusion and absolute, Ultimate Truth or Reality.

The principle of sublation (or subratiion, as Deutsch calls it) [Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedanta Reconstructed*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1969] is at the core of the doctrine of *maya* and of the doctrine of the attainment of the highest *jnana*. Larson complains that Shankara creates too sharp a dichotomy between *vidya* and *paravidya*, or ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ knowledge, so that the very concept of ‘knowing’ loses meaning. However, at the same time, Larson maintains that in Samkhya ‘salvation-knowledge’ is quite different from ordinary knowledge [Larson, op.cit., p. 204]. I see very little difference here (as far as the gap or ‘leap’ is concerned) between the systems.

Moreover, the Vedantin theory provides, through the process of sublation, by which we go from lower and more limited truths to higher and more general or more inclusive or more universal truths, a more satisfactory explanation of our progress towards the highest knowledge. Besides, the distinction between the higher and lower knowledge is not really between two levels of knowledge in the ordinary sense, but between two different ways of knowing. Higher knowledge is not the sum of all the types of lower knowledge, nor is Absolute Truth the final step in a continuous staircase of relative truth and knowledge, with the second to last step missing. It is knowledge of Brahman-*atman*, in which the subject/object distinction is transcended. In this sense, perhaps it is true that this kind of knowing is not like ordinary knowledge. We use the word “knowledge” for it simply because we have no other word for it — hardly surprising, considering that higher knowledge is ineffable, indescribable, non-conceptual. It is “knowledge”, if you like, in an analogous or metaphorical sense. After all, isn’t that the point mystics of all traditions have persistently made? That the knowledge of God (as many mystics, especially Christian) would call it, is in a completely different dimension, so that it can hardly even be compared with any kind of ordinary knowledge. As the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* puts it, between us and God is the cloud of unknowing which can be pierced only by the dart of love, not by reason. Even Yoga grants that before the highest state of *nirbija samadhi* is attained, one must pass through an indescribable *dharmameghasamadhi*. This could not possibly be said of the knowledge or consciousness of anything else. It is knowledge and love, *and* being — a puzzling idea to our rational minds. Spinoza was surely very perceptive in calling it “*amor Dei intellectualis*” [Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*].

It is Samkhya-Yoga, I believe, which really takes the higher or salvation knowledge completely out of the boundaries of anything that we can possibly recognise as, or even imagine to be, “knowledge.” It seems to me that knowledge which is possessed by, or is the attribute of, a substance or entity totally devoid of consciousness is a meaningless notion. The concept of knowledge rests upon, is inseparable from, and necessarily demands some connection with, an idea of consciousness. Can we make sense ordinarily, for instance, of the idea of a stone ‘knowing’ something? No. Why not? Because a stone has no consciousness. Alternatively, such a view reduces knowledge (though not consciousness) to a process explainable in terms of a very simple epiphenomenalism. But this, too, is so curious that it is hardly an explanation. Epiphenomenalism, after all, reduces the various aspects of consciousness (including knowing) to physical, chemical, neurological changes, events, processes in the physical brain. But even it does not divorce knowing from consciousness. “Curiouser and curiouser!” as Alice would say. It may be, however, that if we are determined to limit the category of knowledge to our very common-sense notion of a process involving two elements, the knowing subject and the known object (whether the latter belongs to the physical or mental realm), then *purusha* can perhaps be reasonably understood as not involved with knowledge.

Vedantins would, as we saw, also wish to regard the ‘knowledge’ ascribed to the *atman* as very different from knowledge, whether rational or empirical, in the ordinary sense of that term.