

SOME MODERN VIEWS ON SANKARA

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Sankara as a historical phenomenon is all that we are taught and expected to teach in our Indian Universities. The result is that regarding the exact view-point of Sankara there exist today a hundred and one opinions causing unnecessary differences. No two *Advaitins* [Non-dualists] agree about the meaning of *Mâyâ*, nor do the different types of *Advaita-Vâdins* meet without a clash! Yet one and all of them adore the Teacher as the world's greatest one. Differences somehow crop up when they try to interpret the basis of their essential agreement.

Long before the appearance of Hegel we have ample evidence of Western thought being familiar with the general principles of Sankara's philosophy. Owing to the honest efforts of Max Müller, Deussen, Thibaut and others, Sankara's system has found a permanent place in the thought of Europe. In spite of their denials we can easily detect the influence of Sankara on the development of Modern Thought in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The rational Monism of Sankara appears time and again under different names, but under queer conditions of approach. Their scientific speculations based upon an imperfect knowledge of Sankara's philosophy, are merely different aspects of Faith in the intellect or in the will or in both as one. Hegel's Absolute Idea, Schopenhauer's Will, Bergson's Life, Gentile's Mind, Bradley's Reality, etc., are only some new names for Sankara's Brahman—unsuccessful attempts to go higher than Sankara, futile intellectual struggles to get rid of solipsism with a view to giving scientific meaning for the merely phenomenal within the Reality. They share the same fate as that of other speculations.

Each new system of thought seems to destroy the existing one. The book of the hour has a short span of life before it inevitably passes into the debris of thought. There seems to be no end to this so-called speculative thought, and consequently no philosopher seems to be secure of his ground. The History of Philosophy occupies a greater position of importance today than the actual science. And the term, 'some-how,' creeps in at some stage or other; and dogmatism resumes its proud position, i.e., the sphere of *Avidyâ* [ignorance] seems to continue with a vengeance!

We are not concerned with the 'Western intellectual stunts', but with its views and criticisms of Sankara. When the European philosophers criticize the *Upanishads*, they attack also Sankara's position which by some unaccountable intuition they identify with the former. Their colour and race prejudices blind their vision. A few rare souls like Deussen and René Guenon ask us to keep to Vedânta, the highest possible achievement by human thought. René Guenon, in his book, *Man and his becoming according to Vedânta* (which deals entirely with *Avasthâtraya* [The Three States]) answers the usual charge levelled against Vedânta thus: "The doctrines are not to be degraded to the scope of the limited and vulgar understanding; they are for those who can raise themselves to the comprehension of them in their integral purity; and it is only in this way that a genuine intellectual *elite* can be formed." But it is to be regretted that even the most unprejudiced minds of the West are not able to appreciate the full implications of Sankara's philosophy because of their lack of insight into his metaphysical methods. And "the clue to a philosophy lies in the method pursued". It requires the keenest insight and the greatest self-sacrifice, the sacrifice of age-old prejudices, to get into the spirit of Sankara to

understand him. Mere intellectual appreciations leaves their ignorance of Sankara's system untouched. Hence with regard to their views on Sankara, each new book on the subject differs from the previous one. Perpetual doubts are arising about the only possible solution of the world problem which Sankara offers, or as to its final disposal. Most of the criticisms levelled against Sankara by the ancient and modern thinkers are concerned only with his '*Mâyâ*' doctrine so-called. But have they succeeded in attacking his unassailable metaphysical position? Does Sankara really postulate a central cosmic principle independent of Reality, which gives rise to this world of name and form? It is this so-called independent cosmic principle attributed to Sankara, that is attacked with varying degrees of success by the different schools of thought, both ancient and modern.

What does Sankara really state in his *Bhâshyas* [Commentaries]? From certain undeniable facts of experience he establishes that *Prajnânânam* [Consciousness] is Brahman or the Reality which is proved to be identical with our Self. Here we get a definite criterion of Reality: Reality is that which transcends time and yet is the sole entity that endures for ever from the time-view, i.e., from the empirical standpoint. Even an ordinary thinker would never then believe in an extra-cosmic force or entity that can give rise to the consciousness of a world—the world that consists of individuals and exists in their consciousness. The only possible way in which we can understand him when we take into consideration his sound metaphysical position, is that he points out '*Adhyâsa*' or Mistaken-transference as cause of bondage and misery, which we can easily note in all beings—an individual's illusion or a natural prejudice that veils the Truth. The word, 'illusion', need not give rise to unnecessary fears in the minds of the

so-called realists who have clearly no idea of what an illusion is and therefore much less of what Reality means. Life consists of a series of memories; the event of the present becomes only a memory of the past. The elusive handful of the 'present' is as unsubstantial as the achievements of a dream. Does anyone realize the illusory aspect of experience within dream? As there is nothing else but Reality under any circumstances, even a dream or an illusion has a meaning only within itself. The substance of this world consists only of a bundle of sensations arranged in order by the presence of Reason which is identical with our Real Self. The order and consistency that are instanced to prove the reality of an external world, are entirely due to the presence of the Real Self, and the former are the evidences of the permanent and unchanging nature of the Self which appears as the consistent whole in any state or in any conceivable situation. It is the invariable presence of Self that gives the appearance of reality to every situation. But there is the same order and consistency within a dream as well; and hence these are no real marks to prove the reality of an external world.

A born Hindu familiar with Sankara's teachings will be surprised at the different views held by the modern thinkers. He is called a Nihilist, a Mystic, a Tantric, and so forth. These are the opinions of the Westerners who have a fascination for his bold conclusions but have no idea of their grounds. In our country it is a fashion to quote Sankara as an authority even for obscure and irrational beliefs. There are any number of such theories about Sankara which I need not consider now at length. I am dealing only with the views of the intellectuals not only of the West but also of the present Indian interpreters of Sankara. When so many of our own *Âchâryas* and philosophers, not understanding the methods of Sankara, have

attacked only his so-called theories, how can we expect the philosophers of the West, who have not the least idea about the peculiar Vedic methods, to understand and give the legitimate value to the most rational outlook of the great philosopher?

In trying to give a wider meaning to the term *Mâyâ* than what Sankara gave it, we move on to slippery ground. *Mâyâ* is the cause of all the existing disputes! Even in our country there are several possible explanations-theories on the meaning of *Mâyâ*. One will get really confused by hearing all the different *Vâdas* about it. Therefore the safest course is to read his *Adhyâsa Bhâshya* a number of times and form our own independent conclusions based upon his metaphysical position. To treat it as a real cause of an unreal world or an unreal cause of an unreal world would lead us on to an endless array of speculative efforts. The cause ceases to be a cause if there is no effect apart from it. The unreal cause of an unreal effect ceases to be with the unreal. What does not really exist, needs neither an explanation nor an accounting for; and the attempt would be impossible because the real position does not allow it. Facts are superior to mere theories and the problem does not exist in the final comprehension of the Fact or in the Fact itself.

What is the cause or purpose of this world? That is all the question which worries the philosophers. They do not pause to consider whether this problem arises at all in an enlightened enquiry. "What world?" we ask. Is it an independent entity? If it is only the consciousness of a world we have to deal with, causality is included within it and can never be traced beyond consciousness. Sankara never troubled himself seriously about this illusory problem. For, the problem of the cause of the world, the crux of all philosophy, is an intellec-

tual illusion by its very nature in an enlightened enquiry. There is no occasion for such a problem if only we analyse our experience and get rid of our ignorance. When one great American philosopher asked Swami Vivekananda how he could explain the creation of the relative universe out of an absolute Reality, the Swamiji said that he would give the same answer that Sankara had given us long ago, viz. To request the questioner to put his question in a syllogistic form. The questioner of course thought and thought for a long time but had to confess in the end that he could not find the middle term!

We generally mistake one thing for another, to wit, the unreal for the real. Knowledge removes this ignorance. What, then, is the problem that would still exist in the sphere of knowledge? To establish or even to think of a relationship between the absolute and the relative is illogical from the very start. The worrying problem of the origin of world is grounded only in such an ignorant and illogical outlook. Hence Sankara analyses first our ordinary experience and arrives at the permanent and undeniable aspect of it. I need not deal in detail the methods of *Avasthâtraya* [Three States] and *Panchakosha* [Five Sheaths], both of which prove beyond doubt that the Self of the enquirer is the permanent reality – the Self that merely witnesses its percepts in two of its states, waking and dream, and reveals its true nature in what is known as *Sushupti* [Dreamless Sleep]; the Self that appears as one perfect whole in each and every *Kosha* (the universe of discourse) and on serious enquiry is proved to be none of these manifested spheres. The *Panchakosha* method proves that this 'I', the self of the enquirer, is not anything that it comprehends nor anything that it witnesses but is that which remains unaffected after the most rational process of elimin-

ation of the phenomenal. To deny this 'I' is at least to exist in order to deny or to doubt. Now the *Avasthâtraya* and the *Panchakosha* are viewed together as a whole. There are all the five *Koshas* even in a dream as per our experience. But after waking we find that the individual of the dream and all his five *Koshas* and all activities connected with them are unreal. So too in the sheath of Reason or *Vijñânamaya-kosha* we arrive at the conclusion that the three states or *Avasthâs* are unreal and the Self is free from its temporary attachments created with each state. Thus the five *Koshas* and the three *Avasthâs* are found to be mere passing appearances and situations, and *this* Self is actually free from them.

Self's nature as pure or perfect consciousness is proved by the method of *Avasthâtraya* which disposes of all the existing problems of causality, world, etc. Cause demands time, and time has meaning only within the waking or the dream. The sense of time snaps in our deep sleep. Therefore the problem of the cause of the three states on which hangs the consciousness of the world, does not arise, and if it arises at all, it can arise only in those who are ignorant of the nature of cause. About this question of causality, Mr. K. A. Krishnaswami Iyer of Bangalore, has dealt with at length in his valuable book *Vedânta or the Science of Reality*. The knowledge of Reality arrived at by an enquiry into the nature of our experience makes the problem of the cause of the world meaningless and illogical. If there still remains a craving for the cause of the world, Vidyaranya humorously asks those that want it, to find it out—all within the waking state. Few are aware that the greatest scientists of today have arrived at the same conclusion about the cause as that of Sankara.

Here I have to say a few words on a most controversial point. It is not a small family quarrel among ourselves, for it

affects seriously our notions of freedom and bondage and release, etc., I think that most of the criticisms levelled against Sankara would appear very reasonable if it is proved that he believed in the existence of *Avidyâ* [ignorance] as cause in any form in *Sushupti*. It is left for great scholars to decide the issue textually. But one familiar with the canons of pure philosophy and modern science, cannot think of a cause in a timeless sphere. As *Vâsanâ-matra* or as *Bija-rupa* or in any conceivable form, the presence of *Avidyâ* as the cause in *Sushupti*, would make time greater than the Self. Fortunately our Self is free from such an imaginary curse! *Sushupti* is the one occasion, so to speak, when we can realize Self's absolute purity and freedom. The waking intellect that demands a cause in its time-bound form, must imagine *its* cause in *Sushupti* which is then viewed by it as *its previous* state from the same time-bound view. It thus includes the timeless sphere within its time sphere and imagines an 'ought-to-be' something in *Sushupti* to account for the *subsequent* rise of a world in consciousness. The power of ignorance is so great that such unconscious slips in logic become possible even in very great thinkers. Such an irrational position is mistakenly transferred to Sankara himself, the world's greatest thinker, who never uses such a term as *Mulâvidyâ* [Root-Ignorance] anywhere, according to Mr. Y. Subba Rao of Bangalore, in his scholarly work in Sanskrit, *Mulâvidyâ Nirâsa*. Even if the interpreters and scholars prove by texts that Sankara says that, we know for certain that the greatest philosopher must have meant it only for those who are still in the sphere of ignorance and who will get confused or even get mad if the unreality of cause is proved to them. In his *Bhâshya* on Gaudapada's *Karikâs* and also in several places in *Sutra Bhâshya*, he has clearly pointed out the errors of all such unphilosophical positions. To the *Poorvapakshin* [Ob-

jector] who asks the question: “Whose is this *Avidyâ* ?”, Sankara replies in his *Gita Bhâshya*: “To you, the individual, who asks this question.” One may ask here, “If the individual's ignorance is removed by the individual's knowledge, what have you to say about other individuals? There ought to be a universal force or something, whatever we might call it, that should account for the *Avidyâs* of the other individuals.” We say that the idea of a universal force and the other individuals are all included within the individual's *Avidyâ* and ceases to be with it when knowledge arises. Where individuality is absent as in *Sushupti*, it will be a futile attempt to seek for the trace of *Avidyâ* there in any form. *Avidyâ* in *Sushupti*, i.e. 'I did not know anything then', is not a conscious experience but is only a created memory of the waking intellect. He who establishes the unreality of an external world by *Avasthâtraya* would never undo himself by postulating a central cause for such an unreality outside the actual sphere of ignorance, and much less within the sphere of Absolute Reality. The cause is not available *there* or *then* for *this* or *now*.

I will also refer to another existing fashion of some of the modern Indian thinkers. A few of the exuberant *Advaitins*, in their zest for reconciliation and moderation, say that Ramanuja is the best commentator for Sankara. Can ignorance of Sankara's position go further? It arises out of a confusion of *religion* with philosophy, *faith* with science. The one is a mere poetical description of the Lord according to the *Srutis* and *Smritis*, while the other is the proof for such a Reality. Both talk no doubt about Vasudeva [the Lord], but Sankara's Vasudeva is a rationally proved entity stripped of all *our* illusions about It. To Sankara the *Srutis* that declare the truths about Reality are sacred because of their *rational* outlook. They can be proved by reason—reason reaching its logical

limit in experience and revealing intuition by which the nature of Reality is comprehended. Here, in this position, there is greater room for *Bhakti*, for it is in perfect accordance with knowledge. Mere faith in the Lord has its own uses of course. But faith based upon certainty means eternal release from doubt, despair, and unnecessary hopes. To think of a unity in philosophy of the type referred to, is only a compromise with ignorance. Ramanuja's Vasudeva, in spite of all the glorious attributes that we can imagine, is outside the sphere of both reason and experience, the only reliable instruments of knowledge. Knowledge does not arise merely by a denominational allegiance to a particular creed or sect or by accidents or birth, time, and place. Ramanuja's system is a leap in the dark with the talisman of individual consolation or satisfaction for one's own safety. It is an interesting speculation based upon religious instincts without entering into the meaning of their deep basis. Moreover his idea of Reality, 'as a whole composed of parts', reifies the essential distinctions, and God as the ultimate unity becomes then a mere illusion—one among several wholes!

God, religious experience, the urge of Truth, the sacredness of the *Srutis*, all these get their deep meaning and glory only in Sankara's system of thought where God is proved to be the very urge and the ideal of all conscious existence and therefore to be the only Reality identified with our Self. Any other view can only be an illusion based upon mere ignorance of the situation. God alone is; there is nothing else but God. We can get at Him intellectually and intuitively. This is the glorious position of Sankara. This high rational outlook is bound to endure for millions of these illusory years, whose value and meaning he so boldly pointed out that even a thoughtful *child* can try and understand.

Thibaut tries to prove that Ramanuja's commentary on the *Vedânta Sûtras* is more in accordance with the spirit than Sankara's while he also admits that Sankara's is more in line with the philosophy of the *Upanishads*. This is entirely a wrong view when we know that the *Vedânta Sûtras* are meant only for revealing the consistent doctrines of the *Upanishads*. What concerns the modern thinker is not the faithfulness of the interpretations or even consistency with the *Srutis*. Which is the *rational* view? The greatness of Sankara consists in taking a most rational outlook while agreeing with the *Srutis*, thereby showing the rational basis of the *Mahavakyas* themselves. He does not give up either textual authority or reason based upon actual experience, because his metaphysical position is entirely in agreement with that of the *Srutis*, as he proves at every step. An appeal to reason alone will hold good for all time to come but an appeal merely to the religious instincts of a particular set of human beings cannot stand the ultimate tests of reason. Sankara yields to none in his reverence for the *Srutis*. But in his view knowledge demands the fullest use of reason necessary for the discrimination of the Real from the unreal in experience. A *Vichâra-Buddhi* is first absolutely necessary before trying to understand the deep meaning of the *Srutis*. What appears as reason under the first limited view becomes exalted as intuition; and what is intuitively grasped as Truth is what is revealed in the *Srutis*. And hence their sacredness. Mere quotations without taking into consideration their full implications do not take us even one step higher. That is where Sankara scores a victory over every other philosopher! Sankara's victory is virtually a victory to Truth! He alone has a right to talk about the limitations of reason, for he alone has reasoned it out and found its meaning in the Reality. The legitimate purpose of intellect, the instrument of reason,

seems to be to know its own limitations and obtain the satisfaction that the very limitation is thoroughly rational from the point of view of ultimate reason. What are the proofs for the existence of God? All speculative efforts to answer this question have failed. And Ramanuja's is one of them. The splendid superstructure of his theological speculation is built upon the genuine but uncertain foundations of human beliefs, hopes, and fears! But Sankara's system is based upon the solid ground of reason and undeniable experience. If Self is proved to be the Reality, what seems to hide this glaring fact is only one's own ignorance and nothing else. If that is seen to be the only obstacle, then we can truly say with Sankara that God's mercy is infinite! A little serious thought in the right direction, and we find that we are actually free from all bondage. The greatness and genuine goodness of the Lord is once for all vindicated in Sankara's great system of thought and not in any theological or other speculations.



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