

CERTAIN PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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The following consists of replies to some difficulties raised by students of philosophy and religion.

What is Philosophy?

It has been argued that the system of philosophy which is known as Advaita, propounded by Acharya Sankara, is not a philosophical system, since it accepts the authority of the scripture, and philosophy does not accept scriptural testimony as a test of truth. To this point of view, several answers may perhaps be appropriate. Firstly, the term 'Advaita' need not necessarily be associated with Sankara, because it stands for a way of thinking or a doctrine which can be promulgated by a methodology of reason. Even if Sankara had not been born, this system of human thought would remain as a way of possible logical analysis and synthesis. Perhaps it would not be difficult to see that the conclusions which are associated with Advaita can be drawn even without reference to any scripture or theological background. That historical circumstances required Acharya Sankara to consider Scripture as the final authority would not preclude the great logical acumen which is demonstrated in his writings, which can stand independently as a supreme philosophical system, even without any reference to

Scripture. Hence, a true student of philosophy need not have to mix up the theological atmosphere of Sankara's times with the philosophical conclusions that he drew by pure reason alone.

Further, it is strange that philosophy should be interpreted as a position totally opposed to Scripture or irreconcilable with Scripture, if we are to consider Scripture as an accepted hypothesis which itself cannot be questioned, and not necessarily a book written by someone or even revealed to anyone. Which scientific method or philosophic situation can be said to be free from the necessity to be finally grounded on some hypothesis on which it bases itself and on whose pedestal it raises the edifice of its system? How would science or philosophy or any thinking process at all assume a sense or meaning if it is not to found itself on some irrefutable fact which is already accepted not as something deduced from a premise, since a premise itself cannot be deduced? Indian philosophers, whether they accept the authority of Scripture or not, had also amply revealed in their expositions the great power of reason which, while it was not necessary for it to refute Scripture, could also stand on its own legs.

The Nature of Reality

It is also argued that the Advaita position that Brahman is consciousness is a sort of self-contradiction, for consciousness is a quality. To this, it has to be said that consciousness is certainly not a quality, nor can it be a product of the conjunction of the subject and the object as some thinkers have tried to establish. If consciousness were a quality, it would have to be a quality of something other than consciousness, but what on earth can that be which is other than consciousness? That so-called something which is other than consciousness has necessarily to be also that which is not known to consciousness, in which case it cannot be related to consciousness, and consciousness cannot be related to it. Where then comes the question of

consciousness being a quality of anything at all? Secondly, it is contended that the Advaita conclusion that Brahman (the Absolute) is consciousness is not tenable, for, it is argued, the statement "Brahman is consciousness" is tautological. The point is that if Brahman is consciousness, it would be like saying that Brahman is Brahman, and to say that Brahman is consciousness would be like an analytic judgement, not a synthetic one, adding no new information to the subject Brahman, since Brahman is already said to be consciousness. This objection arises on account of introducing the defects of linguistic grammar into a philosophic proposition, for we cannot see any tautology in the statement that Brahman is consciousness, inasmuch as the statement is intended to describe the characteristic of Brahman, or, we may say, the constituent essence of Brahman, or, rather, more precisely, what Brahman is. Hence, the statement "Brahman is consciousness" does not introduce the conjunction 'and', so that there should be Brahman 'and' consciousness in order that Brahman may be consciousness. The grammatical copula 'is' in the statement "Brahman is consciousness" does not distinguish between Brahman and consciousness, but is only a verbal contrivance necessitated by the exigency of grammar. The spirit of the statement is the real philosophic position, and not the form of the linguistic structure of the sentence. It is well known that every sentence involves a subject and a predicate linked together by a verb. Only, in the present context, neither Brahman nor consciousness can be taken as a predicate, because one and the same thing is asserted even when two terms are used. Thus, it appears the objection is not philosophical. The statement "Brahman is consciousness" cannot be considered as a truism, as if it is a well known fact, for it requires an elucidatory effort to come to the conclusion that the nature of Brahman is consciousness. If a father makes a statement, "Rama is my son", it does not follow that the statement is tautological or a truism, for, while Rama and son mean one and the same person, the one term explains the intrinsic nature of that which is indicated by the other.

Is the World Unreal?

It has often been glibly and sarcastically opined by many a thinker that the Advaita doctrine propounds the unreality of the world, the illusoriness of all things, that nothing exists at all. While the process of an investigation into the validity of the question of the unreality of the world is a little intricate and need not be discussed here, it is not true that the Advaita crudely brushes aside the content of world-experience as a literal unreality. No content of an experience can be regarded as totally unreal as long as there is such a thing as experience, and no one with the least sense would dub an experience as unreal as long as it remains an experience. But, while it is certainly true that the very meaning of experience is that it 'is there', and no one will speak of it if it is not there, no experience can be considered as unreal as long as it 'is' an experience, whether it is of the world or anything else. Yet, there is certainly something more to be said about this phenomenon. Would we call it an experience when it is contradicted by another experience subsequently following it? The famous analogy of the experience of a snake in the rope is before us. Is the snake real? No one would say that it is unreal, for it is a content of experience which is real. But, at the same time, there is a point which requires a more judicious consideration of the issue, since, in a different experience which is of the rope, the snake is realised to be unreal. Who would ever regard the snake as a reality on the perception of the rope as a real experience? It appears to us that the analogy of the snake and the rope, which is so well known, is not a puerile connivance of some psychological whim, but a most apt illustration of the position of the world as a whole and of man's location in the world. It would thus be obvious how one and the same proposition can be unreal as well as real in two different contexts, while not being self-contradictory as a blending of totally opposite positions.

It may also be added here that it would not be wisdom to stretch even the weapon of logic to its breaking point, for

logic is a function of reason operating on the dichotomy of the subject and the object, while at the same time feeling the necessity to bring together the two as an integral statement.

The Basis of Proof

If there are no proofs which can demonstrate Brahman's reality, this need not be considered as a serious defect in the situation. Rather, it should be happily accepted as the glory of truth itself, which is also associated with eternity. How is one to prove the eternal through non-eternal means, and what eternal means are available to man in a world of temporal processes? What proof does one expect to establish the existence of Brahman, as Brahman is the basis of all proof, the indubitable existence as the very self of the one who argues and thinks in terms of proof? How would it be proved by some other proof, and where is the point in expecting a proof at all?

Evidence from Sleep

The illustration of experience in the state of deep sleep sometimes advanced in the Advaita system as an evidence of the existence of an absolute being, is not without substance. Reversing the Cartesian proposition, "I think, therefore I am," the analogy cited is an adventure in the direction of the conclusion, "I am, therefore I think." Would there be a need to bring a proof that one's own self exists? Obviously, it is not hard for one to realise that proofs proceed from the fundamental experience of there being such a thing as self, and if the self itself were to be an object of doubt, there would be no worth-the-while conclusion in life, which would be free from the defect of the same doubt. If there is anything at all which cannot be doubted, it has to have a base which itself cannot be doubted. All this would be commonplace to any sensible point of view.

Now comes the question, What happened in deep sleep? This is one of the great analyses made in the system of Advaita philosophy. While in the waking state the body

seems to be the whole of the reality of oneself, in dream one's existence is proved to be possible without association with the physical body. The point that comes to relief in deep sleep is that one can and one does exist there in a condition wherein even the mind does not operate, and one's existence in the state of sleep is free from association of every kind, physical as well as psychological. It is no great feat of discovery to make much of the psychological difficulty involved in understanding the nature of the memory that remains subsequent to sleep, of one's having existed in the state of sleep. That the physical and the psychological embodiments are not the reality of a person is the essence of the discovery which is made from one's existence in sleep. Whether sleep is a biological condition, or is brought about by this factor or that, is irrelevant for the purpose. We need not go into the details here as to how and why one enters the state of deep sleep. The Upanishad has something to say about it, while the medical man or the psychologist and the scientist may have something else to say from their own points of view. These considerations, however, do not touch the essential point made out in the study of the self in sleep, that it is impossible to set aside the conclusion that the self is basically of the stuff of consciousness. While the experience of joy in sleep is attributed to different factors and can be explained in several ways, it is impossible to believe that there can be satisfaction in a state of unconsciousness. No doubt, sleep is a state of unconsciousness and it should be a contradiction for anyone to believe that such sleep should have any value. Is it not strange that the value of sleep seems to outweigh any other value, even if it is to be considered only as a reminder, though occasional, that man is evidently something other than what he appears to be in his much-adumbrated waking activity?

It is said that the condition of sleep cannot be regarded as an experience because this condition is an 'event' and all events are not experiences. To this it is to be pointed out that it is difficult to understand what an 'event' can be if it is not existent, and what can existence mean if it is not something

that is known to exist? Precisely, an experience is the knowledge of existence; it may be the existence of an event, a condition, a situation, a thing, or whatever it be. Then, why should not sleep be an experience, if it is an event? Further, the argument that in order to call an event an experience, it must be an event of which someone is the subject, does not in any way affect the issue on hand; for, how could sleep be an experience or an event if it is not an experience to someone or an event occurring in respect of someone or something? In fact, what exists, or, precisely, is, in the state of sleep is the pure subject alone. In sleep there is an indication of subjectivity, free from traces of all objectivity, if only we are not to consider the state of unconsciousness as an object counterposed before a subject. The definition of consciousness has also to be made a little clear. Consciousness cannot be considered as something happening to someone, whether it is noticed or not. Philosophically, the term 'consciousness', when it is applied to describe the pure metaphysical subject, is to be understood as denoting something more than even what is usually called self-consciousness. It is the basic presupposition of any meaning whatsoever. Hence, such a subliminal base of the very meaning of anything, the primary being or existence of whatever can be regarded as meaningful, has to be something not only not associated to any other primary being which may be its subject, but should be not even a state of self-consciousness in the sense of one being one's own object of awareness. It is pure universality, consciousness as such, which cannot be distinguished from being as such. Thus, consciousness need not mean noticing, seeing or any kind of happening to anyone. This latter empirical characterisation of consciousness may have the utilitarian value of a grammatical subject, or sensorily conditioned individuality localised in space and time. But consciousness has to supersede space and time, since the former knows the latter as its content. The suggested pure subject indicated by the experience of sleep is not an ego, which latter is a self-conscious, localised, embodied something, but a general state

of reality which encompasses all that can be anywhere or at any time. The subject indicated in sleep is not the enjoying or suffering subject, for it is prior to every psychological condition, since, here again, psychological experiences are its contents.

Experience is not 'doing something', for the fact of doing anything would be the object of a consciousness prior to it. Thus, we find that consciousness cannot be associated with anything other than itself, neither an event nor a thing. The Advaita argument of the presence of bliss in the state of deep sleep, as evidenced by a subsequent memory thereof, cannot be just brushed as totally irrelevant. There is certainly a great point which the Advaita makes out here. It is logically impossible to conceive of memory or remembrance except as a conscious recollection of a previous experience. Since experience cannot be dissociated from a consciousness of it, the conclusion that consciousness is not absent in the state of sleep cannot also be ruled out. As regards the experience of happiness in sleep, it is up to anyone to prove it or disprove it. An intense subjectivity to which consciousness is driven in sleep should be considered as the explanation for the happiness mentioned. The nearer one moves to oneself, the truer one is, and, hence, freer; and, is not freedom a state of happiness? It is entanglement in objectivity that distracts the attention of consciousness by making it appear as something other than its own self, which may safely be called a sort of metaphysical schizophrenia. The utter subjectivity which everyone craves for as an emblem of total freedom is demonstrated by man in the process of history. No one would like to be other than oneself, or involved in what one is not. Such empirical involvements are not present in sleep, and though this not-being-present is a kind of negative freedom and an entry into pure subjectivity through the backdoor (this, incidentally, differentiates sleep from Samadhi, or universal consciousness), there is no doubt that this apparent negativity becomes at least a suggestion of the possibility of positive subjectivity, even as the reflection of an object, which may be said to be the negative presentation of

the object, indicates the nature of that object itself. In studies of this type, one may have to be dispassionate and honest, as far as one's own feelings and experiences are concerned, and not allow an empirical logic to interfere with its validity, for, as we have noted, logic is not a permanent friend of the very source of logicity. We need not identify this source entirely with the Transcendental Unity of apperception of Immanuel Kant, but here is certainly its elder brother, as it were, and the presence of it none can deny without denying the denier's existence itself. In a way, the true self is reflected in spatio-temporal involvement in the state of waking and, evidently, philosophers are right when they opine that the world is a dream, if it is true that all spatial and temporal experience is a shadow cast through the screen of objectivity by that which is the archetype transcending the space-time network. Plato's analogy of the cave is profound and pertinent, and it is a happy augury that in a more explicit manner this truth is coming to light through the discoveries of modern physics, into whose findings we need not enter here.

On the Question of Creation of the Universe

All descriptions concerning the origin or creation of the universe are intended to clarify philosophical and psychological situations which arise due to an inborn belief that the world must have an origin, and must have a creator. This is a hypothesis which cannot itself be explained by any rational process of investigation. Why should it be necessary for the world to have a creator outside itself? Why should anyone create a problem and then try to find a solution for it? Has anyone seen God creating the world? But how is it that people everywhere speak of the creation of the world as if they have witnessed God working at the beginning of things. The circumstance actually involves two facets, namely, (a) belief in the word of the Scripture, which narrates the story of creation by God; (b) a necessity felt by inductive logic and the natural manner of human thinking that everything that is visible must have come from somewhere and that all things

must have been made by someone as a cause preceding an effect.

Taking the first issue, namely, the descriptions and explanations in the Scriptures, it is no doubt true that the Scripture of every religion, except those that do not bring in a God into the picture, speaks of God creating the world out of His own Will, not because He has a desire but it is His Nature automatically operating, as the sun shedding light without any desire to do the work of shining. Firstly, therefore, it has to be accepted that God creating the universe does not imply an action like some human being working, because God is timeless Being, and no action is conceivable where time is absent. Hence it is fallacious to take the creation theory literally, as if God is some large man thinking and working like man only. Creation is like the four-dimensional realm of modern physics appearing as a three-dimensional world of empirical experience. And no scientist will say that four-dimensional existence has 'created' the three-dimensional world. The electrons or the atoms do not "create" the stone of which they are the internal constituents. This would land us on the question: Is the world really there? For, if a stone is really there, it should be visible to the microscope which sees only a pressure of electromagnetic force commensurate with the entire structure of the universe. In this light, the world and God would be two names for one and the same thing, and any question regarding creation by God would fundamentally lack scientific basis.

The renowned philosopher, Acharya Sankara, says that theories of creation are not intended to describe an actual historical process of the world coming from God, as if God started manufacturing things in some ancient time, but that these stories of the procession of effects from God at the top are indicative of a higher truth that God alone is, inasmuch as the logical relationship between effect and cause negatives any difference between the two, thus merging the effect in the cause, that is to say, leaving God alone to Himself with no world whatsoever as a product externally created.

The infinity and the omnipresence of God, which is accepted by everyone, precludes the possibility of a world being there outside God. An appearance of a reality cannot be regarded as something created by reality. Hence all problems arising in respect of desire, playfulness, constraint and the like on the part of God, get ruled out and the question contradicts itself, since the necessity for the world to have a cause outside it is a hypothesis characteristic of the three-dimensional way of human thinking in which it is shackled.

On the Question of Pain and Suffering to Created Beings

The idea of pleasure and pain is a product of what may be called parochial thinking, without the consciousness of any reference which one may have with other factors that range beyond human perception. Pleasure and pain do not exist as if they are things hanging somewhere in space. These are names given to conditions of experience undergone by a particular degree of consciousness when the atmosphere which it regards as existing external to itself in space and time is either reconcilable or irreconcilable with its present condition. It is a pain for a human being to be dipped within the bowels of the cold waters of the Ganga, but a delight to the fish swimming within it pleasantly. Man never thinks the same thought throughout his life. Today's pleasure is tomorrow's sorrow. These facts are not unknown in human history. Apart from the psychological considerations, there is a scientific and a metaphysical error in thinking that pleasure and pain are existent in objects, as it were. A cool breeze in summer is pleasant, and the same thing is unpleasant in winter. A fourth or fifth cup of pleasant milk causes nausea. The rich people of the world know the sorrow caused by their wealth. People who crave for having children know the troubles of family life and social tension. Why go so far? Since pleasure and pain are conditions of particular circumstances of individualities in relation to reality outside, any excessive

harping on the tune of life's sufferings may require a more impartial adjudication.

The horror of the big fish swallowing the smaller ones and the apparent unjustifiability behind the survival of the strongest, or, we may say, the fittest, is inseparable from the basic psychological defect which Alfred North Whitehead calls "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness," which means to say that human judgements of what look like local events and occurrences do not take into consideration their vaster relationship to the universe as a whole, such that every event is a universal event, and it is not the big fish that swallows the smaller one but the evolutionary impulse of the cosmos adjusting itself in terms of its internal components for a purpose that transcends an existing situation. Evolution is not a pain, even as no one regards as pain the growth of a child into a mature genius. The whole difficulty arises because of the thought that God is outside the universe and handles things as a carpenter operates on his tools. This unfortunate weakness of human thought raises the frightful bogey of questions which have as much reality and meaning as its own intrinsic worth. Evolution is not for anybody's pain or pleasure, because, there is no "anybody" outside the process of evolution. The Infinite seems to proceed from the Infinite, and return to the Infinite, all which can suggest nothing more than that the Infinite is just what it is.

The Process of Action and Reaction

If we insist on finding a reason behind the sufferings of life, whatever be their nature and detail, it has to be accepted that the justice of the universe which is a single organism cannot permit illogical and, therefore, unjust occurrences within its internal constitution. Life in the world is seen to be a little complicated by the operation of the law of action and reaction, called Karma. This is a principle according to which every action produces an effect with an equal force. Bondage is considered to be the reaction produced by actions which defy the fact of the unitary structure of the cosmos of which

all individuals are inseparable parts. This principle of reaction to action arises only when this intrinsic inseparable connection of the individual with the cosmos is forgotten and the former indulges in attitudes or actions with the false notion that it is an independent actor or doer, consequently inviting the nemesis of reaction. The universe is the shadow cast by the wishes of its contents, and it is what these wishes are and what they sweep away from infinite existence with the winds of the forces moving towards their fulfilment. Since the acceptance of the fact of creation implies the fact of pleasure and pain in life and suggests a cause behind the effect, it would follow that there are endless causes behind endless effects moving in a cyclic fashion, which system operating in the time-bound world is called by different names by the religions of the world; and the Indian tradition calculates this cycle of an endless revolution by its concept of the Yugas or temporal ages known as Krita, Treta, Dvapara and Kali, in the descending order of knowledge and virtue. All this would explain why no man tied down to the present cycle alone can know why anyone has any particular experience, pleasurable or miserable, since the causes behind effects visible in the present cycle can originate from earlier cycles, and therefore it cannot be said that there is an undeserved pleasure or an undeserved suffering. Nothing can come from nothing, is indeed sound logic.

The Evolution of Life

There is no precise saying as to when a lower species evolves into the higher one. Since personal agency in action cannot be attributed to sub-human species, all evolution below the human level is supposed to be a spontaneous fulfilment of the vast purpose of Nature. The progress of the sub-human organism, or the rise from the lower condition of the soul to the higher, is considered automatic as a spontaneous action of the universal Nature in the case of all beings who are free from the egoism of personal agency in action. Personal effort comes into relief only at the human level wherein consciousness becomes self-consciousness, an

individual affirmative urge, whereby this centre of affirmation is severed from the supporting hand of the universal Nature and self-effort on the part of one's own individual self becomes the well-known drudgery of life. The animal nature when it rises to the human level will, in the natural course of things, take higher births, gradually, provided right thinking harmonious with the total universe motivates its thought and action. The sufferings of animals, as with sufferings of human beings, in whatever way they be called, are already touched upon in their essential causational circumstances, in what we have considered already above in a different context. There can be no devil engaged in inflicting sorrows on anyone, even as there cannot be a world external to the omnipresent reality. Human thought has to learn a little of the art of the vision of things by superhuman insight before whose glowing radiance the world will shed its cloak of all darkness and misfortune.

The Vedas, Epics and Puranas

The Epics and Puranas are there only to dilate upon the secret hints and hidden truths embedded in the body of the Vedas. The gospel of the Vedas does not contradict the Epics and the Puranas. People who speak of a difference herein are mostly those who have not made a thorough and entire study of either the Vedas or the Epics and Puranas in their true spirit. The hells and heavens of the Puranas are gradations or degrees of expression of reality, all which is corroborated in the Vedas in a more concise and pithy form. The meaning of the Vedas is too hard for the ordinary mind to grasp, and a mere grammatical or linguistic translation of them cannot be said to convey their real message. The Vedas are supposed to be interpreted from the subjective, the objective as well as the universal points of view and not merely as bodies of words which have just a dictionary meaning. The Epics and Puranas are elaborations of truths which are already embodied in the Vedas in a loftier form.

The Question of God and Satan

What is known as Satan may be regarded as the centrifugal urge of the cosmos, an impulse to move away from the centre to the periphery or the outer circumference as space, time and objects. God is the Centre of the Universe, and everything that is divine, the opposite of the so-called Satan, is the centripetal urge, an impulse that directs itself towards the Centre of the Universe. Neither God nor Satan can be viewed anthropomorphically. But man has an inveterate habit of converting God into a widespread man and visualise Satan as the quintessence of wickedness, again viewed as some person existing somewhere. Nothing of the kind is called for in the broad daylight of clearer thinking. Our earlier analyses above would be sufficient clarification of whatever one may think God is, Satan is, or their supposed relationship is. We are not puppets at the mercy of anyone, as we are integral parts of the universe; call this, if you would like, man's relationship to God. With this awakening, the idea of the devil, or Satan, vanishes into thin air.

Man's Duty

The duty of man, then, is an inward collaboration with the structure of all things, the law of the Universe; we may say the Universe is more a large area of a law operating than a thing, an object or substance. The terms Sattva, Rajas and Tamas imply the threefold condition of the constituents of the Universe, and the injunction to cultivate a tendency to Sattva is the highlighting of a requirement on the part of everyone to move towards larger dimensions of universality, that is to say, cosmical being. This naturally implies a rise from Tamas, or unconscious motivation and existence, and Rajas which is the impulse of consciousness to diversification and distraction of attention in a multitude of ways. Sattva is the integrated perspicacity of the total reality, or the wholeness of being, which is the final aim of all things and towards which it is that everyone, and everything, anywhere, seems to be eagerly moving inwardly as well as outwardly.