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THE CONTRIBUTION OF ADVAITA VEDANTA TO THE QUEST FOR AN EFFECTIVE REASSERTION OF THE ETERNAL

I

An occidental disease has infested the global surface of human affairs, and we must now ask ourselves if we shall allow it to permeate the vital organs of mankind, i.e., the great human traditions which sustain civilised activity on the surface. This disease, the empirical symptoms of which are rapidly becoming legion, from the gas chambers of Nazi Germany to the abortion clinics and snipers' bullets which assail us today, appears to be primarily a disease of the mind. Fostered in the occident, this disease entails a break with the classical attitude of the occident. Platonic, Aristotelian and Judeo-Christian, the occident has been traditionally humble in the presence of the eternal—which does not change, and is therefore the constant which makes ethical activity itself possible. I would like to suggest that it is precisely the vision of the eternal which is in danger of being destroyed in the occident, and that this is due to a new attitude or state of mind, which arises from the modern way of thinking about human freedom and creativity, the rights of the individual human being, and the nature of human happiness.

In classical, occidental thought, ethics was eudaemonistic, i.e., concerned with the achievement of happiness. Furthermore, human happiness meant the possession of the eternal. Happiness for man was not something relative, dependent upon individual taste and phenomenal circumstances. Human happiness was based upon man's participation in his own eternal idea, that rationally discernible essence which is the decree of the Judeo-Christian God. It was man's destiny, the *telos* of his preordained nature, to fulfill himself in the joyful possession of his own eternity.

Immanuel Kant, however, separated human nature from a rationally discernible essence. Fascinated with the *māyā* which was the empirical panorama of contemporary science, Kant abandoned happiness to the

realm of phenomena, and with it human nature. What man is by nature is not what his reason tells him he ought to be. Kant did not speak about the perfection of human nature through the intellect's *discovery* of man's true essence. Kant was not concerned with enabling man to participate in that eternal reality which is after all his true self, no matter how often man's presumption brings about his disorientation and misery; but rather, Kant was concerned with *creating* an essentially new man, a being different from that center of selfish craving which he perceived as the natural man. And what is most devastating, this creativity of human reason itself appears to be under the domination of Kant's understanding of nature – not merely human nature *per se*, but nature seen as the purpose of the whole and identified with providence itself. Although the universal acknowledgment of the categorical imperative is certainly what Kant desired most, it appears that he inadvertently sacrificed morality to the phenomenal flow of history, for God Himself was ostracised from eternity, becoming in effect the amoral principle behind the temporal succession of events:

Thanks be to Nature, then, for the incompatibility, for heartless competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess and to rule! Without them, all the excellent natural capacities of humanity would forever sleep, undeveloped. Man wishes concord; but Nature knows better what is good for the race; she wills discord. He wishes to live comfortably and pleasantly; Nature wills that he should be plunged from sloth and passive contentment into labor and trouble, in order that he may find means of extricating himself from them. The natural urges to this, the sources of unsociableness and mutual opposition from which so many evils arise, drive men to new exertions of their forces and thus to the manifold development of their capacities. They thereby perhaps show the ordering of a wise Creator and not the hand of an evil spirit, who bungled in his great work or spoiled it out of envy.¹

Perhaps Friedrich Nietzsche, more than any other thinker, clearly saw the implications of the Kantian view of nature and history. The classical,

1. Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," trans. by Lewis White Beck, in *On History*, ed. by Lewis White Beck, The Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1963), p. 16.

For a revealing account of Kant's views on nature and history, also see in the same collection his "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" and "Perpetual Peace" (especially the first supplement).

occidental vision of the eternal was abandoned. Radical historicism and ethical relativism triumphed. And since man himself lacks an enduring essence, men are no longer equal. Man becomes a bridge to the overman. All men were once equal before God, but we have all heard what Zarathustra has proclaimed:

Before God! But now this god has died. You higher men, this god was your greatest danger. It is only since he lies in his tomb that you have been resurrected. Only now the great noon comes; only now the higher man becomes – lord.

Have you understood this word, O my brothers? You are startled? Do your hearts become giddy? Does the abyss yawn before you? Does the hellhound howl at you? Well, then, you higher men! Only now is the mountain of man's future in labor. God died: now we want the overman to live.²

And who is the overman? We have all heard Zarathustra's reply, by way of contrasting the overman with the traditional, self immolating Messiah of the occident:

Man must become better and more evil" – thus / teach. The greatest evil is necessary for the overman's best. It may have been good for that preacher of the little people that he suffered and tried to bear man's sin. But I rejoice over great sin as my great consolation.³

A mere glance at the historical phenomena of the twentieth century sufficiently reveals the diseased attitude of the modern mind. The emphasis on individual autonomy and creativity blossomed into the anarchic struggle of individual wills in the social and political arenas. For it is clear that in lacking an eternal foundation upon which to build, modern contractual theory, by upholding the primacy of individual rights, has engendered the identification of human happiness with an egoistic satisfaction devoid of any specific orientation or limit – witness the plight of the modern consumer!

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann, The Viking Portable Library (New York: The Viking Press), pp. 398-399.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 400.

Certainly the denial of an absolute norm has always plagued mankind. However, antiquity lacked the great vehicle which is today's technology. Without denying the liberating potential of man's manipulation of phenomena, it appears that modern technology has actually enslaved the individual human being. Through his technology modern man advances a view of human happiness which is based on the individual's domination of phenomena and *vice versa*, rather than on his liberation through something greater and more fulfilling than either himself or the empirical objects he encounters. Because of technology the modern attitude of the occidental mind has successfully infested the global skin of our common humanity.

If the diagnosis is correct, the ethical problem of modernity is due to a current attitude of the occidental mind carried by technology, and the cure can only come from a healthy mental state injected through the same technology. If a healthy mental state is to be found, it is in the great civilising traditions of mankind. Ancient attitudes have in fact sustained human interaction, and it is only logical that we explore these reservoirs of stability. Since the disease is occidental, the only permanent cure might be a purification of modern occidental culture through the reassertion of classical, occidental values, those values which are after all least alien to the occidental mind. However, the civilising values of our world have this much in common, they call men out of themselves by proclaiming that there is something more worthy of attention. And in view of the global penetration of the occidental disease, the quest for a truly effective reassertion of the eternal foundation of ethical activity must acknowledge all contributions, for these are the cries of the vital organs of civilisation proclaiming their unwillingness to die. Civilisation, if it is to endure, must be founded on something more permanent than the contractual guarantee that the capriciousness of freely creating individuals will not be tampered with. Ethical activity must be based on that which cannot be taken away. Ethics must have an eternal foundation, and one civilising tradition which has boldly asserted this is Advaita Vedānta.

II

The contribution of Advaita Vedānta is especially relevant, because it is exclusively concerned with establishing the nature of reality. Advaita Vedānta offers us a penetrating ontology, and without necessarily accepting its disavowal of many beings, one is nevertheless compelled to acknowledge its accurate disclosure of the nature of being itself, as that which is precise-

ly because it is *eternally* what it is and nothing else. It is not through ethics *per se*, but through metaphysics that Advaita Vedānta proclaims the eternal foundation of ethical activity. For Advaita Vedānta ethics is only the multiple reflection in the phenomenal realm of the eternal and undivided light of being itself. And it is precisely the reassertion of the eternal which is being sought.

In a brief essay on ethics in Advaita Vedānta, M. Hiriyanna points out that the ethical implications of Advaita are both negative and positive.⁴ Hiriyanna points out that the negative implication concerns the significance of the doctrine of *māyā* from the standpoint of the *jīva*, i.e., its importance for the perspective of the *jīva* not having yet attained the realisation of its true identity in the state of *mokṣa*. The positive, ethical implication of Advaita concerns the identification of the *jīva* with Brahman. It is concerned with the nature of *mokṣa*, and as we shall see from Hiriyanna and other sources, it appears that the practical aspects of *mokṣa* are most clearly discernible in the state of *jīvanmukti*. It is the purpose of the positive implication to remove the negative implication, and although the discussion takes place in an ethical and therefore anthropological framework, it is always concerned with metaphysics. The negative, ethical implication of Advaita has its origin in the negation of being, and the positive, ethical implication has its origin in the affirmation of being and what being necessarily entails. However, it is true that Advaita Vedānta affirms the eternal nature of man.

In no uncertain terms, Śaṅkara himself condemns that creation of *avidyā* which is *māyā* or the superimposition of action or change on the eternal and unchanging Ātman. In his commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, Śaṅkara proclaims that this superimposition is evil:

This manifested universe, consisting of means and ends, was in an undifferentiated state before its manifestation. That relative universe, without beginning and end like the seed and the sprout etc., created by ignorance and consisting in a superimposition of action, its factors and its results on the Self, is an evil.⁵

4. See M. Hiriyanna, "The Ethics of Advaita," in *Popular Essays in Indian Philosophy* (Mysore: The Wesley Press, 1952), pp. 83-87.

5. Swami Mādhavananda, trans., *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya* (India: The Modern Art Press, 1950), p. 5.

It does not appear to be the case that Śaṅkara is saying that the phenomenal *per se* is evil, but rather that the super-imposition of the phenomenal on the Ātman is evil. This form of idolatry Śaṅkara condemns. In this sense *māyā* is not the truth. It is the very negation of being itself. *Māyā*, created by ignorance or *avidyā*, is the obscuration of knowledge or *vidyā*, which is the unveiling of being or truth. *Māyā* is therefore in this sense evil, if evil is to be understood as the denial, and by intention the destruction of what is. The ethical implication of this metaphysical doctrine is decidedly negative, and it concerns the significance of this doctrine from the standpoint of the *jīva*. Through *avidyā* and the superimposition of change on the eternal Self, the *jīva* fails to perceive its true nature or essence. And R. Balasubramanian remarks, in an excellent study of Advaita Vedānta based upon the work of Maṅḍana Mīśra:

According to Advaita, the realization of the true nature of the Self is release. The Self or Brahman which is non-dual is of the nature of knowledge, bliss, and existence. It is ever-free; it is of the nature of eternal release. But its real nature is missed due to *avidyā*. The *jīva* is Brahman itself. It is on account of the limiting adjuncts that it appears to be different from it. Birth and death, finitude and limitation, do not belong to it, for it is of the nature of Brahman which is unborn and homogeneous, infinite and immutable; but they pertain to the psycho-physical complexes, which cause finitude and limitation and which are, therefore, not-Self and non-real. Attachment to the non-real is responsible for desire, sorrow, and suffering. And the root cause of all these is *avidyā* which obscures the real nature of the *jīva*.⁶

And Hiriyanna, distinguishing between the purely metaphysical or cosmological significance of the doctrine of *māyā* and its ethical or anthropological significance from the standpoint of the *jīva*, lucidly exposes the practical implication of this doctrine:

... the direct or immediate cause of operative delusion is not *Māyā* in its aspect of veiling the ultimate truth from man or of giving rise to his environment, whether social or

6. R. Balasubramanian, *Advaita Vedānta*, No. 23 of Madras University Philosophical Series, ed. by Dr. V.A. Devasenapathi (India: At Avvai Achukkoodam, 1976), p. 258.

physical, but only in its aspect of imposing on him the egoistic feeling, with its implication of the contrast of 'I' and 'You'. If thus the feeling of egoism be the source of all evil or, to state the same in different words, if selfishness be sin, it follows that he who desires to free himself from it should do his utmost to rise above that feeling by renouncing all private or personal interests. This is the first practical lesson we have to draw from the conception of *Māyā*.⁷

Advaita Vedānta teaches that *avidyā* and *māyā* are not indicative of man's nature. And it is significant that *māyā* does not merely denote the superimposition of phenomenal multiplicity on the one and eternal Self, but as Hiriyanna has clearly stated, *māyā* also implies the feeling of egoism or selfishness. Advaita, contrary to the perception of the modern, occidental Kantian, maintains that the center of selfish craving is not the natural man. Furthermore, Advaita does not abandon happiness to the realm of phenomena. Blaming misery on *avidyā*, Advaita teaches that bliss is an integral element in man's eternal nature. And as we shall see, Advaita also teaches that what is best in man is something to be discovered, awakened to or unveiled, for it is nothing other than man's eternal essence. For Advaita Vedānta the moral man is not something to be created. We have already seen that such a creation of human reason apparently leads to Nietzsche's overman, rather than to the ardent admirer of Kant's categorical imperative.

The positive, ethical implication of the metaphysics of Advaita concerns the nature of being itself. Reality is without duality for Advaita. The one, unchanging and eternal reality is Brahman (the multiplicity of phenomena being classified as neither real nor unreal, and ultimately sublated in the face of the enduring Brahman). This one is being itself, for as it is stated in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*: "In the beginning, my dear, this was Being alone, one only without a second."⁸ Advaita teaches that the nature of Brahman is being (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*) and bliss (*ānanda*), and that Brahman is identical with the essence of man, which is the eternal *Ātman*.

7. Hiriyanna, "The Ethics of Advaita," p. 85.

8. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI. 2. 1.; English trans.: *The Principal Upaniṣads*, ed. and trans. by S. Radhakrishnan, Muirhead Library of Philosophy, ed. by H.D. Lewis (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1974), pp. 447-448.

In his *Brahmasiddhi*, Maṇḍana Miśra notes seven different views of the relation between *karma* and knowledge, of which Maṇḍana accepts only two.⁹ He accepts the view that the *karma* prescribed in the ritualistic section of the *Veda* is bi-functional, in the sense that the *karma* performed can lead to a merely phenomenal result as well as to the realisation of the Ātman. This is known as the principle of *samyoga-pṛthaktva*, where two are said to be contained in oneness.¹⁰ Maṇḍana also accepts the view that *karma* can be a means of purification for the realisation of the Ātman, and he refers to the *Vedānta-Sūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa itself for support.¹¹

What is most important in the context of this essay, however, is that the realisation of the Ātman (i.e., awakening to the fact that the *jīva* is identical with Brahman) is for Maṇḍana simply the discovery of what already is. The realisation of the Ātman is nothing other than the unveiling of man's true nature or essence, and this *vidyā* is not the creature of *karma*. *Karma* can only aid in the removal of those tainted veils which obscure the vision of what eternally is:

If release signifies the realization of one's real nature, how can it be said to be originated or brought into being? We can throw light on this question by considering an example. The dirt which has settled upon the cloth does not allow it to appear in its white colour. When it is removed, the cloth shines in its original colour, and we say, 'The cloth has *become* white.' Here there is no origination of a new colour. The cloth was white even earlier. But still we say that it has become white as if it was not white previously. In the same way, the knower of the truth gives up the notion of the identity of the Self with the body, etc., and becomes Brahman himself.¹²

The stress on discovering – on the realisation of an eternal condition – is so evident that Maṇḍana even refutes the view that *mokṣa* entails the loss of individual identity, by the absorption of the *jīva* into Brahman:

Even this view of release cannot stand examination. It proceeds on the wrong assumption that the *jīva* and Brahman are different,

9. See Balasubramanian, *Advaita Vedānta*, p. 219.

10. See *ibid.*, pp. 245–247.

11. See *ibid.*, pp. 247–248.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

while they are not. We can talk about the rivers which flow into the sea becoming one with it, when they merge in it, or the different juices losing their identity in the one essence to which they are reduced, since the two – the rivers and the sea, or the different juices and honey – are different. But Brahman is not different from the *jīva*, but is identical with it. If they are different, we can talk about the latter merging in the former and losing its identity. Since they are non-different, the very idea of the one merging in the other is meaningless.¹³

Śaṅkara, in his commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtra*, offers a profound insight into the nature of discovery, as opposed to creativity, in the realisation that the *jīva* and Brahman are identical. Succinctly, Śaṅkara states: "... release is a fruit in so far only as it is a cessation of all bondage, not as implying the accession of something new."¹⁴ The nature of release or *mokṣa* is such that it is not an effect – what is in fact brought about is only the removal of an impediment.

The significance of this discovery, awakening to or unveiling for ethical activity is immense. However, it is not a rational ethics in the Kantian sense which the metaphysics of Advaita implies. It is not the categorical imperative, severed as it is from the ontological depths of man's eternal and joyful essence, with which Advaita is concerned. The eternal nature of man shines forth in the *jīvanmukta*, i.e., one who has realised that the *jīva* and Brahman are identical, while yet in the embodied state. Hirianna, in an excellent lecture entitled "The Quest after Perfection," has stated that "...conscious effort must disappear in the case of goodness, and moral action must become spontaneous and joyful."¹⁵ No statement could be more accurate concerning the condition of the *jīvanmukta*. It is not the imperative or duty which prescribes the ethical behaviour of the *jīvanmukta*, for he has transcended all personal injunctions:

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 254–255.

14. *Vedānta Sūtra* IV, 4:4; English trans.: *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa with the Commentary by Śaṅkara*, trans. by George Thibaut, Part II; Vol. XXXVIII of *The Sacred Books of the East*, ed. by F. Max Müller (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), p. 406.

15. Hirianna, "The Quest after Perfection," in *The Quest after Perfection* (Mysore: The Wesley Press, 1962), p. 55.

A person that has attained *jivanmukti* does not abandon activity if, indeed, it is possible for anybody to do so; but the activity becomes wholly impersonal, and he responds to presented situations without relating them to himself. It is this transcending of all subjective or personal valuation which is the significance of the Upanishadic saying [*Tait. Up.* II. 9.] that a knower is not troubled by thoughts like 'Have I not done the right?' or 'Have I done the wrong?' It means that he rises above the moods of self-approbation and self-condemnation, and not that he ceases from acting. The freed or perfected man thus does not lead a passive life. Nor is his attitude towards the world one of pessimistic fatalism, as is too commonly assumed. That is clear from our characterisation of *mokṣa* as a state of supreme bliss; and there are many passages, like the song of the soul's unity in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (III. x), which revel in describing the peaceful state of the knower. There are again *saṁnyāsins*, still among us, who are the embodiment not only of loving kindness for all, but also of detached joy of which the serene smile that ever plays on their lips is a sure sign.¹⁶

And M.K. Venkatarama Iyer, in his book on Advaita Vedānta from the viewpoint of Śaṅkara, writes concerning the state of one who has attained knowledge or *jñāna*:

As a consequence of this enlightenment one may work for the good of others out of love and compassion. Duty as such, however, will cease to bind him. But he will not shut himself up in an ivory tower and become indifferent to the fortunes of his fellowmen. On the other hand love will become the law of his life and he will spontaneously lend a helping hand to others who are in need of it. Actuated not by pity or condescension but by pure love, he will engage in service. This kind of spontaneous and self-losing service rises clean above the level of ordinary morality. It is born of a new vision.¹⁷

And this "new vision" is none other than the ontological foundation of ethical activity itself, i.e., the enduring consciousness of the eternal Ātman, which Advaita identifies with being itself.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

17. M.K. Venkatarama Iyer, *Advaita Vedānta According to Śaṅkara* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1964), p. 183.

III

The eternal is that which does not change and can therefore serve as the constant which makes ethical activity possible. The radical historicism and ethical relativism of modernity denies the eternal. It claims that man has no permanent nature, that nothing endures. But can morality be based on an absolute norm? What about the special circumstance or situation? The eternal does not claim to be an absolute law, an abstract maxim of human reason which must be universally binding. Kant's categorical imperative claims to be that, but ethical activity based on the eternal claims to be something other. As in the case of Advaita Vedānta, it is the ontological formulation of ethical activity which is the eternal standard. It is the eternal nature or essence of man which is the governing norm. Morality is not the command which compels, but the spontaneous activity of a man who has realised his true nature. And this spontaneity is above the law, it is the truly human, and necessarily unique response in every new situation. And yet it is constant, allowing the eternal to shine forth, for in the absence of egoism or selfishness, man's enduring nature exhibits being itself. No longer paying any attention to the self, the saint or *jivanmukta* no longer negates or denies the whole of being. Such a one is no longer a threat, like Nietzsche's overman; but rather, such a person is more like the traditional, self immolating Messiah of the occident, one who affirms and makes others happy, even those whom Nietzsche so scornfully refers to as the "little people."¹⁸

18. See *supra*, p. 389.