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The Scriptural Dilemma

The aim of all Scripture is to reveal the ultimate unity which lies hidden within the whole of existence. This means that there is a basic structure or ground upon which both objective and subjective being is based. Reality is a whole, through and through. Scripture reveals this unity by pointing towards that which is: the most comprehensive, the most immediate, the simplest, and of the greatest experiential content.

Scripture is language of a special sort. It is logically odd.¹ It is distinctive and peculiar. It is vague and poetical. It is metaphorical and paradoxical. And, it is problematical. It creates the horns of a dilemma. Either its subject-matter is unthinkable and unknowable or else it is useless jargon which fails to reach the heights for which it was originally propounded. Simply put, it uses ordinary words of day-to-day discourse in an extraordinary way. For example, when Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day",² it does not mean that God has a physical body with which he moves along the footpaths. Nor does the scriptural statement, "It thought, may I be many, may I grow forth", mean that It (Brahman) thinks in the familiar sense of the word.³

What is the justification for this special use of ordinary language? If the words which are applied to the objects of scriptural language do not have the same meaning as when applied to the objects of ordinary day-to-day language, then the exact nature of those objects becomes very difficult to define. Such statements will become unthinkable and unknowable for no intelligible content can be assigned to them. If this horn of the dilemma is asserted, one will find agnosticism approaching

1. Bishop Durham suggested that the questions that concern us most demand the oddest kind of language.

2. *Genesis* 3:8.

3. *Tat aikṣata bahu syām prajāyeyeti* Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6. 2. 2.

closer and closer. And, on the other hand, if one asserts existence and causality to the objects of religious language in the manner in which they are asserted of ordinary language objects, then such terms become redundant and unnecessary. As the horn of similarity is emphasized, the defect of anthropomorphism approaches nearer and nearer. "Whether we set out from human language with the intention of talking about God, or whether we set out from the reality of God in order to discover how he can be expressed in human language, we might come to an impassable gulf."⁴

Thus we are presented with a serious dilemma. How does Scripture derive its use from ordinary mundane language? Until this problem is solved, the exact meaning which Scripture asserts will remain vague and problematical. If Scripture consists of assertions of facts, then such assertions may be meaningless. This would be due to the unverifiable nature in terms of sense-experience of the objects which scriptural language points towards. And alternatively, to say that Scripture is a set of metaphors and symbols sheds no light on the problem. The question remains as to what the metaphors and symbols refer to . . . The "metaphors must have translatability into non-metaphorical meanings. Else, they become meaningless and arbitrary because non-experiential terms can never be understood."⁵ According to Indian philosophy, the secondary meaning of a word [*lakṣyārtha*] is necessarily connected with its primary meaning [*mukhyārtha*] and operates only when the literal sense is unintelligible. All words have their own explicit, primary meaning which is directly conveyed by the words themselves. The secondary meaning is resorted to only when the primary meaning does not do full justice to the context. However, it must be noted that even when the secondary meaning is understood, the primary sense of the word is never forgotten. Thus the special extension of the primary sense of the word must always have its justification only in the context of the relevant situation, and with direct reference to the primary meaning. As regards the Scriptural language, usually those words which function in both an ordinary mundane context and a religious context, primarily signify a secular meaning. Ordinarily it is this secular meaning which developed first and which determines the common definition of the word. When such a word is then employed

4. John Macquarrie, *God-Talk* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1967).

5. P. K. Sundaram, "Advaita and the Problem of Religious Language" in *Voice of Samanvāya* Vol. IV (March, 1980), p. 93.

in Scriptural language, its meaning is an adaptation of the primary secular meaning. And herein lies the problem. The objects of religious language are not experienced through the senses and thus, how to establish that the metaphorical meaning is necessarily connected to the non-metaphorical meaning? How to bridge this seeming gap between ordinary human language and Scriptural language? It appears that whether one begins from the common, mundane empirical side or whether one begins from the exalted, incomparable divine side, an unbridgeable gap remains. Does there exist a bridge which can withstand the challenge posed by this dilemma?

The problem of the meaningfulness of Scriptural statements is by no means a contemporary phenomenon. It has attracted the attention of philosophers, both in the East and in the West, throughout the ages. Over two thousand years ago Plato wrote:

The father and maker of all this universe is past finding out; and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible . . . If, then, Socrates, amid the many opinions about the gods . . . we are not able to give notions which are altogether and in every respect exact and consistent with one another, do not be surprised. Enough, if we adduce probabilities as likely as any others.⁶

And even prior to Plato, it was said in the Upaniṣads:

The eye does not go there, nor speech, nor mind. We do not know (Brahman to be such and such); hence we are not aware of any process of instructing about it. That (Brahman) is surely different from the known; and, again, it is above the unknown. That which is not uttered by speech that by which speech is revealed, know that alone to be Brahman, and not what people worship as an object.⁷

If this subject-matter of the Scripture is indeed ineffable, then perhaps Saint Augustine was correct in saying, we speak of God "not in order to say something, but in order not to remain silent."⁸ Like-

6. Plato, "Timaeus I", in *The Dialogues of Plato*, tr. by B. Jowett, (New York: Random House, 1937), vol. II, p. 13.

7. *Kena Upaniṣad* I. 3-5.

8. Augustine: "to Simplician:" *On Various Questions* II. 2. 1.

wise, Śaṅkara in his *Brahma-sūtra bhāṣya*, refers to the Scriptural passage wherein Vāṣkalin questions Bāhva about Brahman. Three times Vāṣkalin puts forth his question and three times Bāhva remains silent. Finally in frustration Vāṣkalin raises his voice and demands an answer. Gently Bāhva replies, "I am teaching you, indeed, but you do not understand. Silent is the self."⁹

A classic paradigm to throw light upon this problem is the famous Yājñavalkya-Gārgī debate in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. Gārgī has put Yājñavalkya between the horns of a dilemma. She asked him to explain the nature of Brahman. If he explains, he will be guilty of a contradiction for he has already declared that Brahman is unexplainable. And yet, if he doesn't explain It, he will be guilty of the charge of noncomprehension. To escape this dilemma, Yājñavalkya gives the 'not-this, not-this' [*neti-neti*] reply and qualifies it by saying that this is not his opinion but what the knowers of Brahman have said.¹⁰

Philosophers in the Western world have long been struggling with the problems created by Scriptural statements. Basically these problems fall into one of two areas. Scriptural language may be defined as either: 'descriptive' or 'prescriptive'. If it is descriptive, to what does it refer, and how? If it is prescriptive, what is the function which it is to fulfil, and how? Or, another way of asking about the nature of Scriptural statements is to enquire whether they are cognitive (assertions of fact) or non-cognitive (non-assertive statements). The question may be asked whether Scriptural statements purport to be factual, formal and verifiable, or non-factual, pictorial, imaginative, emotive and non-verifiable. The cognitive approach demands factual meaningfulness and verifiability (or at least probability) while a non-cognitive approach is concerned with the particular function or use of a statement.

Ingrained with the fundamental religious assertions is a belief that they are factual and significant. In the 1920s, a philosophical movement known as Logical Positivism questioned the verifiability of religious language. Before asking whether a proposition is true or false,

9. Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya*, two parts, trans. George Thibaut (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1890 and 1896), III. 2. 17. (*brāmah khalu tvam tu na vijānāsi, upaśānto'yam ātmā*).

10. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III. 8. 8.

they proposed that one must first determine whether it is meaningful or not. In order for a proposition to be termed meaningful, that is factual and cognitive, it must be verifiable (at least in principle). A. J. Ayer said :

We say that a sentence is factually significant to a given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions to accept the proposition as being true or reject it as being false.¹¹

Thus, for the Logical Positivists, truth and falsity rest upon empirical observation.

By applying this principle to Scriptural statements, Ayer concluded that they are pseudo-concepts and factually meaningless.

The theist . . . may believe that his experiences are cognitive experiences, but, unless he can formulate his 'knowledge' in propositions that are empirically verifiable, we may be sure that he is deceiving himself. It follows that those philosophers who fill their books with assertions that they intuitively 'know' this or that . . . religious 'truth' are merely providing material for the psycho-analyst.¹²

He says, those "statements . . . to which no empirical observation could possibly be relevant, are ruled out as factually meaningless. The emphasis here is on the word 'factually'. It is not denied that language has other uses besides that of imparting factual information."¹³ But it is a mistake to hold that Scriptural language factually informs and is literally true in the same way as statements about the ordinary mundane empirical world are true and factual.

Ayer believes, much like Hume before him, that this empiricist criterion is an adequate safeguard against empty-talk in philosophy. Scriptural language, which as first glance seems so informative, turns out to be meaningless jargon at the worst and futile struggles to say the logically impossible at the best.

11. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, (London: Gollancz, second ed., 1946).

12. *Ibid.* p. 120.

13. A. J. Ayer, *Revolution in Philosophy*, (London: Macmillan, 1956).

To escape from the horns of the dilemma, Scripture is in need of a radical transvaluation. Instead of appearing as a seemingly mass of meaningless jargon, Scripture is really a meaningful means of communication of the highest import. How is this? Scripture concerns individuals, here and now, and not a God above and beyond. It refers to that which is immediately evident and immanently present. Even granting that all language as language is inherently inadequate to express the inexpressible, still Scriptural language has the unique character of being a report of the supreme Reality and of those who have had a direct experience of it. And, moreover, a second unique feature of the Scripture is that it possesses a wonderful power or ability to awaken this direct experience of the Reality. Just as a nightmare possesses the ability to awaken a sleeping individual more than any other type of dream, so do Scriptural statements possess the ability to rekindle a certain type of experience more than any other kind of language.

Every religious scripture is interested in making the greatest common being the supreme Reality. And this great being of metaphysics is not a mere meaningless jargon with no empirical reference. It has an immediate reference to the very depths of one's being; to the Being of all beings, and thus it is the most empirical of all. More than any other language, Scripture refers to the radical roots of one's being and thus it has an immediate relevance to each and every individual's life as well.

The problem of Scriptural statements is plainly visible for all to observe. The Reality is ever-present and yet one does not realize it. The purpose of Scripture is to kindle an awakening to this ever-present established fact. This it does by utilizing the knowledge that appearances cannot appear independently of a reality which upholds them. The Reality is a universal fact of life and an ever-present reality to each individual therein. Though it cannot be captured by thought, all thought implies it and depends upon it. Though its nature is inexpressible, Scripture suggests it.¹⁴ It is spoken about though it cannot be adequately nor logically comprehended.¹⁵ It is not a mere concept, but is the only absolutely real. It is not a mere

14. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2. 1. (*lakṣyate, na tu ucyate*).

15. *Ibid.*, *Vedānta-Sūtras*, III, 2. 23.

nothing, a non-entity. "Even imagined things must have something to stand upon."¹⁶

What is the real? "Ultimate reality is such that it does not contradict itself; here is an absolute criterion."¹⁷ "That is real whose nature by which it is cognized, remains constant, and that is unreal, whose nature by which it is determined, varies."¹⁸ "Of the real there is no non-existence, and of the unreal, no existence."¹⁹ What is it that meets the requirements of these definitions? Being is that which refers to the essence of anything whatsoever. It should not be confused with any particular 'being', but is the very awareness to which everything else is an object. It is the reality which is a matter of direct experience for everyone. It is not possible to experience anything apart from the existent. A non-existent sense-datum is impossible. Thus all experience points towards that which is the basis of all else. And as such it is the most basic empirical fact common to all empirical facts. It is that which is immediately accessible in any and every experience. It can never be denied, for even the very denial of it is but an affirmation of it!²⁰

To say of the Reality that it 'exists' is a crude manner of talking as Paul Tillich would put it. "Existence, too, is a determinative description, a categorical experience as much as essence."²¹ Existence, in such a usage, is but a predicate of a substance. And that is not what is being suggested as the supreme Reality. The Scripture points not to a spatial-temporal idiom, but to that of which everything else is an object. It is not the greatest common factor nor an *a-priori* assumption. It is existential. It always is, under all circumstances. Any proof of it must presuppose it. And as any proof is an objectification of this presupposition, it will falsify instead of proving it.²²

16. *Ibid.*, III. 2. 22.

17. F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930).

18. Śaṅkara's commentary on Taittirīya Upaniṣad (satyam iti yad rūpena, yan niṣcitam tad rūpam na vyabhicarati tat satyam, yad rūpena yan niṣcitam tad rūpam)

19. *Bhagavad-gītā* II. 16. (nā'sato vidyate bhāvo nā'bhavo vidyate satah).

20. *Ibid.*, Vedānta-Sūtras, II, 3. 7.

21. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of Foundations* (Great Britain: Pelican Book, 1964).

22. *Ibid.*

No one says of himself 'I am not'; but only 'I am'. This reference is immediate. Though one does not normally enquire into what this 'I' is, it is the pure experience *par excellence*. It is without mediation. It is forever present and available though it is seldom, if ever, noticed. "I am that I am."²³ It is not a presupposition. It simply IS. Anyone who questions it must assume it in order to do the questioning. It is the most fundamental fact possible.

Being the most immediate, the simplest, and the most comprehensive, the purport of the Scripture is likewise self-luminous and self-established. It is not an entity which will be known objectively. It is not an 'other', out-there somewhere. "The farthest of the far is also the nearest of the near."²⁴ Thus the most ultimate turns out also to be the simplest. "The more God is in all things, the more He is outside them. The more He is within, the more without."²⁵

It is the nature of thought to first divide and then reassociate the constituents it has abstracted out of reality. Without doing this, thought cannot function. Its very nature is to deal in duality and without it, it would die of attrition. It needs a subject and an object and reality seems to encompass something beyond this. This inadequacy, which is inherent in thought, is the reason why thought cannot succeed in forming an idea of reality adequately. The fullness of reality thus seems to remain ineffable to thought. The mind operates within a space-time limitation. Being bound by space-time, thought cannot possess infinite extension nor eternal endurance nor independence of being. So it is that the most comprehensive and simplest, apparently gets lost among the manifold sensuous by-lanes of thought. The most real appears but a non-entity and a mere nothing hidden among the relative, ever-changing phantasmagoria of the world.

All Scriptures describe the supreme Reality as ineffable. "The Tao which can be named is not the true Tao."²⁶ When the Buddha, as well as Jesus, were asked about Reality, they both maintained a

23. *Exodus* 3. 14.

24. *Iṣa Upaniṣad* 5.

25. Meister Eckhart, in Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*, Fontana Books, 1958, p. 15.

26. Lao Tze, in S. Radhakrishnan's *Bhagavad Gītā*, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970), p. 21.

calm silence. However, though all words, all thoughts, and all conceptions fall short of the Reality, still whenever one denies something as unreal, this is done with reference to something real. It is an obvious fact that all phenomenal things change. But there must exist a supersensible reality as the ground of all that exists. This is because there is demanded the reality of something which does not need the support or help of anything else. Thus it is that there must be some reality which does not come to be or cease to exist. And it is upon this ground that the whole structure of thought, knowledge, and experience rests. This ground is the reality at the back of all things. It is self-evident and ever-present in all things. This one is so infinitely real that though it is ineffable, experience eloquently speaks of it in the austerity of silence.

We have been searching for a reality which is the subject-matter of the various Scriptures. All religions have set themselves the task of revealing this supreme Reality. This is the be-all and end-all of the Scripture. Without referring to any historical events, it is to be observed that all religions have posited a Reality which is the source and support of all existence. Each particular Scripture conceives this Reality as supremely independent. It is the goal and supreme value for all life. And this Reality must be within everyone and thus within everyone's reach. As all conceive of it as omnipresent, it is the most comprehensive, the most immediate, the simplest and of the greatest experiential content.

Nothing can be reduced further than the source and substratum. This is the bedrock, the most elementary and all-embracing foundation of all. Merest Being is found here. It is the self of everything that exists. It is so concretely real and immediate that a denial of it cannot be uttered without a contradiction. Its necessity is not merely that of an analytic proposition, but one which is immediate and self-evident. It is an existential truth, experienced by all.

Positively, this Universal Being may be expressed as, "All this is that Being only."²⁷ Negatively one could declare, "None of this is that Being."²⁸ The former conveys the mystic experience that the world is spiritual through and through. It suggests that there is nothing

27. *Sarvam khalu idam brahma.* cf. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad.*

28. *Neti-neti:* cf. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2. 3. 6.

over and above this supreme Reality. The *via negativa* is an attempt to avoid the danger which Kant pointed out of trying to know the noumenon in terms governing the phenomenon. The Reality is not a category nor within the causal scheme. Thought is inherently unsuited to embody the Reality. It is objectively oriented and functions only by division. Thus Eckhart said, "God is beyond knowledge." The Taittīriya Upaniṣad declared, "Whence words return along with the mind, not attaining It."²⁹ To discover this Universal Being, one must eliminate all particular limitations thereof: hence the value of the negative approach. It acts as a warning against the fallacy of objectification.

Being is eternally revealed and immediately manifested always. Yet to arrive at such knowledge, investigation is necessary. Thus the positive approach may be seen as a statement of the religious experience while the negative approach is the technique or methodological tool by which to bigger this experience. This technique is not unique to any particular religion, but is the common property of all.

Thus it is that the Scripture is an account of that Being which dwells in the inmost being of all things. Because man has the ability to be conscious of this, the Scripture concerns him directly and vitally. It is that which endures and is eternally imperishable. This Universal Being appears as embodied within the limited psycho-physical sheath. By a proper enquiry, each individual is capable of discovering this supreme Reality. So it is that the Scripture is a testimony to this ever-established, eternally existent Reality.

29. Taittīriya Upaniṣad II. 9: *yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha.*