

THE RATIONAL FOUNDATION OF ADVAITA DHARMA:

A Departure from Mimāṃsa

The following versicle is traditionally believed to contain the quintessence of Sankara-Vedanta : *Brahma satyam jaganmithyā, jivo brahmaiva nāparah* : Brahman alone is true, i.e., Brahman is the sole Reality; the world is *mithyā* or false; and man is not different from Brahman. Often the word *māyā* is substituted for *mithyā*; and then the popular translation would be : ' God alone exists, the whole world is a grand illusion, and man is non-different from God '. The moment the Advaita-Vedanta of Sri Sankara is exposed this way, it becomes the target of fierce attacks from the opponents; and it is the religio-ethical aspect of Sankara-Advaita that becomes the focus of the fiercest attacks from its adversaries. They argue : ' If only Brahman exists, and the whole world of men and beings is a mental fiction or a mirage, where is the rational foundation for any religion or ethics or morality ? Therefore, Sankara-Advaita digs the grave of all ethics and morality.' Even great thinkers like Albert Schweitzer and John McKenzie have argued on these lines.

Now the objections to the Ethical system of Sankara-Advaita stem chiefly from a two-fold source : his *Weltanschauung* and his 'identity-doctrine'. According to the critics, Sankara holds the world to be a sheer illusion (*māyā*) or *mithyā*; he maintains also an intransigent identity between man and God (*jivātman* and *Paramātman*). These twin doctrines, namely, the doctrine of world-illusion and the doctrine of man-God-identity, strike at the root of any concept of ethics and morality, contend the critics. Its adversaries assert further that even if Sankara *de facto* prescribes an ethico-religio-moral system, such a

system wholly lacks a rational basis and rests on illogical premises and shaky ground.

Against all these charges, I intend to establish the following fact: If Sankara's doctrines on the world and on man are properly understood, those doctrines far from being a stumbling block to ethics, afford the surest foundation for an ethico-religio-moral life. So, let us first examine his world-view.

I

Sankara's World-View

What does Sankara say about the existence of the world or universe? He does not discard or dismiss the world as a mere illusion or chimera or mirage. Right at the beginning of his *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* (Abb. hereafter BSB) Sri Sankara says that "this amazing universe has the Supreme Brahman for its cause, sustentation and end" (BSB 1.1.2). Sankara affirms in unmistakable terms that the universe has Brahman for its cause (BSB 2.1.14). The intelligent Brahman is the material and efficient cause of the world (BSB 2.1.37). Sri Sankara declares to the Samkhyans: "Look at this world of which the most ingenious workmen cannot even form a conception in their mind.... Nobody but an intelligent Brahman could be the author of this universe (BSB 2.1.37.3.2.11).

Sri Sankara proposes even an evolution in the case of the world. But "the world was evolved under the supervision of an intelligent cause, namely, Brahman" (BSB 1.4.16.1.4.25-27). Brahman, however, did not depend on any extraneous matter for the formation of this world. "For, Brahman, though one only, is, through its manifold power, able to transform itself into manifold effects just as milk is" (BSB 2.1.14.2.1.26). Sankara says again: "Just as the spider emits out of itself the threads of its web, so does the intelligent Brahman create the world by itself without extraneous means or matter" (BSB 2.1.25). Brahman, the efficient cause and the material cause of the world, transforms itself, without suffering any change in itself, into the world. It is the 'soul' (*ātmā*) of Brahman so to say, that is transformed into the multiple objects (*nāma-rūpas*) of the world.

Still, Brahman does not undergo any real transformation or modification; Brahman's evolution into the world is only an apparent transformation, a *vivarta* (BSB 2.1.14).

The world is a Self-revelation or manifestation of the Supreme Brahman (BSB 2.2.43). In other words, the world is nothing but Brahman manifesting itself in the form of the world; the world is the transformation of Brahman; the trouble is that the world does not present a real form or true picture of Brahman; but only an unreal form (*mithyā rūpa*) of Brahman. Brahman through its *māyā-śakti* shows itself in the form of the world; and all men in the state of *avidyā* (i.e., in the mundane or natural state) can perceive only this *mithyā-rūpa* of Brahman, Brahman as multiplied in the form of the various objects of the world. So, duality belongs to the sphere of *avidyā* or *añāna*; but those who rise above the *avidyā*-plane (to the plane of God-experience) will intuit the non-dual Brahman alone; in that God-experience (*Brahma-sākṣātkāra*) the world vanishes or dissolves (*prapañca-vilaya*). Hence, there is no Infinite plus the finite; the Infinite appears as the finite; no Brahman plus the world, but Brahman appearing (though not truly) as the world; the world has no separate existence; so we can say that Brahman is the *adhiṣṭhāna*, *antaryāmin*, *sāmānya* of the world. In Brahman all things are held together as pearls or flowers are held together by a thread.

No Independent Existence for the World

Sri Sankara, together with the Sāṃkhya philosophers, admits *Satkāryavāda* according to which 'the effect before its actual production exists in the cause in the form of causal power (*śakti*), and this power is not to be considered as something distinct and different and separate from its cause. Thus the various effects such as pots, jars, jugs, etc., existed earlier in different forms in their cause, namely, clay out of which these things were later formed. Following this *satkāryavāda* Śankarācārya argues : 'The world which is an effect cannot be distinct and separate from Brahman, its cause (BSB 2.1.16). As a clay-pot cannot be different from the clay of which it is made, as cloth cannot be separate from the threads of which it is made, as gold-ornament cannot have existence apart from the gold of which it is made, so too the world cannot have an existence separate from and independent of its cause, namely, Brahman (BSB 2.1.1.2.1.14). Even after creation Brahman continues to be the *sat* or *sattā* or *adhiṣṭhāna* or *āspada* of the world in the same relation as clay to clay-pot or gold to gold-ornament or ocean to waves (BSB 1.4.23; cf. Kath. Up. 3.11; Br. Up. 1.6.1).

The World is not God

Though the world is not different from Brahman, Sankara would not say, 'World= Brahman'. He says that though the effect is *ananya* (non-different) from God, we cannot equate the world with God; because there is an aspect of difference between the cause and effect. Though the waves belong to the ocean, we cannot say the waves are the ocean; though the space in a jar is non-different from the universal space, the jar-space cannot be equated with the universal space. "If absolute equality is insisted upon cause and effect, the relation of material cause and effect would be annihilated" (BSB 2.1.16). The world, therefore, is both different and non-different from Brahman; Brahman is the *esse* or *sattā* of the world (BSB 2.1.13).

Brahman-world non-difference is perceived by those who rise to the higher state of consciousness called the *paramārtha-darśana* or *Brahma-jñāna* or *Īśvara-anubhava*. The experience of this 'higher state' is the test of truth and reality. So, the unity-experience of the *Brahma-jñāni* is the true experience.

Brahma-sākṣātkāra or Mystic Experience

Sri Sankara says that in *Brahma-sākṣātkāra* or *Paramārtha-darśana*, the *yogin* enjoys 'unity consciousness'; he then transcends world-consciousness and ego-consciousness (*i.e.*, then the world dissolves *prapañcah viliyate*); then the *yogi* perceives himself to be one with Brahman; consequently, nothing but Brahmin is experienced. This unitary-consciousness is the central concept and starting point of Sankara-Advaita. This unity-consciousness or intuitive vision of the Supreme Reality is called by various names such as *Brahma-sākṣātkāra*, *paramārtha-darśana*, *samyag-darśana*, *ātma-darśana*, *Brahmajīva-aikya-bodha*, *Brahmānubhava*, *Īśvarānubhava*, *ātma-jñāna*, *Brahmavidyā*, *paramārtha-avasthā*, *turiya-avasthā*, and so on. So, this transcendental experience (God-experience) is viewed as *darśana*, *jñāna*, *vidyā*, *bodha*, *anubhava*, *avasthā*, etc.

Now, what is this *Brahma-sākṣātkāra*? Modern researches in the field of religious experience show that what Sankara and other Advaitins mean by *Brahma-sākṣātkāra* (God-experience) is Mystic experience or mystic vision. It is an experience through which man obtains a direct and immediate contact with the Supreme Being; and through such contact man enjoys an experiential knowledge of the

Ultimate Reality. "In mystic state we become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness," writes William James in his *The Variety of Religious Experience*. Dasgupta defines mystic experience as "the realization of God through ecstatic communion." "Mysticism means union with God or it is a unitive experience with someone or something other than oneself," says R. C. Zaehner. This direct and immediate knowledge of God obtained in mystic experience is usually described as 'union', 'identity-consciousness', 'vision', etc. Note the very etymology of the term '*Brahma-sa-akṣikaroti*,' i.e., *Brahma-sākṣātkāra*; similarly, the *Mundakopaniṣad*-expression "*tasmin dr̥ṣṭe paravare*" (2.2.9). Mystics of all ages and countries and religions unanimously affirm that man can rise into union with the Transcendent, can participate in Divine Nature, can identify himself with it. In mystic union, the mystic passes into a higher mode of being; he gets a clearer vision of the Reality.

Mystic Experiences in the Mystic State

- (i) The intuitive vision of the 'One' as the inner Reality of all, usually expressed by the formula 'all is One'.
- (ii) The Consciousness of a deifying Transformation.
- (iii) Inexpressible peace and bliss.
- (iv) Ineffableness and Paradoxicality.
- (v) Sense of the Holy and Divine.
- (vi) Certainty of the truth of the experience or vision.

The description of the mystic experience or intuitive vision fits in very well with the Advaitic description of *Brahma-sākṣātkāra*. This unity-consciousness is enjoyed only in the higher state or mystic state. Until man rises to that mystic state, i.e., as long as man is in the *vyavahāra* state, there is ample scope for ethics and morality. And, in fact, Sankara prescribes an elaborate ethical system in view of *Brahma-sākṣātkāra*.

II

Brahman-jīva Relation

The next important concept of Sankara-Advaita that is alleged to undermine ethics and morality, is *Brahman-jīva* relation or the

so-called identity doctrine. 'If I am Brahman and if all are Brahman, where is the scope for ethics?' the adversaries ask. Sankara does not assert any absolute and unqualified identity between the *jīvātman* and *Paramātman*, man and God. Sankara illustrates his concept of man-God-relation with the help of various metaphors. Let us examine a few of them :

1. The Mahākāśa-ghaṭākāśa (universal-particular ether) Analogy

Brahman is unchanging eternal consciousness, pure and undivided. But this one, unchanging Brahman exhibits itself as divided, so to say, into many human souls through the media, *i.e.*, body or the psycho-physical organism, just as the universal ether is delimited, so to say, through the limiting *upādhis* such as pots and jugs and jars. "Owing to the *Paramātman's upādhis* (limiting adjuncts) the One *Paramātman* is treated as if it were two, just as we make a distinction between 'mahākāśa' and ghaṭākāśa" (BSB 1.3.7).

2. The Reflection Theory

The soul is *pratibimba, ābhāsa*. Sankara often compares the soul of man to the images of the sun reflected in different waters; he compares also the souls to the images of a person reflected in various mirrors : "The soul is, like the reflected image of the sun in water, a reflection of the *Paramātman*; neither absolutely identical nor totally different" (Ch. Up. 6.16.3, Kath. Up. 2.2.15). The meaning of this reflection analogy is that God is the prototype or source of the human soul which resembles God. So, "just as the sun does not tremble although its image trembles when you shake the cup filled with water in which the sun's light is reflected, thus *Īśvara* is not affected by pain which may be experienced by the *jīva* (BSB 2.3.46; *Gīta* 15.7).

3. The Juggler's Analogy

Brahman or *Parameśvara* is also compared to a juggler or magician, and the *jīvātman*s (souls) are compared to illusory figures produced by the juggler who stands invisible on the ground : "Thus the invisible Brahman, who is the substratum of all, remains unaffected by the production (creation) of the *jīvātman*s just as the magician is not at all affected by the magical show of his own making" (BSB 1.1.17). "There is only one Highest Lord ever-unchanging whose substance is

cognition and who by means of *avidyā*, *māyā*, manifests himself in various ways, just as a thaumaturg appears in different shapes by means of his magical power" (BSB 1.3.19.1.17). As R. P. Singh observes, "Sankara's intention here is not to preach any variety of subjective idealism", but to prove the total dependence of the soul on God.

4. Fire-and-Sparks Simile

Sometimes Sankara compares God to a burning fire, and the souls to the sparks flying out from it. "The origin of the souls from the *Paramātman* is compared by *śruti* to the issuing of sparks from fire" (BSB 1.4.22). Further, "Non-differenced intelligence belongs to the soul and the Lord (*Īśvara*) alike as heat belongs to the sparks as well as to the fire. From these two views of difference and non-difference, there results the comprehensive view of the soul being a part of the Lord—part, 'amsa', as it were (BSB 2.3.43; *Gīta* 15.7).

And yet the *jīvātman* is not simply the *Paramātman*. The higher self in man (the *ātman* proper, *anthastham jyotis*) does not differ substantially from the *Paramātman* who is pure Consciousness who is above all change, activity (Kena Up. 1, 4). But the *Paramātman* indwelling in man in the form of *jīvātman* or human soul, is not simply to be identified with the finite human being called *jīva*. The lower self in man (the psycho-physical organism) is not to be identified with Brahman or *Paramātman*. So under this aspect man is different from Brahman. Hence the reason for the traditional insistence of *Advaitins* that the Upaniṣadic saying *tat tvam asi* (Thou art that [Brahman]) should not be taken simply in the literal sense (*vācyārtha*), but in the *bhagalakṣaṇa*. The stock example of *bhagalakṣaṇa* is *so'yam deva-dattah* = This is that Devadatta. Devadatta is common factor. So *jīvātman* and *Paramātman* are non-different (*ananya*) on the basis of *sattā* or *caitanya*. The *Paramātman* is *akhaṇḍam aviśiṣṭam caitanyam* while the *jīvātman* is *viśiṣṭam khaṇḍitam caitanyam* (qualified divided consciousness).

If the *Paramātman* is the brilliant sun in the sky, the *jīvātman*s are its reflections in many waters. The *Paramātman* or Brahman is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent while the *jīvātman* is the opposite.

5. Difference in day-to-day life (vyavahāratāla)

This difference of *Jīva* from *Paramātman* is very poignantly felt on the *vyavahāra* plane, in the normal day-to-day life in the waking state. But in the *Paramārtha*-experience all differences are obliterated; identity or unity (*ekatvam*) alone is envisioned; in that state “all distinctions vanish” (BSB 1.2.6; 2.2.9). “The *śrutis* teach ‘oneness’ (*ekatvam*) in that state” (BSB 1.2.6).

Since difference and distinction are given ample scope on the *vyavahāra* plane, there can be no reasonable objection to the Advaita religion and ethics, nay, the Advaitic doctrine of *śattva-suddhi* (soul-purification) as a necessary pre-requisite to *Brahma-dārsana* furnishes the ‘rational’ for the assiduous practice of ‘Dharma’.

It is wellknown that Sri Sankara prescribes *pravṛttidharma* for those aspiring for *Brahma-sākṣātkāra*. When the aspirants have purified themselves through the practice of *pravṛttidharma* such as *sama-damādi*, *vairāgya*, *Īśvara-praṇidhāna*, *śravaṇa-manana-nididhyāsana*, they are urged to cultivate *nivṛttidharma* (abstaining from all actions) which will culminate in the Intuitive Vision of Brahman.

III

Conclusion

Advaita-dharma, a *Departure from Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* : The *Mīmāṃsakas* propose heaven as the ultimate goal of human destiny. And heaven, they say, is ensured for those who perform *yajña* or sacrifice in accordance with the Vedic injunctions such as *svarga-kāmo yajeta*. By the disinterested performance of obligatory duties, and knowledge of the *ātman* (self), one is liberated from the shackles of past *karmas* he is freed from the chain of rebirth.

In this context the *Mīmāṃsakas* greatly extol the excellence of the *yajña* or sacrifice. *Yajña* is deemed to be *sarvjaña* and *śarva-śakta yajña* has innate power; it possesses omnipotence. It is the properly performed *yajna* that maintains the universe in due order and existence. Nobody can attain *niḥśreyas* without duly performing the sacrifice. So, *karma* leads to *mokṣa*; nay, *karma* is Brahman. Even Brahman was cast into the shade or relegated to the background by the *Mīmāṃsakas* in their anxiety to uphold the unchallenging authority of the

Vedas. Since the Vedas and sacrifice are of such supreme importance, naturally, the sacrificing priests who control the *yajñas*, came to be regarded as controllers of the destiny of the universe. Thus, ritualism and ceremonialism abound in the *Pūrva-mīmāṃsa*.

As explained earlier, Sri Sankara combated the ritualism of the *Mīmāṃsakas*. Sankara rejected even the *Mīmāṃsa* theory that *Svarga* or *Niḥśreyas* is the result of or reward for *yajña* or any sort of *karma*. Sankara is very uncompromising too in his doctrine that *mokṣa* is not a combined product of *karma* and *jñāna*; he refutes the *jñāna-karma-samuccaya-vāda*.¹ For Śankarācārya, Eternal Salvation is through God-experience or *Brahma-jñāna* : *jñānād eva kaivalyam*.

1. See Dr. J. Kattackal, *Religion and Ethics in Advaita*, Herder Publication, 1980, pp. 107 ff.