

CAN THE ANALYSIS OF ADHYĀSA EVER LEAD TO AN ADVAITIC CONCLUSION?

That something is taken as something else cannot be a sign of unreality of either, and yet this has been the ground of the rejection of the reality of the non-self by Advaitins since Śaṅkara wrote his famous *bhāṣya* on the Brahmasūtra and described the identification of the self with the non-self as the foundational *adhyāsa* on which all other erroneous cognitions are based. But the so-called *adhyāsa*, if it is one, proves only that the non-self, should not be taken as self, and not that the non-self is unreal. In fact, if the non-self were really unreal, the *adhyāsa* could not have arisen. The usual example of seeing the rope as snake is given to illustrate such an erroneous identification, but the example, if reflected upon seriously proves just the opposite. Both the snake and the rope are real. It is *only* the cognition of the “rope as snake” which is erroneous and needs to be corrected. In fact the rope could not, in principle, have been seen as snake if there were no snakes in the world. But, if the reality of snake is a pre-condition of the seeing the rope as snake, then the example usually given proves just the opposite of what the Advaitins want to prove.

Śaṅkara, of course, has not given the example of seeing rope as snake at least in the beginning of his discussion on *adhyāsa* in his *bhāṣya* on the Brahmasūtra. Instead, he gives two examples: one, referring to the seeing of *śukti* as *rajata* and the other as seeing two moons instead of one. The two examples are, however, so radically different that if one is taken as the

paradigmatic example of *adhyāsa*, the other cannot be so understood. The first example, that is, seeing *śukti* as *rajata*, is similar to that of seeing the rope as snake, since both *śukti* and *rajata* are present there in the world and are known independently of each other. On the other hand, seeing two moons instead of one usually takes place if one presses the eye-lid firmly. No one is lead to believe that there are two moons even when one perceives them to be so. This, perhaps, is due to the reason that one knows that the seeing of two moons is the result of something that has been done by oneself, or even by someone else if the other has pressed one's eye-lid, and that one can easily see the moon as one if the finger is removed from the eye-lid. Here, there is no *adhyāsa* as not only one is not identifying the one moon with the two moons but also knows that the two moons that one sees are not really two, but that the one moon itself is appearing as two because of a particular pressure one has put on one's eye-lid. In fact, one not only knows that there are no two moons in the sky, but also that one can see two moons whenever one likes by just pressing one's eye-lid again. One can play the game as many a time as one likes, and it is only because one is not deceived that no appropriate action relating to the erroneous cognition ever occurs. In fact, there is no erroneous cognition at all, and no erroneous identification to deserve a name of *adhyāsa* as Śaṅkara seems to have thought.

One may, of course, apply the term *adhyāsa* to both the examples, as Śaṅkara seems to have done. But, then one would have to accept that there

can be radically different kinds of *adhyāsa* and not just one as most of the Advaitins seem to have thought up till now. But, in case there can be more than one kind of *adhyāsa*, one would have to explore the different types of erroneous cognitions and identifications that take place and delineate the deep differences between them. Unfortunately, as far as I know, no one seems to have attempted to do this up till now.

Perhaps it may be said that the Advaitins' contention relates to the cognitive enterprise as whole and contends that no cognition in the ordinary sense is possible without the identification of the self with the non-self at some level. The identification with the body, for example, is a precondition of all perceptual knowledge, and the one with *buddhi* for all rational knowledge, that is, knowledge based on *anumāna* or inference. But even on such interpretation of the Advaitin's position, the reality of the body and the *buddhi* will have to be admitted as without it no identification would be possible. Not only this, the occurrence of *adhyāsa* implies that both the objects are already known to one, as in case one of the objects is totally unknown it cannot be superimposed on the one that is being experienced. Śaṅkara seems to be aware of the problem as he suggests that the self or the *ātman* is not completely *aviśaya*, that is, something which is not an object at all, for, if it were to be so, then how could the not-self be superimposed on it? This, perhaps, is not the exact reason why Śaṅkara makes the self or the *ātman* as the referent or the object designated by "I" or what he calls the "asmat-pratyaya" [na tāvad ayam ekāntenāviśayah

asmatpratyayāviṣayatvāt]. The reason, more probably, is to emphasize the experiential immediacy with which the self is experienced, which is radically different from the way all other objects are experienced even at the perceptual-sensuous level. The reference to *asmat-pratyaya* seems unfortunate and even misleading as the “I”, or the sense of the “I”, that is being referred to has nothing linguistic about it. Instead it is the existentially experienced sense of “I-ness” which is being talked about and which is perhaps better conveyed by the term *ahaṅkāra* used in the Sāṃkhya sense. In fact, Śaṅkara seems to have been misled by the terms *yuṣmad* and *asmad*, forgetting that the former, in its ordinary usage, does not refer to object in general but objects of a certain type only, that is, those that may be regarded as another human being. In this case, however, it is correct that what is referred to by the term *yuṣmad* is not *ekāntenāviṣaya* as Śaṅkara seems to think, but also *aviṣaya* in the sense that it too has the sense of “I-ness” or thinks of itself, as the object of *asmat-pratyaya*, to use Śaṅkara's language. Not only this, for the other human being I am a *yuṣmad*, that is, someone who is an object, though not completely an object in the sense in which inanimate objects of nature are.

Surprisingly, Śaṅkara himself questions the necessity of the immediacy or *aparokṣatva* for the objects between which the *adhyāsa* is supposed to occur. He had himself said that the self is not *ekāntena aviṣaya*, but later on questions the necessity of this by pointing out that there is no such Law or *niyama* that both the objects between which the *adhyāsa* occurs have to be immediate

objects of consciousness [na cāyam asti niyamaḥ puro'vasthita eva viṣaye viṣayāntaram adhyasitavyam iti] as is usually the case with the objects of perception. He gives, in this connection, the example of *ākāśa* which is not perceived by anybody and yet on which the *adhyāsa* of color etc. is superimposed [apratyakṣe 'pi hyākāśe bālās talamalinatādy adhyasyanti]. The example is strange indeed, for as Dr. Mukund Lath has pointed out in a discussion on the issue it will make *ākāśa* an *aviśaya* like the self and there would be the problem of distinguishing the different types of *aviśaya*.

Moreover, if *ākāśa* is not an object of perception then it must be an object of inferences. But what is the *hetu* of this *sādhyā*? In other words, what is the ground for believing that there is such a thing as *ākāśa* and that even if there is such a thing it cannot have the quality of color in it? The so-called superimposition of qualities such as color, or to use Śaṅkara's own term *malinatā*, that is, tarnished or of a dark color, do not seem any different from the quality of sound which is usually ascribed to it. The only reason that appears to have been given in the tradition for the postulation of *ākāśa* seems to be that it is the substance in which sound inheres. However, unlike all the other four elemental substances (all the other *mahābhūtas*), that is, earth, air, fire and water, *ākāśa* is not, as Śaṅkara has pointed out, an object of perception. But in case the only reason for the postulation of *ākāśa* as an independent *mahābhūta* is that we need a substratum for sound, then sound or *śabda* will have to be eternal, for if it were to be non-eternal then it will have no quality

whatsoever when the sound is absent and thus become like *nirguṇa-brahman* which will obviously not be acceptable for the Advaitins.

There is another problem with Śaṅkara's use of the term *bālaḥ* raises and which, as far as I know, has not been noticed. According to Śaṅkara it seems that only the ignorant suffer from *adhyāsa* as they alone superimpose *malinatā* on *ākāśa*. Those who know the truth in this matter also see the *ākāśa* as *malinatā*, though they are not deceived by the appearance as was the case with those who were ignorant. The correction, however, even in their case, is only theoretical as it does not affect their perceptual experience in any way whatsoever. We had drawn attention to this fundamental difference between the two types of *adhyāsa* in our paper entitled "Two types of appearance and two types of reality" published long ago in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie Belgium* (Oct., 1957). The advaitin, however, would scarcely be satisfied with a theoretic correction, as it would make the whole process of *sādhana*, which is supposed to lead to the self-realization, unnecessary.

The larger problem that Śaṅkara's example opens relates to the question as to how purely theoretical entities, which are based only on *anumāna*, can have perceptual qualities superimposed on them because of *adhyāsa*. The other possibility opened up by the example is the one where a theoretical postulated entity based on some inferential necessity has purely theoretical qualities ascribed to it, which later on are found to be erroneous, and, hence, which retrospectively are ascribed the character of *adhyāsa*. And once such

possibilities are admitted, the self itself may be seen as not something which is directly experienced but theoretically postulated to understand on account for the experience one have. If so, the so-called superimposition on it may be as theoretical as the self itself and may, later on, found to be correct or incorrect depending upon the exigencies of the theoretical requirement concerned. The deeper contention, perhaps, is that the objectifying act of consciousness itself is the root cause of the foundational mistake as it makes the self think of itself as an object, which it can never be. But why should it be so is never made clear.

There is also the other problem as to why a knowledge based on erroneous identification need itself be necessarily wrong. The body may be perceived correctly, even if the self's identification with the body is wrong. The perception of objects through the body senses is not affected in any way by the identification of the self with the body. Similarly, the correctness or the incorrectness of any reference has nothing to do with the supposedly false identification of the self with *buddhi* or the rational faculty in man. The perceptual or the inferential cognition may not occur without the identification, at least at the human level, but such a non-occurrence has nothing to do with the validity or invalidity of the cognition concerned.

At a still deeper level the Advaitin may be said to be objecting to the objectifying function of consciousness itself, and pointing out that what is constituted by this act is taken to be real, as is obviously supposed to be true

in the case of drama, and it may be said that all that is apprehended as object shares this characteristic. Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, the well known Advaitin, is supposed to have said something to this effect. But, firstly, there is no identification of the self with the not-self here and if that is the essence of *adhyāsa*, then this can not be regarded as *adhyāsa* in the accepted sense of the term. Secondly, if consciousness has this capacity of objectifying within itself, then the exercise of that capacity could not be a mistake except when one regards the object as having an independent reality of its own without reference to the consciousness that bring it into being.

It may be urged that the problem is not so much with the objectifying function of consciousness, as with its identification with what it objectifies, particularly if it begins to see itself as an object because of this act of objectification through which it brings the object into being. But this is only another name for self-consciousness through which, or in which, alone the self becomes aware of itself. At the level of consciousness, one is aware *only* of the object and not of the fact that one is aware of it. Animals are generally supposed to have only this kind of awareness, even though the higher ones among them show many of the emotions that man possesses. Human beings, on the other hand, are supposed to be distinguished by the further fact that they are not only aware of objects as the animals are, but also aware of the fact that they are aware of the objects. This second-order awareness gives rise to a whole new set of phenomena amongst which the most interesting and

intriguing is the idea of the self itself. This gives rise to the notion of the ideal self, or the self-as-it-ought-to-be, as distinct from the self-as-it-is, and makes one strives to be that which one ought-to-be.

The achievement of self-consciousness thus leads not only to the awareness of the self as object, but also to a dissatisfaction with what one finds oneself to be. In fact, the ideality of any object, whether it be the self-seen-as-object or something else, is always a function of self-consciousness, as consciousness only apprehends the object in its facticity and the pleasure or pain that it might cause on occasions. Psychological hedonism, thus, is the natural attitude of consciousness. It turns into ethical hedonism only when self-consciousness reflects on it and treats it as the norm for itself. But, if it were to reflect on its own reality, it would see that it can never accept hedonism as a norm for itself, as it has already introduced an element of questioning into everything it apprehends in terms of an ideality which it knows only roughly. This knowledge is mainly negative in character as it is generally sure that what obtains should not be, but seldom as to what it should be.

The element of ideality, thus, is a result of self-consciousness and it is, in fact, an imposition on consciousness. Consciousness functions, by its very nature, at the hedonistic level, but when it becomes an object of self-consciousness it acquires an ideal dimension which is in conflict with the way it naturally functions. This is the root cause of conflict in man, as he finds himself not to be what he should be. The ideality of consciousness, like that of all other

objects, is, thus, a function of self-consciousness. But if self-consciousness itself is the foundation of *adhyāsa*, or 'objectification' and the identification with it, then the ideality of the self along with that of all objects will also be mistaken. But the ideality of consciousness is the same as *ātman* and if both the idea and the ideal of *ātman* are the result of the fundamental illusion which self-consciousness projects through its objectifying function, then what will happen to the whole enterprise of *ātmānaṃ viddhi* on which the whole Advaitic enterprise is based. The realms of both *dharma* and *adhyātma* arise because of the distinction between what is and what should be, a distinction that would not have been there but for the fact of self-consciousness which introduces it in the realm of fact itself.

The fact of self-consciousness, thus, has a double aspect: though it happens to be a fact, it also introduces the distinction of fact and ideality within the realm of fact itself. Paradoxically, it does not remain untouched by this distinction as, reflexively, it can turn on itself and find it not to be what it should be. The Advaitins, strangely, finds fault not with this or that characteristic of self-consciousness, but with the very fact of self-consciousness itself. But this is to strike at the very roots of that which makes the reality of *adhyātma* and *dharma* possible. The ultra-radical Advaitin accepts the suicidal consequences of his relentless logic and banishes the seeking for the realization of *ātman* to the realm of illusion, as, according to him, the *ātman* is *nitya-siddha* and not *sādhana-siddha* as the deluded seeker thinks. Also, if the whole activity of

sādhana belongs to the realm of illusion, then does the argument of the Advaitin not belong to the same category? In fact, the Advaitin has to accept a distinction between the *ātman* when it is realized and the situation when, according to him, it is not realized, that is, one does not realize oneself to be the *ātman*. This distinction has to be admitted even if the *ātman* is supposed to be *nitya-siddha* and not *sādhana-siddha*. The distinction, however, cannot be made intelligible, especially if the very procedure or processes by which one comes to the awareness of the idea of *ātman* are regarded as based on a fundamental error, as the Advaitin tends to do.

The Advaitin faces the dilemma in another form when he discusses the problem of *jīvanmukti*, that is, whether one lives on in this world even after one has realized the *ātman*. For, if one allows for the fact of *jīvanmukti*, then one will have to admit some sort of identification with the body and the mind, as without such an identification one cannot conceive of living in the usual sense of the word. The ambiguous, puzzling and paradoxical nature of the idea of *jīvanmukti*, in the context of the ideas of sublation and identification, does not seem to have been the subject of critical attention except perhaps in the work of Srinivas Rao on the subject. The *jīvanmukta's* identification with the psycho-physical complex, it may be said, is not the same as the one that occurs in those who have not realized the *ātman* or achieved liberation. But, then, identification need not necessarily be erroneous or be of such a nature as to lead to bondage. It may be of a different type and hence need to be

distinguished for purposes of analysis, a task that the Advaitin does not seem to have performed.

One need not, however, go to the exemplars of *jīvanmukti* to find examples of “identification” that are harmless. Nāṭya provides a superb example of it at the ordinary day-to-day level of living and has been the subject of reflection since at least the time of Bharata onwards in the Indian tradition. It is surprising, therefore, to find that the Advaitin has taken no serious note of it or tried to meet the challenge it poses for his theory of identification. There seems no prima-facie reason why the snake-rope or *śukti-rajata* illustration of *adhyāsa* be taken as a paradigmatic example of it and not the *nāṭya*.

The identification of *jīvanmukta* with the psycho-physical complex, however, is only because of the necessity of living and does not achieve any positive purpose except perhaps when he or she guides others on the path of *adhyātma*, or the realization of the self. The characters in a play, on the other hand, play a positive role as without it one can neither understand nor appreciate the play itself. The identification with the play, thus, is a necessary condition here for the revelation of the reality embodied and evoked in the play. The identification, of course, is not a total identification as it is supposed to be in the case of the rope-snake. It is more of an imagined, or assumed identification, an “as if” attitude where one knows that it is not really so, but still behaves as if it were what one knows it is not. This willed suspension of what one knows to be true is shared with the one that is found in the

jīvanmukta's attitude. But while the latter is a burden which one carries on due to the exigencies of living, or because one has to exhaust the *karman* whose effect has already been set in motion, in the case of the former it is a free act of imagination which gives access to a world which brings joy. And in some cases, it gives not only joy but also insightful understanding of the human situation if the play is really great and is acted well.

The identifications with the characters in a dramatic representation or novel is well known and has provided material for the construction of various theories amongst those who are interested in the subject. But little distinction has been made between the identification of the spectator, or the reader, and the one that happens in the case of the actors, or the writers or the director. As for the problem of identification in other arts such as architecture and music, as far as I know, no one has ever discussed it. Both Bharata and Aristotle concentrate on the drama for building their theories about art and as the Indian and the Western tradition have generally followed their formulation of the subject, the portrayal of human situations and the identification on the part of the spectator with them resulting in the experience and enjoyment of virtual emotions has continued to be the paradigmatic example of what identification means in the context of art.

The active identification in the moral realm, where it is a precondition of concern, care and sympathy for the other, has hardly engaged the attention of thinkers. Besides this, there are other real and meaningful realms constituted

by conflicting identifications such as that of sport or patriotism or membership of a class, caste, *varṇa*, region, language, or *sampradāya* or *āśrama*. One cannot call oneself a *saṃyāsīn*, a *bhikṣu* or even an Advaitin, without some of identification.

Ultimately, then, the question is not of erroneous identification, or superimposition, or *adhyāsa* as the Advaitin has thought, but whether it occurs in consciousness or rather at the self-conscious level, and whether it is free in the sense that one can withdraw from it and is not too much affected by it. The Gītā had propounded such an idea, but the Advaitin seems to have missed it. The Gītā's contention is that one cannot live even for a moment without action, and hence the idea that one can live without any identification at all is a contradiction-in-terms. Its own solution of the problem is to suggest that one can have an identification which does not lead to bondage, as it is not real identification resting on the error which both the Advaitin and the Sāṃkhya thinkers have emphasized. Rather, it is an assumed identification, knowing fully that it is wrong. Still, one does so for certain purposes as in the case with the witnesses of a dramatic performance or when one engages in moral action. In the latter case the identification is only implicit, while in the former case it is self-consciously explicit, as without it one cannot understand the act of going to witness the performance. The non-attachment preached by the Gītā is only another name for this. In fact, the ideal advocated by the Gītā is fully embodied in Kṛṣṇa himself who continuously exemplifies throughout his behavior what

this ideal of "identification-without-identification" is.

In fact, the idea of *avatāra* itself implies this, as the Lord who incarnates himself cannot do so without assuming this seemingly incompatible duality involved in the very notion of the embodied self. The Lord himself as Kṛṣṇa, it should be remembered, uses the term "*aham*" to refer to himself. The term indicates the embodied self, or the ego, or the *jīva* in the advaitic vocabulary, and that Kṛṣṇa should be constrained to use it suggests that the identification involved need not necessarily be based on *avidyā* or ignorance.

Identification, thus, may be of many kinds and what is called *adhyāsa* by the Advaitins, and illustrated by the paradigmatic example of the rope-snake or the *śukti-rajata* illusion, is only one of them. It is also the least important as it can only lead to fear and flight or greed and delight. It may, on the other hand, give rise to doubt as one may begin to wonder that the thing does not move at all and hence could hardly be snake, or the shine that one is seeing is not exactly the one which is usually given by silver. The point is that the example on which the Advaitin has built his whole edifice is so weak that it can hardly support his case. He has not even thought of the other possibility that one may mistake the snake for a rope, and the fatal consequences that may follow on this type of wrong identification. Will the Brahman, then, be like the rope and the world like a snake or conversely? The whole thing is so childish that one wonders how so many intelligent people could have been taken in by it for so many years.

There is another aspect of the rope-snake illusion which has not been taken notice of. This relates to the fact there are some identifications which are involuntary in the sense that one is born with them, while the others are voluntary or acquired. The identification with the body is perhaps the most involuntary identification that we know of. It is also the most foundational, primal and natural identification, as it is not only the seat of pleasure and pain but also responsive to our acts of will and thus the main center through which we act on the world. Others too identify us primarily through our bodies, even if it is mainly through the face, which becomes evident when one has to identify a dead body. In fact, there is a radical distinction between the identification of the self with the body and the identification of the others with his or her body. The former, though involuntary and natural, is always secondary while the latter is almost always primary. K.C. Bhattacharyya has drawn attention to this fact in his remarkable work entitled *Subject as Freedom* wherein he had built his whole philosophical edifice upon the notions of identification and de-identification and suggested that when one has de-identified one realizes that the prior identification must have been voluntary in the sense that it need not have been there as there was no necessity about it. But he has not seen that the de-identification does not set one free as one relapses into the identification once more. The freedom was only momentary and even illusory as one does not become free of the identification and relapses into it again and again. In fact, it is an identification one cannot do without as it is the very condition of one's being alive and living in the world.

The "free" identification in most cases, thus, is not free at all. And, this is the case not only with the body but also with the gender, language and memory. The case of gender and language is peculiar as one can, at least these days, get one's sex changed through operation and one can learn another language sometimes with greater facility than one's own. There are also persons who are bi-lingual just as we are told that there are those who are bi-sexual. Such cases, however, have not been studied in depth to find what exactly happens to one's identification in their case. As for the cases in which the change in one's sex occurs naturally, the identification with the past of one's earlier bodily self must present intriguing problems which, as far as we know, have not been investigated. The detailed study by H. Garfinkel is of one such case that deals with the problem.

In any case, the problem of identification with and through memory is even more complex as even in ordinary normal cases there is a large part of one's life of which one has probably no memory. No one remembers about one's life in the womb, or the experience of being born, or the hundred and one things that happened to one in one's childhood. Yet, one not only believes that it was the same self which was there in all these experiences but also celebrates one's birthday. There is also the problem that one finds false memories, suppressed memories and memories edifying for purpose of self-adulation or oneself-adoration. Yet, it is only through memories and the owning of them by the self that one gets an identity.

Identification may, of course, be correct and the notion of “erroneous” identification presupposes this. There is, for example, nothing wrong in identifying a rope as a rope, or a snake as a snake. But the advaitic theory of *adhyāsa* and in a sense, the *Sāṃkhya* theory also, implies just this. This is because, as we pointed out earlier, the so-called “correct” identification would not be possible without the erroneous identification of consciousness with something that is not consciousness. Thus, even if one grants that the foundational identification of the self with the not-self is a mistake, it does not follow that all identifications in the realm of the not-self are bound to be incorrect because of this. The criterion of a correct identification in the realm of the not-self is not dependent on the fact whether the whole realm of the not self is itself the result of a “wrong” identification. The relegation of the whole world to the status of *māyā* in Advaita Vedānta seems to be based on this fundamental mistake, as even within the *māyā* there remain the distinctions between the true and the false, the good and the evil and the beautiful and the ugly.

The situation in *Sāṃkhya* seems to be similar to that of Advaita Vedānta, even though it has not been described in the same way, and appears to rest on the same mistake. The whole world, in *Sāṃkhya*, is a creation due to the identification of *puruṣa* with *ahaṅkāra*, or *buddhi*, or *manas*, or the senses including both the *jñānendriyas* and the *karmendriyas*. But this does not, and cannot render this whole world unreal, just as the whole world of not-self

cannot be considered as *māyā* only because it presupposes the identification, in some sense or other, of the self with the not-self.

The Sāṃkhya-Advaitic interpretation of the phenomenon designated as *adhyāsa* seems untenable on all counts. It is therefore surprising that thinker after thinker have repeated the interpretation as if it were a self-evident truth. No example of erroneous cognition, particularly if it be perceptual in character, can ever establish the unreality of either of the objects which are said to be erroneously identified with each other. It is, of course, true that only the Advaitin draws this conclusion. None of the other Vedāntins do this. As for the Sāṃkhyas, it is true that they accept the independent reality of *prakṛti*, but it is not clear what do they exactly mean by this as according to them the whole world of *vyakta*, or manifest *prakṛti* from *ahankāra* to the five gross elements, is due to the erroneous identification of *puruṣa*, or the pure consciousness, with that which it is not, that is, the non-self, or the object, or the *prakṛti*. The more than two thousand years old contention taken by many to be the most distinctive contribution of Indian philosophy, thus, is non-sequitur, a fallacy which should have been known as such long ago. It is time that the *adhyāsa*, if we may be so allured to call it, is realized for what it is and laid to rest and buried for ever so that the Indian mind is freed of the *māyā* by which it has been entranced all the years. It is time to get liberated from the *adhyāsa* that the advaitic analysis of *adhyāsa* has imposed on a large part of the philosophical intellect of India. But perhaps it has been bewitched by it too long to want to

be liberated from it. The bondage of love can be more entrancing than the desire for liberation. Did not the *gopīs* tell Uddhava this?