

Advaita Vedānta without transcendent metaphysics

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I

Advaita Vedānta presents itself primarily as a spiritual path whose goal is to lead the individual from bondage to liberation, which can be attained through direct knowledge of *brahman* (the Absolute). This spiritual path incorporates a set of metaphysical beliefs or ideas about the world, the soul, the Absolute, rebirth, the law of *karman*, etc., which together constitute Vedāntic metaphysics. The acceptance of the truth of these beliefs depends on the acceptance of the validity of Vedic revelation. This belief system is the “theology” of Vedānta—understanding theology to be a set of statements about reality that depend on the truth of a particular revelation or religious experience. Besides, the thinkers of this school try to prove the truth of these metaphysical ideas by reasoning from common human experience, thus giving rise to what we can call Vedāntic “philosophy”—where philosophy is understood as an attempt to describe the general structure of reality without presupposing the truth of any particular religious revelation or experience. In short: Vedānta is primarily a spiritual path, but it also incorporates a revealed theology and a rational philosophy.

According to Vedānta, the Veda is the means of knowledge (*śruti pramāṇa*) that enables competent individuals to reach direct knowledge of the Real, which is beyond perception and inference. The problem with this is that something similar is claimed by believers in other alleged religious experiences or revelations, such as those contained in the Purāṇas, the Tantras, the Buddhist and Jain *sūtras*... not to mention the Bible, the Koran, etc. How does one know if any of these contradictory “revelations”, or more than one, are a valid means to metaphysical knowledge?

One might object that Vedānta is neither a theory nor a mere belief, but involves direct experience—however, all spiritual traditions make similar claims. They are all based on certain metaphysical beliefs, and culminate in supposedly direct mystical experiences, whose content depends on the beliefs they are based on and the practices through which they are reached. For instance, in Theravāda Buddhism the mystic eventually experiences the absence of *atman* (self); in Madhyamaka Buddhism, one

experiences the insubstantiality (*śūnyatā*) of everything; in Sāṃkhya, classical Yoga and Jainism, it is the difference between soul and matter; in theistic traditions, it is communion with the Divine; in Advaita Vedānta, Kashmir Śaivism and Yogācāra Buddhism, identity with or dissolution in the Absolute, and so on. In all cases the allegedly “direct” experience confirms the belief it arises from. It cannot be otherwise because the experience is based on that belief.¹

II

Let’s see what can be said about the metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta from a philosophical standpoint. Often, the masters of the school try to prove their assertions, employing arguments based on what we may call “transcendent metaphysics”. Transcendent metaphysics seeks to reach conclusions about hypothetical transcendent entities by reasoning from premises that refer to immanent entities. This kind of metaphysics has been common both in Indian and Western philosophy, and remains so even today. Unfortunately, this form of reasoning is wrong, since the content of the conclusions cannot go beyond the content of the premises. Therefore, one cannot draw transcendent conclusions from immanent or worldly premises. Transcendent metaphysics is thus impossible.² In Kant’s words, it is like a dove flapping its wings in the void, trying to fly without being supported by the air of experience.³

But there is another form of metaphysics: “transcendental” metaphysics, which merely tries to describe the structure of our common experience of reality. This kind of metaphysics has been employed throughout the history of philosophy, but it was first systematically laid out by Kant. Both he and Husserl—and, employing another terminology, Nicolai Hartmann and Peter Strawson⁴—have distinguished between the two

¹ For decades now Stephen T. Katz has been the main representative of this “contextualist” approach to mysticism. See Katz, S. T., “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism”, in Katz, S. T. (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978: 23-74.

² A similar argument was made by Dharmakīrti and other Buddhists in their criticism of the Nyāya arguments for proving the existence of God (see Vattanky, J., *Development of Nyāya Theism*, Intercultural Publications, New Delhi, 1993); in the West, this criticism was made by Hume, Kant and many others after them.

³ *Critique of Pure Reason*, Introd. III.

⁴ Hartmann used to distinguish between synthetic and constructive metaphysics, typical of scholastics and rationalists, and his own “new ontology”, which is analytical and critical (see Hartmann, N., *Neue Wege der Ontologie*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1942). Strawson opposed “revisionary” metaphysics, which aims to correct the ordinary way of thinking about reality, while he accepts “descriptive” metaphysics, which merely attempts to describe our actual way of thinking about metaphysical notions (Strawson, P. F., 1959, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London, Methuen).

forms of metaphysics, denying the possibility of speculative metaphysics while affirming the possibility of a descriptive metaphysics of common experience.⁵

III

If these authors were right, should we reject all Vedāntic metaphysics outright? No. There is another possibility: that of reinterpreting transcendently the transcendent metaphysics of Vedānta. That is, we cease considering the metaphysical assertions of Vedānta to be ontological claims about “objective” reality, independent of our knowledge of it, and instead we interpret them only as descriptions of our common subjective experience of reality. We find something similar, for example, in the thought of Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya and of Debabrata Sinha. The philosophy of Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya⁶ starts with a transcendental philosophy like that of Kant but—as also happened to Kant—it falls back into transcendent metaphysical speculations about the pure subject or the Absolute. These ideas cannot be reached by a merely descriptive philosophy, and are based on prior religious beliefs. Debabrata Sinha, in his 1986 work,⁷ accepts that the phenomenological reconstruction of Vedantic metaphysics that he is attempting can only be completed through faith in the scriptures as an essential step towards direct knowledge of the Absolute. In both cases, an interest in preserving the transcendent content of Vedantic metaphysics leads them to combine genuine transcendental description with prior religious beliefs. Whether consciously or not, the authors are jumping from rational philosophy to revealed theology.

IV

In fact, pure transcendental philosophy, without any admixture of religious beliefs, can only describe the general structure of reality as it appears in common experience; that is, it can describe a general and rather empty frame that says nothing—because it cannot do

⁵ On the possibility of a transcendental philosophy from a Phenomenological perspective, see Mohanty, J. N., *The Possibility of Transcendental Philosophy*, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1985. Some objections to his proposal can be found in Kirkland, F. M. and Chattopadhyaya, D. P. (eds.), *Phenomenology East and West. Essays in Honor of J. N. Mohanty*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1993:1-91; his reply is at 269-277.

⁶ See in particular “The Subject as Freedom” in Bhattacharyya, K. C., *Studies in Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1983²:367-454.

⁷ Sinha, D. B., *The Metaphysics of Experience in Advaita Vedānta. A Phenomenological Approach*, Motilal Banarsidass, 1983.

so—about “strong” metaphysical questions about God, the nature and destiny of the soul, etc. Transcendental metaphysics is thus a “weak”⁸ metaphysical frame within which different strong metaphysical systems can coexist if their claims are plausible or reasonable. That is, provided they are consistent with this general metaphysical frame and with the commonly accepted contents of ordinary knowledge and of the particular sciences. Accordingly, there may be different plausible alternative metaphysical systems, both religious—i.e. those which affirm the reality of a divine transcendence in the form of God, the Absolute, Liberation, etc.—and non-religious. Therefore, the idea of a weak transcendental metaphysics leads to a “perspectivism” or an “epistemological pluralism” similar to those found in Nietzsche, William James and José Ortega y Gasset in the West or in the Jain *anekāntavāda*, Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya and his son Kalidas Bhattacharya in India.⁹

The metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta is just *one* of those plausible alternative metaphysics.

V

It is not, therefore, possible to prove rationally the truth of Advaita Vedānta metaphysics, i.e. its cognitive value. Perhaps, however, it may be shown to have some practical value for human life—i.e. whether or not it is useful and beneficial to humans, individually and collectively. In asking this, we are adopting a pragmatist approach: since we cannot know if certain plausible metaphysical beliefs are true or false, all that can be determined is whether they are beneficial or harmful in practice.

Like other religious and non-religious worldviews, Advaita Vedānta might be useful for human life when correctly applied. The Chinese philosopher Xunzi, as early as the third century BCE, said that only the ignorant believe that rituals are offered to the spirits and to Heaven, understood as meaning a personal God. The wise, however, even while not believing in those entities, perform rituals because they know they are beneficial

⁸ In a sense similar to the “weak thought” of G. Vattimo (see Vattimo, G., and Rovati, P. A. (eds.), *Il pensiero debole*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1983).

⁹ See “The Jaina theory of Anekānta” and “The Concept of the Absolute and Its alternative forms” in Bhattacharya, K. C., *Studies in Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1983²:329-343 and 483-506; and Bhattacharya, K., *Alternative Standpoints in Philosophy: An Enquiry into the Fundamentals of Philosophy*, Dasgupta, Calcutta, 1953.

for personal and social harmony.¹⁰ Despite not accepting the metaphysical content of religious beliefs, some classical pragmatists—like William James and Hans Vaihinger—defended the value of religion. William James described the state of saintliness in his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*¹¹ and he recommended it highly for everyone, to the extent of their ability. Similarly, for Vaihinger¹² religious beliefs are useful fictions that, despite their unknowable truth or falsity, can guide and improve individual and collective human life.

The metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta, then, might contribute to the order and welfare of human life and society, as do other religious and non-religious belief systems. In addition, besides the possible psychological and social benefits, the believers of advanced religions—the so-called “religions of salvation or liberation” or “post-axial religions”¹³—such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, claim that the specific value of their religions is that they allow humans to achieve a state of ultimate fulfillment called salvation or liberation, which is said to be the ultimate end and supreme good of human life. This state is often said to come about in a hypothetical life after death, in which case this idea would belong to what we have called “metaphysical beliefs”. But, on the other side, all these religions also offer a practical goal to be reached while still living in this world, before death: the state of religious perfection, variously called saintliness, liberation in life, Nirvāṇa, etc. This would be a specifically religious, this-worldly supreme value. Henri Bergson, in his book *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*¹⁴, distinguishes between two aspects of religion: static religion, whose only purpose would be to maintain psychological and social order, and dynamic religion, whose goal would be to help human beings attain total freedom and personal fulfillment. These two aspects of religion correspond roughly to what in Hinduism are the two religious aims of human life (*puruṣārthas*): *dharma* or harmonious living and *mokṣa* or liberation. The first aim may be shared with non-religious belief systems, such as ideologies, as well as by religion

¹⁰ See Watson, B., *Xunzi: Basic Writings*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003.

¹¹ James, W., *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Longmans & Green, New York, 1902. See lectures XI-XV, on the nature and value of saintliness.

¹² See Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, Felix Meiner, Leipzig, 1911.

¹³ See Hick, J., *An Interpretation of Religion*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004².

¹⁴ Bergson, H., *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1932.

in general. The second purpose, bringing the individual to religious perfection, is specific to post-axial religious systems.

In the case of Advaita Vedānta, its specific value would be its ability to liberate the individual in this life (*jīvanmukti*) through knowledge of *brahman*. The beliefs and ideas contained in its theology and its philosophy, regardless of their truth or falsity, would have the practical value of being sufficient means for bringing qualified individuals to the state of complete freedom.

VI

Religion, in its two aspects of protecting individual and collective order (*dharma*) and of giving access to spiritual perfection (*mokṣa*), is essentially a practical matter. Buddhism has emphasized the importance of the practical side of religion and the need to avoid time-wasting activities, such as speculating and debating about metaphysical problems, which are both insoluble and irrelevant. In the oldest texts of the Pāli Canon, when the Buddha explains the Four Noble Truths, he always states that he *only* teaches the reality of suffering, its origin, its cessation and the path to the cessation of suffering.¹⁵ It is, therefore, an eminently practical teaching in which beliefs are only considered valuable if they are useful for spiritual practice. This is why the Buddha refused to talk about metaphysical problems that lacked direct practical relevance. He explicitly refused to answer questions about the world (its eternity or temporal existence, its finitude or infinitude) and about the soul (its relationship with the body, the existence of the soul of the saint after his death). These are the so-called “ten unexpounded (*avyākṛta*) questions”.¹⁶ In addition, he says nothing either for or against the existence of divine transcendent entities, about God or about the Absolute. The only transcendence he affirms is Nirvāṇa, the transcendence of ignorance and suffering, the awakening (Bodhi) to wisdom. This personal experience or state is what takes the place of divine transcendence in Theravāda Buddhism.

The oldest recorded type of Buddhism is, thus, pragmatic and metaphysically agnostic. However, this agnosticism is not so pure if we consider that Buddhism accepts such metaphysical beliefs as rebirth and the law of *karman*. I think this may be because in

¹⁵ For example, in *Samyutta Nikāya* 56.31.

¹⁶ Cf. *Majjhima Nikaya* 63 and 72, *Anguttara Nikaya* 10.96 and *Samyutta Nikāya* 44.

śramaṇic (ascetic) circles at the time of the Buddha, belief in rebirth and *karman* were already universally accepted doctrines, raising no controversies and not leading to excessive speculation. This is similar to the question of the existence of God in medieval Europe, where Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers debated all manner of issues but not the existence of a supreme being, which was accepted by all of them. Similarly, the Buddhists, Hindus, Jains and Ājīvikas of ancient India might well disagree on the existence and nature of the *ātman* (self) and *brahman* (the Absolute), the character of the spiritual path, etc. They did not, however, argue about the reality of spiritual bondage (*saṃsāra*), rebirth, the law of *karman* or the need for liberation (*mokṣa* / *nirvāṇa* / *kaivalya*), which all the schools accepted and took for granted.

What the Buddha says is that we must ignore metaphysical questions not so much because they are insoluble but because they are pragmatically useless: they do not contribute to the overcoming of suffering, which is the ultimate goal of human life. Indeed, they can even be harmful, since they distract from the essential issue, a spiritual practice that leads to spiritual Awakening. In the Buddha's time the law of *karman* and rebirth were not controversial issues: they did not give rise to debates or excessive, time-wasting speculation or to an abandonment of spiritual practice. Therefore, from a pragmatic point of view, they could be accepted without harm.

However, in our day and age all beliefs about life after death are controversial. They have become what the Buddha considered idle metaphysical questions and, for that reason, in contemporary Buddhism there is a growing tendency to dispense with all metaphysical beliefs, including eschatological ones, and to focus instead on religious practice and the few non-metaphysical ideas that are necessary to support that practice.¹⁷

VII

This agnostic, pragmatic interpretation of religion is not confined currently to certain sectors of Buddhism, but is also characteristic of certain important Western philosophers of religion. David Griffin, for example, defends religion's compatibility with a naturalistic vision of reality that completely dispenses with belief in supernatural entities and

¹⁷ Perhaps the most representative work in this line is Batchelor, S., *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Riverhead, New York, 1997.

processes. Dewi Phillips, for his part, interprets religion from an agnostic, practical and experiential perspective which refrains from taking sides on matters of transcendent metaphysics and thus rejects both metaphysical naturalism and supernaturalism.¹⁸

Following this line of reasoning, we can assert that all religious metaphysical beliefs about the soul, the world, transcendence and eschatology, are not only rationally unfounded but also unnecessary for religious practice. They can even be harmful, if one spends too much time speculating about and discussing them, instead of devoting that time to activities conducive to personal and social welfare. From this perspective, and taking into account what was said in the preceding paragraphs, there are several possible and reasonable alternative attitudes towards this kind of metaphysical belief: 1) to abandon them as unfounded metaphysical beliefs without any cognitive value; 2) to tolerate them as plausible alternative views of reality; or 3) to accept them as fictions which can be pragmatically useful for spiritual practice and human life in general.

VIII

In the case of Advaita Vedānta this operations should be carried out 1st) on beliefs about rebirth and the law of *karman* and 2nd) on beliefs about the *ātman* and *brahman*. Rebirth and the law of *karman* are not essential to practice because they are not directly related to the Higher Truth (*pāramārthika satya*), according to which only the indivisible *brahman* exists. Therefore, rebirth and *karman* can be dispensed with without significant harm to the practice of Vedānta. But, if the metaphysical truth of *brahman* is rejected, how can the spiritual path of Vedānta continue to function? Recall that this path consists mainly in the study of the scriptures relating to *brahman*, through which study a direct and liberating understanding occurs.

The answer is that one can continue studying, reflecting and meditating on the identity of *ātman* and *brahman* even though one doesn't believe in the literal truth of these ideas. The practitioner would instead take them as symbols of or pointers to the state of personal freedom (*mukti*), and employ them as useful fictions for reaching that state. For traditional Vedānta the gods (*devatās*) are symbols of aspects of God (Īśvara), Īśvara being

¹⁸ See, for example, Griffin, D. R., *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism. A Process Philosophy of Religion*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (New York), 2001, and Phillips, D. Z., *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001.

a relative and ultimately false representation of *nirguṇa brahman*, which entirely lacks attributes. Nevertheless, even knowing about this ultimate falsehood, Vedānta employs these ideas for the purification of the mind through worship and devout meditation (*upāsanā*). Likewise, my proposal for reinterpretation takes the Vedāntic metaphysics of the Absolute (*brahman*) and the self (*ātman*) as providing a set of ideas useful for contemplating ordinary experience from a non-dual perspective. When it becomes spontaneous, this perspective allows humans to transcend attachment and suffering and achieve inner freedom.

But, how are you to study, reflect and meditate with the required intensity on ideas that you believe are not literally true? The answer is that it is enough to believe they are a suitable means to attain liberation. For pragmatism, the true is what is expedient for action. If you believe that the cultivation of ideas about the non-dual *brahman* and its identity with the *ātman* can lead to total freedom, those ideas are pragmatically true for you and can become the solid foundation of a spiritual practice as effective as that of those who believe in their literal truth.

IX

Thus, while the metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta might not be an adequate representation of reality, it can still be a means for spiritual practice, and its concepts and propositions can be taken as useful fictions, symbols of or pointers to liberation in life. Therefore the only essential literal belief for a critical interpretation of Advaita Vedānta is belief in the possibility and the supreme value of liberation in life. Everything else is either a symbol or a practical expedient.

This conclusion can be extended to all forms of religious metaphysics: ideas of the divine, eschatological beliefs, etc. These ideas will symbolize the personal state of saintliness or religious perfection, and are therefore useful for religious practice. Consequently, the only essential religious belief pointed to and symbolized by all other religious beliefs, practices, institutions, etc. is the belief in the possibility and the supreme value of the state of saintliness.