

The Philosophy of the Vedanta in Its Relations to the Occidental Metaphysics

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An address, delivered before the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society,
Saturday the 25th February, 1893

Published in 1930
Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai [Madras] India
The Theosophist Office, Adyar, Madras. India

[Page 1] ON my journey through India I have noticed with satisfaction, that in philosophy till now our brothers in the East have maintained a very good tradition, better perhaps, than the more active but less contemplative branches of the great Indo-Aryan family in Europe, where Empirism, Realism and their natural consequence, Materialism, grow from day to day more exuberantly, whilst metaphysics, the very center and heart of serious philosophy, are supported only by a few ones, who have learned to brave the spirit of the age.

In India the influence of this perverted and pervasive spirit of our age has not yet overthrown in religion and philosophy the good traditions of the great ancient time. It is true, that most of the ancient *darsanas* even in India find only an historical interest; followers of the Sāṅkhya-System occur rarely; Nyāya is cultivated mostly as an intellectual sport and exercise, like grammar or mathematics, but the Vedāntic is, now as in the ancient time living in the mind and heart of every thoughtful Hindu. It is true, that even here in the [Page 2] sanctuary of Vedāntic metaphysics, the realistic tendencies, natural to man, have penetrated, producing the misinterpreting variations of Shankara's Adwaita, known under the names Visishtādwaita, Dwaita, Cuddhādwaita of Rāmanuja, Mādhva, Vallabha, but India till now has not yet been seduced by their voices, and of hundred Vedāntins (I have it from a well informed man, who is himself a zealous adversary of Shankara and follower of Rāmānuja) fifteen perhaps adhere to Rāmānuja, five to Madhva, five to Vallabha, and seventy-five to Shankarāchārya.

This fact may be for poor India in so many misfortunes a great consolation; for the eternal interests are higher than the temporary ones; and the system of the Vedānta, as founded on the Upanishads and Vedānta Sutras and accomplished by Shankara's commentaries on them, equal in rank to Plato and Kant — is one of the most valuable products of the genius of mankind in his researches of the eternal truth, as I propose to show now by a short sketch of Shankara's Adwaita and comparison of its principal doctrines with the best that occidental philosophy has produced till now.

Taking the Upanishads, as Shankara does, for revealed truth with absolute authority, it was not an easy task to build out of their materials a consistent philosophical system, for the Upanishads are in Theology, Cosmology and Psychology full of [Page 3] hardest contradictions. So in many passages the nature of Brahman is painted out in various and luxuriant colors, and again we read, that the nature of Brahman is quite unattainable to human words, to human understanding; so we meet sometimes longer reports explaining how the world has been created by Brahman, and again we are told, that there is no world besides Brahman, and all variety of things is mere error and illusion; so we have fanciful descriptions of

the Samsāra, the way of the wandering soul up the heaven and back to the earth, and again read that there is no Samsāra, no variety of souls at all, but only one Âtman, who is fully and totally residing in every being.

Shankara in these difficulties created by the nature of his materials, in face of so many contradictory doctrines, which he was not allowed to decline and yet could not admit altogether, has found a wonderful way out, which deserves the attention, perhaps the imitation of the Christian dogmatists in their embarrassments. He constructs out of the materials of the Upanishads two systems; one esoteric, philosophical (called by him *nirguna vidyā*, sometimes *pāramāthikā avasthā*) containing the metaphysical truth for the few ones, rare in all times and countries, who are able to understand it ; and another exoteric, Theological (*sagunā vidyā*, *vyāvahāriki avasthā*) for the general public, who want images, not abstract truth, worship, not meditation. [Page 4]

I shall now point out briefly the two systems, esoteric and exoteric, in pursuing and confronting them through the four chief parts, which Shankara's system contains, and every complete philosophical system must contain:

- I. Theology, the doctrine of God or of the philosophical principle.
- II. Cosmology, the doctrine of the world.
- III. Psychology, the doctrine of the soul.
- IV. Eschatology, the doctrine of the last things, the things after death.

I. THEOLOGY

The Upanishads swarm with fanciful and contradictory descriptions of the nature of Brahman. He is the all-pervading akāsa, is the purusha in the sun, the purusha in the eye; his head is the heaven, his eyes are sun and moon, his breath is the wind, his footstool the earth; he is infinitely great as soul of the universe and infinitely small as the soul in us; he is in particular the *Īsvara*, the personal God, distributing justly reward and punishment according to the deeds of man. All these numerous descriptions are collected by Shankara under the wide mantle of the exoteric theology, the *sagunā vidyā* of Brahman, consisting of numerous *vidyas* adapted for approaching the Eternal Being not by the way of knowledge but by the way of worshiping, and having each its particular fruits. Mark, [Page 5] that also the conception of God as a personal being *īsvara*, is merely exoteric and does not give us a conform knowledge of the Âtman; and indeed, when we consider what is personality, how narrow in its limitations, how closely connected to egoism the counterpart of Godly essence, who might think so low of God, to impute him personality ?

In the sharpest contrast to these exoteric *vidyās* stands the esoteric, *nirguriā vidyā* of the Âtman; and its fundamental tenet is the absolute inaccessibility of God to human thoughts and words;



and again:




and the celebrated formula occurring so often in Brihadāranyaka-Upanishad; *neti! neti, viz.*, whatever attempt you make to know the Âtman, whatever description you give of him, I always say: *na iti, na iti*, it is not so, it is not so ! Therefore the wise Bhāva, when asked by the king Vāshkalin, to explain the Brahman kept silence. And when the king repeated his request again and again, the rishi broke out into the answer: “I tell it to you, but you don't understand it; *cānto' yam ātmā*, this Âtmā is silence!” We know it now by the Kantian philosophy, that the answer of Bhāva was correct, [Page 6] we know it, that the very organization of our intellect (which is bound once for ever to its innate forms of intuition, space, time and causality) excludes us from a knowledge of the spaceless, timeless, Godly reality for ever and ever. And yet the Âtman, the only Godly being is not unattainable to us, is even not far from us for we have it fully and totally in ourselves as our own metaphysical entity; and here when returning from the outside and apparent world to the deepest secrets of our own nature, we may come to God, not by knowledge, but by *anubhava*, by absorption into our own self. There is a great difference between knowledge, in which subject and object are distinct from each other, and *anubhava*, where subject and object coincide in the same. He who by *anubhava* comes to the great intelligence, “*aham brahma asmi*” obtains a state called by Shankara *Samrāadhanam*, accomplished satisfaction; and indeed, what might he desire, who feels and vows himself as the sum and totality of all existence !

II. COSMOLOGY

Here again we meet the distinction of exoteric and esoteric doctrine, though not so clearly severed by Shankara as in other parts of his system.

The exoteric Cosmology according to the natural but erroneous realism (*avidyā*) in which we are born, considers this world as the reality and can [Page 7] express its entire dependency of Brahman only by the mythical way of a creation of the world, by Brahman. So a temporal creation of the world, even as in the Christian documents, is also taught in various and well-known passages of the Upanishads. But such a creation of the material world by an immaterial cause, performed in a certain point of time after an eternity elapsed uselessly, is not only against the demands of human reason and natural science, but also against another important doctrine of the Vedānta, which teaches and must teach (as we shall see hereafter) the “beginninglessness of the migration of souls”, *samsārasya anāditvam*. Here the expedient of Shankara is very clever and worthy of imitation. Instead of the temporary creation once for ever of the Upanishads, he teaches that the world in great periods is created and reabsorbed by Brahman (referring

to the misunderstood verse of the Rigveda: ). This mutual creation and reabsorption lasts from eternity, and no creation can be allowed by our system to be a first one, and that for good reasons, as we shall see just now. If we ask : *Why* has God created the world ? The answers to this question are generally very unsatisfactory. For his own glorification ? How may we attribute to him so much vanity! For his particular amusement ? But he was an eternity without this play-

toy! By love of mankind? How may he love a thing before it exists; and how may it be called love, to create millions [Page 8] for misery and eternal pain! The Vedānta has a better answer. The never ceasing new-creation of the world is a moral necessity connected with the central and most valuable doctrine of the exoteric Vedānta, the doctrine of Samsāra.

Man, says Shankara, is like a plant. He grows, flourishes and at the end he dies but not totally. For as the plant, when dying, leaves behind it the seed, of which, according to its quality, a new plant grows; so man, when dying, leaves his *Karma*, the good and bad works of his life, which must be rewarded and punished in another life after this. No life can be the first, for it is the fruit of previous actions, nor the last, for its actions must be expiated in a next following life. So the Samsāra is without beginning and without end, and the new creation of the world after every absorption into Brahman is a moral necessity, I need not point out, in particular here in India, the high value of this doctrine of Samsāra as a consolation in the distresses, as a moral agent in the temptations of life; I have to say here only, that the Samsāra, though not the absolute truth, is a mythical representative of truth which in itself is unattainable to our intellect; mythical is this theory of metempsychosis only in so far as it invests in the forms of space and time what really is spaceless and timeless and therefore beyond the reach of our understanding. So the Samsāra is just so far from the truth, as the *sagunā vidyā* is from the *nirgunā* [Page 9] *vidyā*; lit is the eternal truth itself, but (since we cannot conceive it otherwise) the truth in an allegorical form, adapted to our human understanding. And this is the character of the whole exoteric Vedānta, whilst the esoteric doctrine tries to find out the philosophical, the absolute truth.

And so we come to the esoteric Cosmology, whose simple doctrine is this, that in reality there is no manifold world, but only Brahman, and that what we consider as the world is a mere illusion (*māyā*) similar to a *mrigatrishnikā*, which disappears when we approach it, and not more to be feared than the rope, which we took in the darkness for a serpent. There are, as you see, many similes in the Vedānta, to illustrate the illusive character of this world, but the best of them is perhaps when Shankara compares our life with a long dream: a man whilst dreaming does not doubt of the reality of the dream, but this reality disappears in the moment of awakening, to give place to a truer reality, which we were not aware of whilst dreaming. The life a dream! this has been the thought of many wise men from Pindar and Sophocles to Shakspeare and Calderon de la Barca, but nobody has better explained this idea, than Shankara. And indeed, the moment when we die may be to nothing so similar as to the awakening from a long and heavy dream; it may be, that then heaven and earth are blown away like the nightly phantoms of the dream, and what then may stand before us ? or [Page 10] rather in us ? Brahman the eternal reality, which was hidden to us till then by this dream of life! This world is *māyā*, is illusion, is not the very reality, that is the deepest thought of the esoteric Vedānta, attained not by calculating *tarka* but by *anubhava*, by returning from this variegated world to the deep recess of our own self (*Ātman*). Do so, if you can, and you will get aware of a reality very different from empirical reality, a timeless, spaceless, changeless reality, and you will feel and experience that whatever is outside of this only true reality is mere appearance, is *māyā*, is a dream! This was the way the Indian thinkers went, and by a similar way, shown by Parmenides, Plato came to the same truth, when knowing and teaching that this world is a world of shadows, and that the reality is not in these shadows, but behind them. The accord here of Platonism and Vedāntism is wonderful, but both have grasped this great metaphysical truth by intuition; their tenet is true, but they are not able to prove it, and in so far they are defective. And here a great light and assistance to the Indian and the Grecian thinker comes from the philosophy of Kant, who went quite another way, not the Vedāntic and Platonic way of intuition but the way of abstract reasoning and scientific proof. The great work of Kant is an analysis of human mind, not in the superficial way of Locke, but getting to the very bottom of it. And in doing so Kant found, to the surprise of the [Page 11] world and of

himself, that three essential elements of this outside world, viz., space, time and causality, are not, as we naturally believe, eternal fundamentals of an objective reality, but merely subjective innate intuitive forms of our own intellect. This has been proved by Kant and by his great disciple Schopenhauer with mathematical evidence, and I have given these proofs (the fundament of every scientific metaphysic) in the shortest and clearest form in my “*Elemente der Metaphysik*” — a book which I am resolved now to get translated into English, for the benefit not of the Europeans (who may learn German) but of my brothers in India, who will be greatly astonished to find in Germany the scientific substruction of their own philosophy — the Adwaita Vedānta ! (For Kant has demonstrated, that space, time and causality are not objective realities, but only subjective forms of our intellect, and the unavoidable conclusion is this, that the world, as far as it is extended in space, running on in time, ruled throughout by causality, in so far is merely a representation of my mind and nothing beyond it. You see the concordance of Indian, Grecian and German metaphysics; the world is *māyā*, is illusion, says Shankara; it is a world of shadows, not of realities, says Plato; it is “appearance only, not the thing in itself”, says *Kant*. Here we have the same doctrine in three different parts of the world, but the scientific proofs of [Page 12] it are not in Shankara, not in Plato, but only in Kant.

III. PSYCHOLOGY

Here we convert the order and begin with the esoteric Psychology, because it is closely connected with the esoteric Cosmology and its fundamental doctrine: the world is *māyā*. All is illusive, with one exception, with the exception of my own Self, of my *Ātman*. My *Ātman* cannot be illusive, as Shankara shows, anticipating the “*cogito, ergo sum*” of Descartes, for he who would deny it, even in denying it, witnesses its reality. But what is the relation between my individual soul, the *Jīva-Ātman* and the highest soul, the *Parama-Ātman* or Brahman ? Here Shankara, like prophet, foresees the deviations of Rāmānuja, Madhva and Vallabha and refutes them in showing, that the *Jīva* cannot be a part of Brahman (Rāmānuja), because Brahman is without parts (for it is timeless and spaceless, and all parts are either successions in time or co-ordinations in space, as we may supply), neither a different thing from Brahman (Mādhva), for Brahman is *ekam eva advitiam*, as we may experience by *anubhava*, nor a metamorphose of Brahman (Vallabha), for Brahman is unchangeable (for, as we know now by Kant, it is out of causality). The conclusion is, that the *Jīva*, being neither a part nor a different thing, nor a [Page 13] variation of Brahman, must be the *Paramātman* fully and totally himself, a conclusion made equally by the Vedāntin Shankara, by the Platonic Plotinos, and by the Kantian Schopenhauer. But Shankara in his conclusions goes perhaps further than any of them. If really our soul, says he, is not a part of Brahman but Brahman himself, then all the attributes of Brahman all-pervadingness, eternity, all-mightiness (scientifically-spoken: exemption of space, time, causality) are ours; *aham brahma asmi*, I am Brahman, and consequently I am all-pervading (spaceless), eternal (timeless), almighty (not limited in my doing by causality). But these godly qualities are hidden in me, says Shankara, as the fire is hidden in the wood and will appear only after the final deliverance.

What is the cause of this concealment of my godly nature ? The Upādhis, answers Shankara, and with this answer we pass from the esoteric to the exoteric psychology. The Upādhis are manas and indriyas, prana with its five branches, sūkshman sarīram, in short, the whole psychological apparatus, which together with a factor changeable from birth to birth, with my karman, accompanies my *Ātman* in all his ways of migration, without infecting his Godly nature, as the crystal is not infected by the color painted over it. But wherefrom originate these Upādhis ? They form of course part of the *māyā*, the great world illusion, [Page 14] and like *māyā* they are based in our innate *avidyā* or ignorance, a merely negative power and yet strong enough to keep us from our Godly existence. But now, from where comes the *avidyā*, this

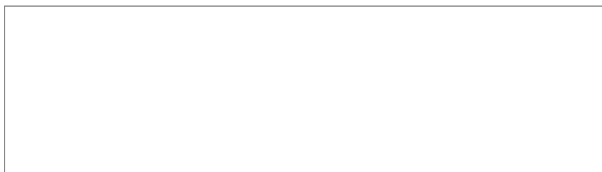
primeval cause of ignorance, sin, and misery ? Here all philosophers in India and Greece and everywhere have been defective, until Kant came to show us that the whole question is inadmissible. You ask for the cause of *avidyā*, but she has no cause; for causality goes only so far as this world of the Samsāra goes, connecting each link of it with another, but never beyond Samsāra and its fundamental characteristic the *avidyā*. In enquiring after a cause of *avidyā* with *māyā*, Samsāra and Upādhis, you abuse, as Kant may teach us, your innate mental organ of causality to penetrate into a region for which it is not made and where it is no more available. The fact is, that we are here in ignorance, sin and misery, and that we know the way out of them, but the question of a cause for them is senseless.

IV. ESCHATOLOGY

And now a few words about this way out of the Samsāra, and first about the exoteric theory of it. In the ancient time of the hymns there was no idea of samsāra but only rewards in heaven and (somewhat later) punishment in a dark region (*padam gabhiram*), the precursor of the later hells. [Page 15] Then the deep theory of Samsāra came up, teaching-reward and punishment in the form of a new birth on earth. The Vedānta combines both theories, and so man has a double expiation, first in heaven and hell, and then again in a new existence on the earth. This double expiation is different (1) for performers of good works, going the *Pitrīyana*, (2) for worshipers of the Sagunam Brahma, going the *Devyāna*, (3) for wicked deeds, leading to what is obscurely hinted at in the Upanishads as the *Tritīyam Sthānam*, the third place — (1) the *Pitrīyana* leads through a succession of dark spheres to the moon, there to enjoy the fruit of the good works and, after their consumption, back to an earthly existence. (2) The *Devyāna* leads through a

set of brighter spheres to Brahman, without returning to the earth (). But this Brahman is only Sagunam Brahma, the object of worshiping, and its true worshipers, though entering into this Sagunam Brahma without returning, have to wait in it until they get *moksha* by obtaining *samayogadorshanam*, the full knowledge of the Nirgunam Brahma. (3) The *Tritīyam Sthānam*, including the later theories of hells, teaches punishment in them, and again punishment by returning to earth in the form of lower castes, animals, and plant. All these various and fantastical ways of Samsāra are considered as true, quite as true as this world is, but not more. For the whole world and the whole way of Samsāra is [Page 16] valid and true for those only who are in the *avidyā*, not for those who have overcome her, as we have to show now.

The esoteric Vedānta does not admit the reality of the world nor of the Samsāra, for the only reality is Brahman, seized in ourselves as our own *Ātman*. The Knowledge of this *Ātman*, the great intelligence: “*aham brahma asmī*”, does not produce *moksha* (deliverance), but is *moksha* itself. Then we obtain what the Upanishads say:



When seeing Brahma as the highest and the lowest everywhere, all knots of our heart, all sorrows are split, all doubts vanish, and our works become nothing. Certainly no man can live without doing works, and so also the *Jīvanmukta* but he knows it, that all these works are illusive, as the whole world is, and therefore they do not adhere to him nor produce for him a new life after death. And what kind of works may such a man do ? People have often reproached the Vedānta with being defective in morals and indeed, the Indian genius is too contemplative to speak much of works; but the fact is nevertheless, that

the highest and purest morality is the immediate consequence of the Vedānta. The Gospels fix quite correctly as the highest law of morality: "love your neighbor as yourselves". But why should I do so, since by [Page 17] the order of nature I feel pain and pleasure only in myself, not in my neighbor ? The answer is not in the Bible (this venerable book being not yet quite free of Semitic realism), but it is in the Veda is in the great formula "*tat team asi*", which gives in three words metaphysics and morals altogether. You shall love your neighbor as yourselves, because you are your neighbor, and mere illusion makes you believe, that your neighbor is something different from yourselves. Or in the words of the Bhagavad-Gītā: "he, who knows himself in everything and everything in himself, will not injure himself by himself, *nahinasti ātmanā ātmānam*". This is the sum and tenor of all morality, and this is the standpoint of a man knowing himself as Brahman. He feels himself as everything, so he will not desire anything, for he has whatever can be had; he feels himself as everything, — so he will not injure anything, for nobody injures himself. He lives in the world, is surrounded by its illusions but not deceived by them: like the man suffering from *timira*, who sees two moons but knows that there is one only, so the Jīvanmukta sees the manifold world and cannot get rid of seeing it, but he knows, that there is only one being, Brahman, the Ātman, his own Self, and he verifies it by his deeds of pure uninterested morality. And so he expects his end, like the potter expects the end of the twirling of his wheel, after the vessel is ready. And then, for him, when death [Page 18] comes, no more Samsāra:

He enters into Brahman, like the streams into the ocean:

he leaves behind him *nāma*, and *rūpam*, he leaves behind him *individuality*, but he does not leave behind him his *Ātmana*, his Self. It is not the falling of the drop into the infinite ocean, it is the whole ocean, becoming free from the fetters of ice, returning from his frozen state to that what he is really and has never ceased to be, to his own all-pervading, eternal, all-mighty nature.

And so the Vedānta, in its unfalsified form, is the strongest support of pure morality, is the greatest consolation in the sufferings of life and death. Indians, keep to it ! [Page 19]

FAREWELL TO INDIA

O, sun of India, what have we committed,
That we must leave thee and thy children now
Thy giant-trees, thy flowers, so well befitted

To thy blue heaven's never-frowning brow.

And you, our Indian friends, whose hearty feeling
Deep sympathy with you has fast obtained —
From Ceylon to Peshawar and Darjeeling,
Are you now lost to us, so soon as gained ?

Farewell! Now Space and Time, in separating
Our bodies, will create a cruel wall;
Until forgetful darkness over-shading
Like Himālayan fog, bedims you all.

Did we but dream of your brown lovely faces,
Of your dark eyes, and gently touching hands ?
Was it a dream, that left such tender traces,
We carry back with us to foreign lands ?

O, yes, a dream is all that we are living,
And India be a dream in this great dream;
A dream, repose and recreation giving,
Under a paler heaven's fainter beam.

But what are Time and Space, whose rough intrusion,
Will separate what is so near allied !
Are they not taught to be a mere illusion ?
May we not be against them fortified ?

O, yes, this thought shall be our consolation,
When we are severed soon by land and sea !
Your sun and ours is one ! no separation !
Keep friendship, friends, let it eternal be.