

JOHN B. CHETHIMATTAM

CONSCIOUSNESS
AND
REALITY

An Indian Approach
to Metaphysics

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By

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PREFACE

In recent times the East-West religious dialogue has gained momentum. The world looks too small to be split up into opposing religious camps. But, what often stands in the way of a mutual appreciation of the religious positions is the radical difference in philosophical thought patterns between East and West. Hence a clear understanding of the Indian philosophical approach is essential for evaluating the religious contribution of India. The scope of this book is to explain briefly the physiognomy of Indian thought in contrast to the Western mode of thought.

India is the homeland of the major Eastern religions and her traditional philosophy was greatly instrumental in formulating their religious ideas. Often what is only a particular way of looking at things and expressing one's ideas is taken by people of other traditions as some exotic religious concept. For this reason a great part of Western criticism of Hinduism and Buddhism has missed the mark. The confusion has been increased by Indian scholars educated in the West who appeal to Kant, Hegel, Berkeley and Bradley to interpret Indian philosophical ideas. They bring in all kinds of superficial parallels with Linguistic Analysis, Logical Positivism, Phenomenology and Existentialism to explain the ancient Indian tradition!

For any fruitful dialogue each one has to be conscious of his own identity as well as of the individuality of his partner. Hence, a right understanding of the metaphysical genius of India is indispensable for an East-West religious dialogue. I have attempted here to rethink the principal questions discussed in Western metaphysics from the Indian angle of vision. I have not dealt with all the different schools of Western thought nor mentioned the shades and differences of opinion in Western contemporary philosophy.

This is a book on the Indian tradition. West is considered only as a point of reference, and in this I have restricted myself to the main stream running down from Plato and Aristotle through Augustine and Aquinas.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Rev. Dr. Norris W. Clarke, S.J., of the Fordham University, New York, who by his criticism of the book from the Western point of outlook helped me to clarify several questions. I was also very much helped in the writing of this book by the discussions in the Seminars on Comparative Religion directed by Dr. Wilfred Cantwell Smith at the Harvard University, as well as by the Sanskrit course on Ramanuja's Philosophy given at the same University by Dr. Daniel H. H. Ingalls. A remark made by Dr. Ingalls while discussing one of the Sanskrit terms can serve as a useful caution to those who approach Indian thought from a Western background: A wrong translation of Sanskrit terms can make Indian Philosophy look very similar to Western Philosophy!

BANGALORE,
15th August 1967.

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PART I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the Indian Approach to Reality

The Approach to Reality is different in different philosophical traditions. Greek Philosophy took an objective and ontological view of reality and emphasized the interrelation and hierarchical order of beings. Hebrew tradition gave a strong action-connotation to the verb "haya" = is, and emphasized the personal side of reality. Indian philosophical tradition placed the accent on the interioristic and self-centred unity of reality in consciousness. Perhaps this diversity in approach to the basic problem of Philosophy, the question of Reality, may be the basic reason for the existence of different schools of Philosophy.

I shall not discuss here the Hebrew approach, which is unique in its own way. But, it is necessary to indicate briefly the general trend of Western thought to understand by contrast the physiognomy of the Indian tradition.

Western View of Reality

In the history of Greek thought Parmenides is considered the father of Metaphysics since he seems to be the first to deal with the world of experience under the transcendental aspect of being. The goddess told him: "That which may be spoken of and thought of is what is: for, it is possible for it to be; but it is impossible for nothing to be."¹ For Parmenides being is unique and necessary: "What is, is

¹ Parmenides. Frag. 6; Hilton C. Nahm. *Selections from Early Greek Philosophy* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), p. 93.

CHAPTER II

CONCEPT OF REALITY IN THE UPANISHADS

Even in the mythological period, when philosophical thinking had very little evolved, India fixed on life and vital evolution as the model of its world conception. The cosmological myths for the most part conceive the origin of the world something like a biological generation: The universe is said to have evolved from the primeval golden seed, the *Hiranyagarbha*. The origin is at times traced to the cosmic egg, which split into two, forming heaven and earth.¹

In the famous *Purushasukta* of the *R̥g Veda* the evolution of things is ascribed to the *Purusha*, the Supreme Person:

A thousand heads hath Purusha, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. On every side pervading earth he fills a space ten fingers wide. This Purusha is all that yet hath been and all that is to be... All creatures are one-fourth of him, three-fourths eternal life in heaven.²

With the evolution of thought the notion of Being, *sat*, the participle of the verb *asti*, verb "to be," is introduced. But *asti* in Sanskrit is no mere copula, as the *esti* of Greek. Hence *sat* has a strong existential meaning. In the light of the evolution and emergence of *sat*, the state before it

¹ *Chāndogya Upanishad*, III, xix, 1. The chronology or the relative antiquity of the Upanishads is of secondary importance for us in this discussion. Since they are productions of different schools, they bear the stamp of the respective school, and show us the different currents of thought. For a summary of the discussions on the chronology of the Upanishads cf. Joseph Nadin Rawson. *The Kaṭha Upanishad* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 8-12. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. *The Principal Upanishads* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1953), p. 22: "Modern criticism is generally agreed that the ancient prose Upanishads, *Aitareya*, *Kauṣitaki*, *Chāndogya*, *Kena*, *Taittirīya*, and *Bṛhadāranyaka*, together with *Isa* and *Kaṭha* belong to the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. They are all pre-Buddhistic."

² *R̥g Veda*, X, 90.

RAMANUJA AND HIS IMMEDIATE BACKGROUND

The importance of Ramanuja in studying the Indian approach to reality is that according to scholars he is more in agreement with the whole of Indian philosophical tradition than any other important philosopher, especially than Śankara, who is held in esteem by all for his outstanding original contribution to Metaphysics. Coming more than three centuries after the great Advaitic thinker, Ramanuja¹ built up his system in reaction to the growing influence of Śankara's *Advaita* or "Non-Dualism". Educated first in the Advaitic tradition, he soon fell out with his teacher Yadavaprakasa, a militant *Advaitin*, because he found that the *Advaita* philosophy was doing great damage through its abstract concept of the Absolute and purely theoretical approach to the problems of religious philosophy, to the religious spirit of the people. Hence in deep meditation in a Vishnu temple he tried to formulate his own system.

In this reaction against *Advaita* he drew inspiration from the *Bhakti* or devotional movement of the Alvars of

¹ Ramanuja was born in 1017 A.D., son of Keśava Jājnika at Sriperumbudur, a village some thirty miles south of Madras. After his marriage at the age of sixteen, and the premature death of his father he moved to the famous temple city of Kanchi or Canjeepuram a few miles away, where he devoted his time to the study of religious Scriptures, and made pilgrimage to the various holy places like Benares. After the death of Sri Yamunacharya he became the leader of the Vaisnavait religious group and head of the *mutt* at Srirangam, at which post he remained till his death, except for a period of twelve years (1096-1118) when owing to the displeasure of the Chola king Krimikanṭha (1070-1118) he had to leave Srirangam and live in the State of Mysore. He wrote his treatises for the instruction of his religious subjects. For the composition of his works he is said to have travelled as far north as Kashmir to consult the writings of the ancient Masters. He is said to have died at the advanced age of hundred and twenty. cf. Krishna Datta Bharadwaj. *The Philosophy of Ramanuja* (New Delhi, 1958), pp. 2-8; Alkondaville Govindacharya. *The Life of Ramanujacharya* (Madras, 1906), pp. 28-362; 51-52.

CHAPTER IV

RAMANUJA AND ŚANKARA

The sharpest division within the Vedānta school is between the *Advaita* or non-dualism of Śāṅkara and the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* or qualified non-dualism of Rāmaṇuja, since very few follow the extreme dualism; most of the dualist schools align themselves with the position of Rāmaṇuja in their opposition to Advaita, with only minor distinctions and additions. This opposition between Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita is clearly brought out by Rāmaṇuja, who devotes a disproportionate portion of his commentary on the Brahma Sūtras to a refutation of the Advaitic position. The disagreement is so much on the basic outlook on reality that the *pūrvapakṣa* or objections presented by the Advaitin and the theses or *siddhānta* of Rāmaṇuja mostly center around the first word “*athāta*” (which is a compound of two simple words *atha* = then and *atas* = therefore) of the first *Sūtra* of Bādarāyana.

The *laghupūrvapakṣa* or minor objection, and the *laghusiddhānta* or minor thesis are about the first word “then” and centers around the approach or methodology towards the study of reality. The word denotes the relation between the *Pūrvamīmāṃsā* or *Mīmāṃsā* proper, which is ritualistic, and *Uttaramīmāṃsā* or Vedānta which is doctrinal. For Śāṅkara “then” of the Sūtra means that the stage of action, asceticism and ritual proposed in *Mīmāṃsā* is completely superseded at the stage of knowledge and in no way contributes to the final liberation which is attained solely by knowledge. For Rāmaṇuja on the other hand, “then” means that action and knowledge are intimately related as two parts of the same path: what is imperfectly attained through action is perfected by knowledge.

Then comes the major difference on the second member of the compound, “therefore” on which the *mahāpūrvapakṣa*

CHAPTER V

CONSCIOUSNESS AND REALITY IN RAMANUJA'S PHILOSOPHY

Avenues of Approach to Reality

From Reasoning to Reality

Ramanuja like the other Hindu Acharyas does not claim originality. They are teachers and as such interpret the traditional teaching laid down in Scripture. But Ramanuja's importance to Metaphysics is that he elaborated the problems from a rational point of view. His main thesis is that even Scripture can be understood only by reasoning, and that if a conflict should arise between the two, reason should be preferred.

The task of reasoning is not to make deductions and generalizations from experience, but to find out the meaning and basic teachings of Scripture, which is handed down from time immemorial from generation to generation. The most important part of Scripture according to Ramanuja is that which sets forth:

the knowledge of the proper form and nature of the individual soul which are different from the body; the proper form and nature of the Supreme Spirit who is the inner Ruler of the soul; the worship of the Supreme Spirit; and the apprehension of Brahman as perfect boundless bliss.¹

Ramanuja agrees with the Advaitins and almost all other schools of Hinduism that the present condition of souls is bondage; it consists essentially in *ajñāna* or lack of right knowledge. Hence it has to be removed by a special knowledge of the Ultimate Reality, Brahman, and of the finite beings in relation to Him.

¹ *Vedārthasamgraha*, No. 3, JABVB, p. 184.

PART II
CONSCIOUSNESS AND METAPHYSICS

CHAPTER I

NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The first part of this study has been devoted to examining the Indian tradition in its approach to reality. Down the centuries it has developed a predilection for consciousness as a point of view for evaluating the world of reality. Śankara and especially Ramanuja have perfected the details of this approach. Their basic suppositions and principles provide a sufficient ground to construct a Metaphysics from the side of consciousness, distinct from the outlook of objective analysis which has been the traditional procedure of the West. This part of the study will concentrate upon the solutions to the principal problems of metaphysics from the point of view of consciousness. The basic problems occurring in metaphysics are the general approach to reality as such, the coexistence of the Infinite Reality and the finite beings, causality, the structure of reality, and man's own encounter with it. To solve these problems taking consciousness as the starting point, the nature of consciousness itself has to be first examined.

Objective Analysis of Consciousness

The difficulty in understanding consciousness is that consciousness itself may be looked at from two sides, from the side of rational analysis and of consciousness.

Objective analysis deals with consciousness as a phenomenon and tries to reduce it to universal categories of thought. In this outlook consciousness stands for self-awareness: Not only does one know, but one knows that one knows. The knowing subject perceives not only the table presented to its experience, but also its own perception of it.

Knowing the table means that the table which was so far unperceived becomes now known or perceived. How-

CHAPTER II

APPROACH TO REALITY FROM THE EMPIRICAL LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Concentric Levels of Approach

A remarkable fact about the Indian approach to reality from consciousness is its capacity to integrate the various levels of thought in the one quest of the real. Even the schools which seem to be engaged in cosmology, logic or psychology like the Nyāya, Vaiśeshika, Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems, are concerned with the final attainment of liberation and realization of the ultimate reality. On the other hand, Vedantins, like Śankara and Ramanuja, who concentrate all their inquiry on the study of Atman give great importance to the *pramanas* or means of right knowledge, which are principally *pratyakṣa*, perception, *anumana* inference, and *śabda* verbal testimony. All these belong to the empirical level of consciousness. These means on the empirical level are necessary for an adequate realization of reality even on the transcendental level.

This capacity for integration is a special feature of the approach from consciousness, and is not very evident in the approach through rational analysis. Though both proceed from knowledge to the study of reality, consciousness takes the thing in all its aspects, while rational analysis takes a particular aspect of the phenomenon apart and studies it in isolation. For rational analysis, reality is an object of thought and speech, existing in itself, independently of thought and has therefore to be examined all by itself and not confused with the subjective impressions of the investigator. Hence, various levels of thought remain distinct with very little possibility of integrating one to another.

This irreducibility of the levels of thought in rational analysis is reflected in the various systems which follow

CHAPTER III

TRANSCENDENTAL APPROACH TO REALITY

Scope and Method of Procedure

We have discussed above the approach to reality from the point of view of consciousness on the empirical level. However, the empirical level does not deal with reality as such, but only under particular aspects, physical, logical, psychological and linguistic. Though all these indicate the one reality, still, they do not ask what reality in itself is. This question can be dealt with only on the transcendental level, where the basic dimensions of reality are existence, truth and such other notions which characterize everything indicated as real. Hence I shall discuss here how reality as such is attained from the point of view consciousness on the transcendental level.

In the present bodily existence of man, he has no direct intuition of reality as such. The complexity of the world of reality, therefore, requires a synthetic approach. I shall expose briefly the *Śūnyavāda* or Void-theory of Nagarjuna and the Advaita of Śankara as two possible extremes in order to explore the feasibility of a synthetic view on the lines suggested by Ramanuja.

On this transcendental level too, rational analysis and consciousness proceed in opposite directions. Rational analysis examines reality as something presented to thought and speech, an object. It is being, because it *is* independently of thought, exists in itself. All the transcendental notes flow from this presentation of being as object to the human mind. Consciousness, however, does not take reality as purely objective, but directs the attention to one's own self as the core of reality. The problem is what the ultimately real in this self is.

CHAPTER IV

THE SEARCH FOR THE ONE FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF CONSCIOUSNESS

General Introduction

In the three preceding chapters I have briefly outlined the nature of consciousness and the various approaches from it to reality. It remains to see how reality is attained in a comprehensive synthesis according to these approaches, especially on the transcendental level.

This survey of reality according to the Vedantic tradition is done in four steps indicated by the first four *sutras* of the *Badarayana Sutras*, the official text-book of the school. These four *sutras* constitute a certain compact unity, and are therefore designated by the common title of "*Catussūtri*" extensively commented upon by the *Āchāryas* or teachers as a comprehensive view of metaphysics. In our discussion below we shall follow the same scheme.

The first *sutra*, "*athāto Brahmajijñāsa*," "Then, therefore, the inquiry into Brahman," shows an approach to the Supreme Reality from the human desire for liberation through right knowledge, and in its light evaluates the world of finite beings. The second *sutra* "*janmādyasya yatah*," "That from which the origin, etc.," is a discussion of Causality from the point of view of consciousness.

The third *sutra*, "*sāstrayonitvāt*," "Since Scripture is the source," concentrates the attention on the central doctrine of the Upanishads and attempts a definition of the Supreme Reality as existence, consciousness and infinity and in its light discusses the reality of finite beings. The fourth *sutra*, "*tattu samanvayāt*," "And that on account of the connection", presents the Ultimate Reality as the highest

CHAPTER V

MANY FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The Scope of the Chapter

In the problem of the One and the many, the more difficult to explain from the viewpoint of consciousness is the many. We shall discuss in this chapter how the multitude of finite beings can exist with the absolute reality of the One without in any way affecting its absolute simplicity and infinite perfection. The best way to understand the solution from the angle of consciousness is to contrast it with the answer according to objective analysis. So I shall briefly explain the analogy of being as conceived in the Western tradition taking St. Thomas as a representative, before proceeding to examine the question according to the Indian approach. However, we shall not attempt a historical study of St. Thomas's ideas, but rather profiting by the excellent studies already made on his doctrine of analogy by Father George P. Klubertanz, S.J., and others, only summarise their conclusions here.

The Analogy of Being

The Problem

When reason approaches reality presented to its scrutiny what unites the great variety of things constituting the real world is being: they are. They are independent of the mind, existing in themselves. But, they are not all in the same way. Though existing, they are not existence, but, only existents, some in themselves, which we call substance, some in others and hence designated as accidents. Some come into existence and are capable of passing out of existence, while being itself denotes only the perfection of existing.

CHAPTER VI

JANMĀDYASYA YATAH: CONSCIOUSNESS AND CAUSALITY

Causality is a basic notion of metaphysics in which Western and Indian approaches complement each other to sound the depths of reality. As we have shown in the last chapter, in a rational analysis the problem centers around the One, while from the angle of consciousness the many is problematic. The universe of "being" as analyzed by reason requires for its full intelligibility an investigation of the ultimate causes, while consciousness, which takes the reality of the One as the starting point, has to reconcile the many with the One through the link of causality.

The Scope of this Chapter

In this chapter I shall first briefly indicate how the problem of causality is discussed from the side of objective analysis and then against its background examine the approach to the problem from the point of view of consciousness. In studying the Western tradition of rational analysis in this subject, I shall follow St. Thomas as one typical representative and summarise his position.

Rational Analysis of Causality

Causality is so fundamental to the approach through objective analysis that to know is said to be to know through causes. Cause is called the "*finis ad quem consideratio scientiae pertingit*,"¹ the very goal of scientific investigation. A thing is considered known only when all the causes from the immediate to the ultimate ones are known.² For, the

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas. *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis*, I, 1, 1.

² *In I Physic. lect.*, 1, n. 5.

CHAPTER VII

SASTRAYONITVAT THE UPANISHADIC SYNTHESIS

Scope of the Chapter

We have so far examined above the discovery of the Ultimate Reality as well as the problem of the coexistence of the finite beings along with the Supreme, from the point of view of consciousness. But, an approach from the angle of consciousness is not satisfied with a mere discovery or a theoretical description of reality. It endeavours to obtain a deeper realization of reality by concentrating upon it all the available means of knowledge. That is why Ramanuja insists on *dhyāna* and *upāsana*, concentration and devotional meditation, in which the mind constantly dwells upon the ultimate object, as the comprehensive means for knowledge of Brahman. This is the principal scope of the Upanishads, which with a pedagogical approach constantly strive to direct the mind to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of reality, especially of Ultimate Reality.

The need for such integral knowledge of reality is emphasised by the third Śūtra of Badarayana, *śāstrayōnitvāt*. It means that *Śāstra* or Scripture is the *yoni* or womb of the knowledge concerning Brahman, the supreme reality. We shall discuss in this chapter the principal ways in which the Upanishads try to attain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of reality.

The Vedantins generally admit the *apaurusheyatva* or authorlessness of Scripture. It is simply wisdom, the record of the direct experience which the sages had of reality in general and of the Ultimate Reality in particular. In this sense Śankara calls it a sort of *pratyakṣa*, direct experience.¹

¹ *Brahma Sutra Sankara Bhāshya*, I, iii, 28; III, ii, 24.

CHAPTER VIII

PERSONALITY FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF CONSCIOUSNESS

**“*Tat tu Samanvayat*—That being the highest object
of human pursuit ”**

The culminating point of Vedanta philosophy is that Brahman is the highest object of human pursuit. The fourth Sūtra of Badarayana reads, *Tat tu samanvayāt* = “that being the highest object of human pursuit.” The meaning of the statement according to Ramanuja is that the final goal of all search for reality is not action or attainment of finite results, but the knowledge of Brahman as the Ultimate Self. Worship and loving surrender are the means by which Brahman, who is the Supreme Person, is attained by man. The human being is a conscious self capable of knowing and loving. Brahman too is a person, a conscious Self. The whole process of liberation is governed by man’s attitude to the Divine Person, and the help the Divine Person renders the human person to attain the right knowledge.

This brings us to the explicit consideration of personality, the personality of God, the supreme Self, and the personality of the loving and devoted finite self. Personality is the most important category in Ramanuja’s conception of reality. I shall here first briefly indicate how the notion of personality is obtained through rational analysis, and then in its light explain the concept of personality from the point of view of consciousness. It will become clear that personality is the converging point for the two approaches to reality.

The Rational Evaluation of Personality

Here again the two approaches are different and complementary. In the rational approach we start analyzing the concept of the person and defining him. The Greeks

CHAPTER IX

THE GENERAL WORLD VIEW

Summary of the Two Metaphysical Positions

We have examined so far the approach to Reality from consciousness as distinct from rational metaphysics, which has been traditional to the West. The difference is radical and affects the solutions to all the main problems of metaphysics.

In the first part we traced the evolution of this approach to reality in the long philosophical history of India, and indicated how it came to be systematically expressed in the six schools of Hindu thought. This study of reality from the angle of consciousness attained maturity in the metaphysics of Śankara and Ramanuja who are opposed to each other in the conception of consciousness itself: Śankara takes the abstract and distinctionless notion of consciousness as the standard for reality, while Ramanuja takes self-consciousness as the model with which to measure beings. In spite of their apparent divergence these two leaders of Indian thought complete each other; and have very much a common ground to present: Both start from consciousness, seek an integral vision of reality, and strive to interpret the world of finite beings in relation with the Absolute Consciousness, Brahman.

In the second part we have taken the fundamental problems of metaphysics and tried to explain how each problem is solved from the angle of consciousness, but always after briefly stating how the question is faced from the rational angle, drawing inspiration from the various systems that have developed in the West. To sum up the main points: .

(1) Western Philosophy proceeds towards reality by a rational analysis of thought, whether it be of its object, or

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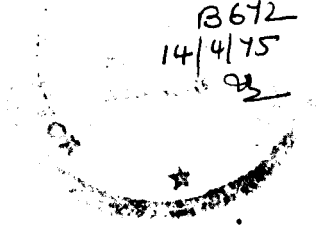
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CONSCIOUSNESS AND REALITY

An Indian Approach to Metaphysics

The central point in the Indian contribution to world thought is the emphasis on consciousness. Consciousness constitutes the point of departure for the discussion of all philosophical and religious problems in the Indian tradition. The real is what consciousness manifests. The more impervious to consciousness a thing is, the less real it is. Consciousness constitutes a norm for evaluating all metaphysical principles and moral directives. In religion the basic problem is the consciousness of pain, suffering and ignorance. Liberation from the present state of bondage is attainment of the fulness of consciousness. The book discusses how an integral metaphysics may be built up from the point of view of consciousness.

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