

THE ARGUMENT FROM ILLUSION

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I

Parmenides, the ancient Greek monist, claimed that there are two basic ways of inquiry. The first confirms that whatever is (i.e. being) "is and cannot not-be". This is the right path of truth that makes us realise that being is one and cannot be created, destroyed, or changed. If any one of these alterations is permissible within being, then being would no longer be what "is" and would become what "is not". But by definition there is no "is not" from which being could come into existence or into which being could change. Being is one seamless immutable whole. The other path of inquiry is mere opinion, which claims that something arises from not-being.¹ Analogously, the Upaniṣadic tradition equates Brahman, the supreme Reality, with Bing (sat). This Being of the Upaniṣadic is an infinite pure Existence, which is immutable. Thus there is a striking similarity of views between Parmenides and the Upaniṣadic tradition as regards the nature of ultimate Reality. Any tradition that aims at constructing higher order metaphysics is bound to adopt the first way of inquiry as suggested by Parmenides.

A legitimate inquiry into the beginnings of any philosophical tradition inevitably suggests us that the key concepts used in that tradition must be construed within its framework of reference. This must be the first prerequisite for any hermeneutic exercise, for otherwise there is every possibility of misinterpretation of the tradition in question. Therefore, one must be circumspect enough while interpreting the meaning of the concepts that one comes across in any tradition. Advaita is one such tradition that is

often misinterpreted and misunderstood by many a scholar. The chief objective of Advaita is to inquire into the nature of supreme reality (Brahman) as stated in the Upaniṣads. In order to accomplish this objective there is every need to make distinction between appearance and reality, for they are considered to be two most important philosophical categories of experience. No genuine metaphysical system ever fails to recognise the distinction between these two categories, for they are very fundamental and important to construct higher order metaphysics. To invoke polar concept argument here, each category derives its philosophical significance from its opposite. When we normally say that these two categories are mutually interdependent for any philosophical explanation, it is not the case that the existence of reality is necessarily dependent on its appearances. In fact, the latter owe their existence to the former, but not vice-versa. Western epistemologists, especially those who subscribe to the doctrine of phenomenalism², employed the "argument from illusion" mainly to abolish the distinction between "what is the case" and "what appears to be the case". They accorded ontological priority to the latter but not to the former on the ground that the former can never be perceived directly. At the most one can say that their existence is inferred from what is given in sense-experience. Consequently, anything that is not given in sense-experience is treated as secondary, derivative, or even fictitious. "Seeing" for them is not only just believing, but also knowing. In other words, "to see" is "to know". Therefore, our claims to knowledge are inevitably dependent on what we perceive. This implies that what we perceive exists in some sense. This may be true insofar as our experiences concerning the world of objects. But, the protagonists of phenomenalism are least interested in any inquiry into the nature of such existence. This becomes the starting point for Advaita. The Advaitin is also concerned with "existence", but his inquiry into the true nature of existence transcends the limits of ordinary sense-experience, although his inquiry proceeds from our day-to-day experiences. For instance, when Parmenides cast doubt upon the apparent features of sensible world, it was not his intention to doubt whether we know anything about the world at all, but whether it is real.³ He was more concerned with the true nature of the world rather than the apparent forms of existence. In the similar fashion, the Advaitin looks at the nature of existence from two

different perspectives. On the one hand, he has to account for the world of objects (appearances) and on the other hand, he was to establish the view that Brahman (Reality) alone exists. This necessitates the Advaitin to distinguish between empirical/relative (*vyāvahārika*) and Trans-empirical/Absolute (*pāramārthika*) points of view. Therefore, one needs to keep in mind that what holds good from one point of view does not hold good from the other. The philosophical logic⁴ employed by Advaita to unravel this philosophical truth (*satya*) viz. Brahman alone is real, is worth consideration. The Advaitin too makes use of the argument from illusion, but only to substantiate the view that there is a distinction between “what is the case” and “what appears to be the case”. The latter is necessarily rooted in the former. My principal objective in this paper is to show that we know (realise) “what is the case” only from our experience of “what appears to be the case”. In other words, the latter refers to our experiences of empirical reality (*vyāvahārika-sattā*), while the former refers to our realisation of the trans-empirical reality (*pāramārthika-sattā*).

II

In one of his major works entitled *The Naiṣkarmyasiddhi* of Sureśvara, Balasubramanian characterises Advaita Vedānta as “transcendental phenomenology” and “metaphysics of experience”⁵. These two appellations given to advaita can be justified on the following ground. First of all, the Self (Ātman), which is none other than Brahman, is the transcendental principle whose evidence is apodictic. Secondly, the phenomenological method employed by Advaita makes us realise that we experience various levels of reality, although the supreme Reality *per se* does not possess any levels or degrees. They are as follows: (1) the reality viewed from phenomenal level, (2) the reality viewed from empirical level, and (3) the reality viewed from the absolute level. The transcendental principle (Brahman/Ātman) is absolutely real, one and non-dual. Thus its first appellation is justified. It can be argued that Advaita is a “Metaphysics of experience” for the method of Advaita aims at a rigorous inquiry of the nature of empirical world, the world of lived experience, as presented to consciousness. What is presented to consciousness consists of both the objects of the external world and also the cogitations of the mind that belong to the inner world. In this way, the method of inquiry adopted by

Advaita proceeds from what is known (appearances) viz. the physical world of daily life, to what is hitherto unknown (Reality).

The metaphysics of Advaita is primarily concerned with the vindication of the view that Brahman/Ātman is the only reality as stated in the Upaniṣads, and the world of objects does not have any independent existence apart from Brahman. In a sense, Brahman is the ground of all beings. It is mentioned in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*: "That from which these beings arise, by which the created beings are sustained, that into which they lapse back at the time of dissolution---seek to know that ; that is Brahman."⁶ In other words, the world of objects is caused by Brahman. In order to demonstrate that the existence of the world of objects is rooted in the very being of Brahman/Ātman, Advaita has to explain the role of Brahman in the creation of the world of objects. However, such a process of creation should not affect the very plenitude and perfection of Brahman. For this purpose advaita found the concept of *māyā/aviyā* or illusion, the principle of inexplicability, as the most suitable one. But one should keep in mind that this concept is purely an explanatory concept. It does not have evaluative significance. To put it in the words of Balasubramanian, "The means utilised by the Advaitin for the explanation of the one reality appearing as the many is the principle of *māyā*."

The Upaniṣads speak about the nature of supreme Reality in so many ways . They are as follows : "All this Brahman."³⁸ "Ātman being known everything is known."⁹ "There was only being at the beginning , it was one without a second "¹⁰ "all this is Brahman"¹¹ "This Self is the Brahman."¹² "I am Brahman."¹³ But , ultimately all these descriptions boil down to three important constitutive characteristics of Brahman. They are pure Being (*sat*), pure Consciousness (*cit*), and pure Bliss (*ānanda*). These constitutive characteristics of Brahman should not be mistaken for its qualities; since Brahman is free from all qualifications (*nirguṇa*), and is also free from any kind of differentiation. To put it more succinctly, it is free from *sajātīya-bheda*, *vijātīya-bheda*, and *svagata-bheda*. It is not the case, there is another entity like Brahman so that Brahman is distinguished from that. Also, there are no parts within Brahman, therefore, it is free from any internal differentiation.

From the above discussion it is clear that there is no other entity

excepting Brahman. However, for the critical mind it is important to show that the teachings of the Upaniṣads that belong to the tradition of infallible literature do not conflict with the reason or ordinary experience. A significant move in this direction would be to prove the opposing claims about reality are self-contradictory and implausible. Now the question arises as to how Brahman which is pure Existence (*sat*), pure Consciousness (*cit*), and pure Bliss (*ānanda*) could give rise to the world of object. It is mentioned in the *Śvetāśvetara Upaniṣad*: “know māyā to be the primal cause of the universe and Maheśvara as possessing *māyā*.”¹⁴ The import of this statement is that *māyā* or cosmic illusion is the principal cause of the world of objects. The expression “Maheśvara” refers to Brahman, which is pure Existence. Since māyā cannot have an independent existence apart from Brahman, the former in association with the latter becomes *saguṇa* Brahman or Īśvara or God. *Māyā* as potency (*śakti*) possesses two important powers. They are the power of concealment (*āvaraṇa-śakti*) and the power of projection (*vikṣepa-śakti*). *Māyā* with its mysterious creative powers conceals the real nature of Brahman and projects it as something other than what it is. This is what is technically known as superimposition (*adhyāsa*). As a matter of fact, the Advaitin does not make any distinction between māyā and avidyā. The former is known as cosmic illusion, which is the creative force behind the world of objects, and the latter individual illusion. They are one and the same. *Māyā/avidyā* as illusion has a peculiar nature. It is neither real (*sat*), nor unreal (*asat*), but an inexplicable principle (*anirvacanīya*). *Māyā* contains the element of self-contradictoriness within itself.

In fact, it is stated in the *Vedānta-sūtra*¹⁵ that Brahman is that to which the birth, maintenance, and destruction of the world have to be attributed. When it is said that Brahman is the cause of the world of objects, since it is ontically prior to everything, it is not Brahman *per se* or *nirguṇa* Brahman, rather it is Brahma associated with *māyā* or *saguṇa* Brahman that is the source of the world of objects. If Brahman is pure Consciousness, then *māyā*, the unconscious principle, cannot be part of it. Then, where did *māyā* originate from? Although *māyā* is not a part of Brahman, the latter is both the locus and content of the former. For instance, when we mistake a rope for the snake, there are two different cognitions. First of all, there is

a cognition of the snake, and this cognition is sublated by a subsequent cognition when we see rope as it is. Then what is the source of illusory snake? Where did it come from? What is the logical relationship between the rope and the snake? Although the locus and content of the snake is the rope, there is no logical relationship between them. Not only that, to look for a relationship, where there is none, results in superimposition of some kind or the other. Similarly, *māyā* is rooted in Brahman since there is no other reality than Brahman. It is true that Brahman is the ground of everything. This does not in any way mean that there is a logical relationship between them.

The kind of causation that one comes across in Advaita Vedānta is something unique. Brahman in association with *māyā* creates the world of objects. Therefore, Brahman is treated as the material cause of the world of objects. But this process does not affect the real nature of Brahman. It amounts to saying that Brahman is the transfigurative or non self-transforming material cause (*vivartopādāna-kāraṇa*), while *māyā*, whose potency (*śakti*) veils the real nature of Brahman, is the transformative or self-transforming material cause (*pariṇāmyupādānakāraṇa*) of the world of objects. In other words, it is *māyā* that undergoes transformation for creating the world of objects.¹⁶ Thus there are two types of material cause. One can illustrate this point with the help of the following examples. A lump of clay can be moulded into various types of objects such as a jar, pot, mug, etc. But the clay remains intact in all these modes of existence. Similar is the case with Brahman. As regards the nature of *māyā*, we can explain it from the following example. It is a known fact that milk is the cause of buttermilk. When milk gets transformed into buttermilk, then the latter alone is available but not the former. Similar is the cause with *māyā*. it gets itself transformed into the world of objects (*jagat*). Therefore, the world of objects is none other than *māyā*.

There is another interesting thing to notice here. Brahman is also treated as the efficient cause of the world of objects. This is because there is no such thing that can be so. The difference between Brahman and its potency (*śakti*) *māyā* is that the former is *sat* or real and the latter *bhāva-padārtha* or existent. The world of objects, which is the product of *māyā*, is experienced by all of us. Advaita does not deny this fact. In fact, the

world of objects is an ordered whole in which the laws of space, time, and causation hold good but, ultimately the world of objects is not real for it is of self-contradictory nature. Advaita is quite clear about the meanings of the words “real (*sat*)” and “unreal (*asat*)”. Anything that has existence is real, and the unreal is that which does not exist at all. When Advaita holds that anything that has existence is real, it means that the object or the entity in question must possess unsublatable existence. As seen in the rope-snake example, when we come to know that the object is really a rope, we believe that the snake no more exists. But what is to be noticed here is that the snake did not exist even when we perceived it. This is what is technically called the inexplicable (*anirvacanīya*). In other words, the snake is a self-contradictory percept that contains its own contradiction.

So far the thought of Advaita is restricted to the world of objects which is experienced by us. It is world that is conditioned by the categories of space-time relations, causal relations, and substance-attribute relations, etc. But, are these categories free from self-contradiction? If they are not, the world which is held together by these categories should also be self-contradictory. Some Advaitins, like Śrīharṣha and Citsukha, employed the method of destructive dialectic to show that these categories are self-contradictory.¹⁷ Let us examine whether these categories are self-consistent. Space is an extended entity, therefore is divisible. If the simplest units of space are bereft of any extension, then any number of these units can hardly give rise to extension. If parts have extension, then they are further divisible. Not only that, an extension of the foot has infinite number of parts, and so also an extension of a yard. Does it mean that an extension of a foot is equivalent to an extension of a yard? This is a logical absurdity. Similar is the case with time.

As regards causation, we generally hold the view that an event *X* is the cause of the event *Y*. We hold such a view when *X* has changed into *Y*. But before *Y* came into existence there is only *X*. When *Y* came into existence there is no sign of *X*. When we experience only *X* we cannot certainly say that it is the cause of *Y*, and when we see *Y* there is no *X*, which is supposed to be its cause. We can hold that *X* is the cause only with reference to *Y*. It amounts to saying that *Y* is the ground for *X* being its cause. In other words, *Y* causes *X* to be its cause. But the problem does

not end there. If *X* cannot exist when *Y* exists, how can *Y* have any influence on *X*? Therefore, we cannot say that *X* was the cause of *Y* in the absence of the former. So causation is a self-contradictory category.

Even substance and attributes are also self-contradictory categories. Has anyone ever seen pure substance? The subjective idealist Berkeley raised the same question. What we normally perceive are qualities like colours, sounds, etc. Does it mean that objects are mere conglomerations of qualities?¹⁸ Can qualities exist independent of a substratum? Here, one has to make a distinction between existence and subsistence. Substance has existence, but qualities have mere subsistence. When someone breaks an object, does he break a cluster of qualities? If substance and qualities are related, what is the nature of such a relation? Any relation is said to exist between two entities or terms. How is the relation related to these terms? If it is related by other relations, then they are related by other relations. This process leads to infinite regress (*anavasthā*). If it is not related, then it is difficult to explain how the relation can pull the terms or entities in question together. The destructive dialectic employed by the Advaitins attempts to establish the self-contradictory nature of these categories. Nevertheless, this attempt is not to uphold or establish acosmism (*niṣprapañca*) as believed by many philosophers, but only to vindicate that there is something higher and deeper than the world of objects. The philosophical logic of Advaita is that everything that is self-contradictory presupposes something that is not self-contradictory (*abādhyā*).

There is another significant move made by the Advaitin to show that the perceived changes cannot be rationally accepted as real, unless they clear the test of the criterion of non-sublatibility. First of all, it must be noticed that this criterion essentially presupposes a dualism between the experiencing subject and the experienced, the subject and the object, consciousness and the content of the consciousness. Secondly, the criterion suggests us that anything that is in principle sublatale possesses lesser degree of endurance and value than that which replaces it as a result of sublation. The degrees of endurance possessed by various things are treated as degrees or levels of reality or existence by the various interpreters of Advaita. Śaṅkara made use of the criterion of non-sublatibility to distinguish reality from mere appearances. For instance, the objects of imagination do

not have existence of any sort. Therefore, they are of no use for any epistemological inquiry. All that one can say is that they have the imaginary existence.¹⁹ Such objects are called *tuccha* by the Advaitins. They are the true representations of *asat* or non existence. Let us imagine an object called “round-square”. It is an imaginary object, which is both circular and square. This is an obvious self-contradiction both in terms of description and definition. Also, one can presume that the logic of advaita is such that it does not make any distinction between what is logically possible like “round-square” and an empirical absurdity like a “white crow”. The subjective side of the cognition of such objects is not false, for they are the objects of our imagination. One can very well imagine a crow, which is white. But, they are treated as false only when our reason (*buddhi*) makes any assertion about them.²⁰

Unlike the objects of imagination, there are objects of apparent existence (*prātibhāśka-sattā*) which are experienced by us. In all these cases, our reason makes assertions about the contents of such experiences. For instance, based on the content of my present perceptual experience, I assert: “That is snake” But, the content of my subsequent perceptual experience makes me assert: “that it is not the snake” A clear case of sublation is experienced here. The content of my earlier perceptual experience is sublated by the content of my later one. It amounts to saying that unlike the objects of apparent existence, there are objects of pragmatic or empirical existence (*vyāvahārika-sattā*). Now the onus rests on the Advaitin to show that the latter differ from the former only in terms of degree, but not in kind. In other words, the objects of apparent existence have less endurance when compared to the objects of pragmatic or empirical existence. Another important thing to be noticed here is that the former are sublated by perceptual experience and also by the experience of action within this world of objects, while the latter are sublated by dialectical reason and intuition of Brahman (*pāramārthika-sattā*). Excepting the objects of imagination, both the objects of apparent existence and pragmatic or empirical existence have a peculiar nature, according to Advaita. They are not real (*sat*), for otherwise they are not sublated, and they are not unreal (*asat*), for otherwise they are not experienced. Their nature is such that they are neither real nor unreal (*sadasat-vilakṣṇa*). Therefore, they

are *anirvacanīya*.²¹ Being the projections of *māyā*, they share its nature. Thus the logic of Advaita introduces a new category of experience which is not admitted by the truth-functional or binary logic.

It is already shown that the world of objects which is held together by the categories of space-time relations, causal relations, substance-attribute relations is self-contradictory, for the categories themselves are self-contradictory. Now the Advaitin proceeds to show that the world of objects is not only self-contradictory, but also false. The Advaitin uses the expression "*māyā*" to mean falsity. The term "falsity" is a relative term. As seen in the rope-snake example, the snake is false with reference to rope, but the rope is false only with reference to Brahman. The rope cannot be false with reference to any other object at its level. Suppose we did not have the experience of rope, then the experience of the snake cannot be false. It should be viewed as a mystery that the snake appears as an independent object, although the rope is a real object. In the similar fashion, it is a mystery that we are living acting in this world of objects which is ultimately self-contradictory. What is self-contradictory cannot have independent existence. The term "*māyā*" expresses this mystery. If the world of objects is an illusion, it is an illusion to every human being. But, it is not necessary that everyone experiences the illusory snake. Therefore, the world of objects is a cosmic illusion, and the specific experience of an illusory snake is an individual illusion. So long as *māyā/avidyā* lasts, one can only presuppose Brahman as the supreme Reality. To realise the presence of Brahman one has to mediate and transcend the ordinary means of valid cognition. The highest kind of knowledge (*aparāvidyā*) is that in which knowledge and Being are one. In this context "to know is to become".

III

To conclude: the argument from illusion intends to establish the view that the immutable, eternal, and infinite Brahman is ontically prior to its ontological existence. In its ontic state Brahman is *nirguṇa*. Its ontological existence as *saguṇa* Brahman or *Ívara*, which is viewed as the creator of this world of object, in association with *māyā*, is purely accidental (*taṭastha*). To the ordinary human mind the world of objects appears to be real, although it is an appearance of the Absolute (Brahman). the world of

of objects is not the absolute itself, but only the phenomenal field of the absolute. It exists, for otherwise one cannot experience it. Therefore, it is empirical and objective (*bhāvapadārtha*) as an existent, but not real (*sat*). to quote Śaṅkara here in this context: "...as long as a person has not reached the true knowledge of the unity of self, so long it does not enter his mind that the world of effects with its means and objects of right knowledge and its results of action is untrue; he rather, in consequence of his ignorance, looks on mere effectsas forming part and belonging to his self, forgetful of Brahman being in reality the self of all." ²²

Māyā as the cosmic illusion has a positive role to play in explaining the self-contradictory nature of the world of objects. One should not interpret this concept in a derogatory sense. *Māyā* is an illusion, but not a delusion. ²³ The former is different from the latter. In the case of an illusory experience, something is experienced as something else, while in the case of a delusory experience, something is conjured out of nothing or a non-existent phenomenon. Thus Advaita upholds the view that *ex nihilo nihil fit*. The argument from illusion provides us with an explanation for the existence of the world of objects. But the very ground of its existence is Brahman. We realise this fact. only when we are totally disillusioned.

NOTES

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1. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufman, *Ancient Philosophy* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 2nd edn., p20.
2. According to phenomenalism, everything that is perceived is real. There is no external reality independent of one's own perceptual experience.
3. D.W. Hamlyn, *Sensation and Perception: A History of the Philosophy of Perception* (London: Routledge & KeganPaul, 1969), p.9
4. Unlike formal logic, which operates within the framework of laws of thought, philosophical logic follows from the philosophical presuppositions of a

given system or thought to substantiate and justify them.

5. R. Balasubramanian, *The Naiṣkarmyasiddhi of Śuresvara* (Madras: Radhakrishna Institute for Advanced study in Philosophy, 1988), p. XIX.
6. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, 3.1.1.
7. R. Balasubramanian (ed.), *The Tradition of Advaita: Essays in Honour of Bhāṣyabhāvajña V.R. Klyanasundara Sāstrī* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1994), p.7.
8. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 7.25.2.
9. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 4.5.6.
10. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 6.2.1.
11. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 2.2.2., *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 3.14.1.
12. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 2.5.19.
13. *Ibid*, 1.4.10.
14. *Śvetāśvetara Upaniṣad*, 4.10.
15. *Veḍanta-sūtra*, 1.1.2.
16. R. Balasubramanian, "The One and the Many "in his edited book *The Tradition of Advaita*, p.47.
17. Śrīharṣa in his *Khaṇḍakhāṇḍakhāḍhya*, Citsukha in his *Tatvapradīpikā* employed the method of destructive dialectic to prove that the categories such as space and time, cause and effect, substance and attribute, are self-contradictory. Even Bradley employed such a method in his *Appearance and Reality*
18. In the west, the phenomenologists like Berkeley in his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, and Hume in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* held the view that the objects are nothing but a cluster of sensible qualities. Both Berkeley and Hume held that there is no material substance.
19. According to Alexius Meinong, the objects with imaginary existence have so-existence (*sosein*). They exist in some sense of existence. They are called "ideal objects."
20. P.T. Raju, *Structural Depths of Indian Thought* (New Delhi : South Asia Publishers, 1985), p.388

21. One should not get confused when it is said that both Brahman and *māyā* are *anirvacanāya*. The former is inexplicable as it is nirguṇa, while the latter is inexplicable since it is of self-contradictory nature.
22. *Vedānta-sūtra*, 2.1.14.
23. J.L. Austin explains the distinction between the terms "illusion" and "delusion" in his *Sense and Sensibilia*. An illusion is a case of seeing something for something else. Contrary to this, a delusion is a situation where we create something out of nothing.

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