

MAN'S TIMELESS DIALOGUE WITH HIS GOD :
ANOTHER RECORDING

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Man : Charana Vandana,¹ my Prahbu.²I pray, let my words reach your ears.

God : You need not worry for that. No word escapes them, even an unuttered one does not.

Man : Yes, my Lord, that is a necessary truth. It won't be a word if it escapes them. As is the case with everything else, word too originates from you.

God : But you have not given up your old, inveterate, habit of addressing me as 'my Prahbu', 'my Lord'. Why don't you drop 'my' and address *me* as the god I am ? I am not simply your, or any particular being's god.

Man : It is so kind of you to have reminded me of my lapse, of my foolhardiness, you know, since you know everything, how strongly, how fondly, I wish I could address him, the god as such, which you say you are. If I succeed in doing that, in having with him a dialogue even for the tiniest fragment of a moment, I would consider myself to have been blessed with my liberation, with the fulfilment of my life's mission. But whenever I have tried to do that, - and I have been trying almost since my genesis and perhaps would never stop doing it, - I have never received from him a clearly audible response, nay, even an unambiguous whisper, of which I may unhesitatingly say that it is from him, and not from *you, the god of*

my conception. Even if some time something *seemed* to be a response from him, it was never one about which I did not feel like changing my opinion when, after some lapse of time, I reflected on it, self-consciously and self-critically, in cooler moments.

On the other hand, whenever I addressed you, the response was instantaneous. That is why even at the time I have the feeling that he is responding to me, I cannot completely get rid of the suspicion that I may be misidentifying a response from you as one from him. All this has led me to take seriously the possibility that there is no 'he', but only 'you'; no god out there, but only the god as I think or wish him to be, i.e. the god who is the product of my creative appetite, whom I have posited or created to satisfy some needs of mine, apparently not satisfiable otherwise. Therefore, I addressed this time my salutation straightway to *you* to *my* god; I did not first address him and turned to you after getting no reply from him. As expected, I have immediately been favoured by you with a response.

God : But are you going to be really satisfied with a response from one whom you consider to be a creation of yours ?

Man : Not at all an easy question to answer. I would certainly not be satisfied with you if I were conscious of your being a product of my appetitive imagination. But normally I am not, because I do not consciously create, or posit, you. The awareness of the possibility of your having been created by me is generally the result of a thinking process which, in effect, is an exercise in reconstruction. To put it in rather crude terms, it runs on some such lines : I find my world, the world I have, willy-nilly, to live in, an extremely difficult place. The demands of living in it make me very badly wish for an agency which can help me in making my living comfortable, or in some unusually distressful circumstances, at least tolerable. I fail to locate such an agency in any individual or object existing, or likely to come into existence in the immediate, or even distant, future. I virtually cry for help. And, the exigencies

of my existential situation, my own desires and aspirations, which are really very pressing and gripping, quite stealthily, or rather surreptitiously, lead me to (mis)take my own cry for a knock on the doors of my consciousness by the very being I wished were there, the being which alone could be said to have the agency capable of helping me out. My resultant thinking, which has obviously become appetitively directed, then, smoothly flows in some such way :

I cannot do without such a being, the world cannot be so cursed that there is none such, there should be, it is very likely there is, there must be, there really is, one.

When I reach the last step, I have a sigh of relief. I have now the feeling that I am absolutely safe. This sense of safety I read as coming from the very being I was in search of. I may then think that the sense of insecurity I felt earlier was simulated and not real :

It is this being which made me feel insecure so that I may sincerely cry for it. Its making me cry is its way of telling me that it is there to take care of me, its way of entering into my consciousness. As a reward for the crying I am blessed with the soothing experience of being absolutely safe under its care. Naturally, I should feel thankful to it for the tortuous experience of insecurity I had, because it is this experience which has opened my ears and enabled me to hear the precious knock.

I then spontaneously exclaim 'How merciful, how great, it really is!'
' My god is nothing but this being.

It is in this way that I first begin, of course unknowingly, or indeliberately, with you, with the god thrown up by my own appetitive imagination, and then convert it, again unknowingly or indeliberately, into god out there, the god you say I should address. And, in creating the former, i.e. in creating you, my image of god, I also create, or re-create, an image of myself as a being

wholly dependent on god, as obligated to it for being what I am and what I can be, as always begging it and hoping to get from it what I beg for.

God : You seem to be incurably obsessed with the idea of the false duality of your god and god, of the non-existent difference between 'me' and 'him'.

Man : Sorry, Bhagavan,³ I could not communicate to you what I wanted to. For me there never exists any duality between you and him because at no time I address my prayer to both. Rather, I cannot think of you and him, at the same time, as two beings, nor I ever need to. Almost always I think I am addressing him. This is so because I have not brought you into being by a deliberate, intentional, conscious, process of thinking. A being emerging out of an effort-dependent mentation would not have even the seeming competence to do all that the god I need is expected to. Since the process of projecting you is not conscious, there is no question of recollecting that such a thing was ever done, and therefore no question of forgetting it either. I can meaningfully speak of recalling, or forgetting, something only if I had, sometime in the past, an experience of it, i.e. only if I had consciously done it, or encountered it.

What happens is that when I fail to receive a response from him, the god whom I take to be an objective being, or rather to be the being of all beings, I start introspecting and feeling like explaining or accounting my erstwhile dependence on him in the manner I have roughly sketched. It is thus a kind of reconstruction, a belated self-analysis, or rather a retrospective analysis, of my transaction with him, the allegedly objective being par excellence, showing that what I took to be a transaction with an objective god is, or is very likely to be, a transaction with you, with a god conjured up by my appetitive nature. It is not a memorial account of something consciously done by me.

It is clear now, I hope, that both, you and him, cannot simultaneously be the objects of my attention, and therefore, I cannot be afflicted with what you have called the false duality.

God : But how can you pray to, or worship, a being which itself depends on you for its being?

Man : I cannot. Such a being cannot be the god I need; it cannot be my god. When it occurs to me that the god I adore is possibly a creation of mine, the immediate effect, I confess, is a feeling of dejection, sometimes very painful, sometimes not so painful, sometimes very durable, sometimes not so durable, but one of dejection it almost always is, and certainly in its first go. All this is natural because I consider him to be the bedrock of all being.

God : Then why do you entertain the idea of such a fatal, and I would say an unreal, possibility ?

Man : Truly speaking, - and there is no point in trying to conceal the truth from you because I cannot conceal anything from you, - I make the reconstruction - experiment with the fond hope that it would not succeed, that I would come across an irreducible ontological residue which cannot be accounted for by means of any reconstruction in terms of my ideas about what ought to exist, or about what would, if it existed, make the world comfortable to me. I really wish that the experiment of reconstruction fail and through its failure I transcend you, the god my appetitive imagination has created in some such manner as depicted in my account of the reconstruction process, and reach him, the god out there, and have a face-to-face dialogue with him. But there are numerous occasions when the reconstruction experiment seems to be robustly successful, and then it naturally makes me tend towards believing that there is no he, and he, whom I sometime (inadvertently) considered to be him, was only you. On such occasions I do feel, as I have told you, quite sad. Sometimes I do recover from the sadness and, using my limited ratiocinative re-

sources, reconstruct a picture of the world without him but good enough to live, or at least to survive, in. But sometimes I do not, and then I become very miserable indeed.

God : I am glad you do not really intend to substitute me, in your words, the god created by you, for him, the god out there. As you have yourself admitted, he and I are not two beings. He is I, or I am he. Why don't you address him, or me as him, directly ?

Man : I very much want to. Rather, there is nothing else which I want more. But I am never sure if I am really addressing my prayers to him, or to you if you and he are identical. I am never sure of his really being there. Any way, I am willing to assume henceforth in the dialogue that you are he. May I, then, address you as if you were he, the god out there ?

God : Yes, you can. That is what you should have been doing since you started dialoguing with me. You said you never felt you were really talking to me (= him)⁴. But are you sure you have tried to talk to me?

Man : Yes, I am. I know when I am addressing my words to you, and when I know it, I *know* it. It is an experience of the kind for which I do not need any evidence other than (the experience) itself. If I feel sure that I am directing my words to you, I am sure, and when I am, I *am directing* my words to you. You also must be knowing that I am. You cannot say that you do not know, since, *ex hypothesi*, you know everything. If you say that you do not, you would no longer be the god of my understanding. Therefore, you cannot say that I did not address you when I did.

God : Would you tell me when do you feel sure of having addressed your words to me ?

Man : I can very easily do that. Some of these experiences are so important and distinct that they cannot be forgotten or misconstrued. Not at all feeling ashamed of being called, or of even being, self-ish, I would say, I do address you when I pray to you to save me

from an impending calamity, to end, or at least to mitigate, some unbearable suffering I am undergoing, or am about to undergo very soon. The experience of suffering is a very bad thing. But it has one redeeming feature. It is something I want to get rid of as soon as I can. When I find no help coming from a natural, i.e. human or non-human, agency, I generally turn to you and pray for its removal or reduction. But many times my prayers remain unresponded to. I cannot believe that they have not been heard by you, since nothing escapes your notice. But then, if my prayers have reached your ears, why are not they responded to ? Sometimes, I admit, after a prayer, my situation does improve. But in none of such cases, I am given any clear, unambiguous, indication to the effect that the improvement has been made by you and not by a natural cause. Rather, in such cases it is generally possible to explain the change in terms of natural causation, i.e. attribute it to some human or non-human (but non-divine) agent.

It is true that in some cases the moment I fall back on you, I do not seem to have available any natural source of help. But it is also true that, in (almost) all such cases, only a little after the betterment takes place, I find it extremely plausible to attribute the betterment to something natural, to some previously unnoticed feature of, or to some change which has taken place in my relevant surroundings.

It is logical for me to think, then, that I mistook the betterment to have been induced by you only because, due to my emotional imbalance caused by the unpleasant situation I was in, I could not properly notice or appreciate the causal role of the existing relevant natural factor, or rightly assess the probability of the natural change which soon took place. My later thoughts tend to persuade me to believe that the natural cause to which I may reasonably attribute the relief I have got was there, or was about to occur, when I cried for help from you. Only, I did not realise that it was because my perceptive, discriminative, powers had become

dulled or overclouded by my upsetting feelings of fear, anxiety, worry, insecurity, etc. That I was then emotionally upset I cannot deny, nor can I deny that emotional disturbance weakens my cognitive and conative capabilities. The result is that the belief that the help came from you finds it extremely difficult to survive, and even if it survives, the danger of its being any time cut by Occam's razor is always hanging on its head.

What happens in the vast majority of cases is that the belief either gives place to the disbelief that you are not the cause of the relief, or is greatly weakened by the suspicion tht the relevant natural cause could very plausibly be given the credit for it. Under the circumstances the validity of the belief in your agency is bound to become highly precarious. But this belief does not suffer the ignominy alone. Its fate is linked with that of another, a more basic one, the belief in your existence. When it becomes questionable, it also makes the latter questionable. Had it been unquestionable, it would very well have been a good ground, or rather a conclusive ground, for the latter. If god listens to a prayer of mine, he certainly exists. But its not being listened to inclines me to become skeptical of there really being a listener, if not to totally deny the latter's existence. Naturally, then, the belief in your existence would be very much weakened, if not replaced by a disbelief.

God : It means you begin to doubt the very existence of mine when you become unsure of my having responded to your prayers.

Man :

God : Why are you silent ? Be frank.

Man : I do not want to be impolite to the being of all beings. But what you have hinted at is true. When I feel that no response to my prayers, intended to have been addressed to you, is coming, I do find it difficult to retain the belief in your existence.

God : But when you are skeptical of my existence itself, why do you call me the being of all beings ?

Man : I do that because of my conceptual habit, my respect for you built into the very concept of your being which I have been entertaining since the day I started thinking of you.

God : You feel respectful towards me and also doubtful of my existence?

Man : Yes, I do both, though it may look odd. In fact, the truth is much odder : I become skeptical or atheistic *because* I have respect for you.

God : Would you elaborate?

Man : I very gladly would. Rather, I was going to ask your permission to do it.

I do not, rather cannot, in my skeptical or atheistic mood, attribute to you a less respectable status than the one I do in my theistic mood. To attribute to you a less respectable status would imply the belief (or assumption) that you exist. This I cannot do: My concept of what you could be forbids me to believe or assume that you exist *and* have any sort of deficiency or imperfection. To deny or doubt your existence is not to do you any dishonour, or to reduce your glory. When my well-meant prayers are not responded to, I may explain the non-response either (a) by believing or assuming that you are not as caring, or capable, as I thought you to be, or (b) by doubting or denying that you exist. To do the former would mean attributing to you some deficiency or imperfection. This I cannot do because the very idea of an imperfect god is (both emotionally and conceptually) repugnant to me. To think of you as not fully free from all imperfections is definitely to show a great disrespect to you. On the other hand, to do the latter would, though, mean adopting a skeptical or negative attitude towards your existence, it would do you no dishonour of considering you deficient in any manner whatsoever.

It seems to me that only to protect your status of being a perfect being,⁵ as envisioned in my concept of what you could or should be, i.e. to protect my image of your being the most exalted kind of

being, I take refuge in skepticism or atheism. I thereby avoid the torture of believing in an uncaring, powerless, i.e. an imperfect, god. Is it not the best way, or at least one of the best ways, to ward off the eventuality of showing disrespect to you by calling you deficient in this or that respect? To be non-existent is not to be deficient in any possible way, since a deficiency can be attributed to a thing only after at least assuming that it exists.

God : Your skepticism seems to be largely due to what you consider to be my non-response to your prayers. But why should I respond to every prayer of yours?

Man : Not to every prayer, obviously. But why to ignore the sincere ones? At least some of my prayers are absolutely sincere. I think I know when I pray sincerely, and none else can certify that I am sincere the way I can be. If I *feel* I am sincerely praying, I *am* sincerely praying. And, it is a fact that at least sometimes even a sincere prayer is not responded to by you.

Normally, to pray is to pray *for* something. I pray that you let a certain state of affairs continue to exist, or replace an existing one by another. A sincere act of praying involves, on the part of the addresser, (a) his having an unambiguous, whole-hearted, desire that the prayer he is making be granted, (b) his reverence and devotion for the addressee, and (c) his belief, or at least, in a limiting case, his assumption, (c_i) that the prayer would reach the addressee, (c_{ii}) that the addressee is capable of granting the prayer, and (c_{iii}) that the act of praying would have some favourable influence on the latter in respect of his attitude towards granting the prayer, sometimes tending the addresser to think, or hope, that his prayer would be, or has a great probability to be, granted.

I may, or may not, pray, but when I do, more often than not, I know whether or not I am doing it sincerely. The experience of making a sincere prayer is not a composite set of experiences, consisting of (a), (b), and (c) with its three components, as its members, occurring simultaneously or successively. Rather, it is a unitary, single,

experience of praying sincerely, though analyzable in terms of (a), (b) and (c). And, so is the experience of praying insincerely. I can pray even half-sincerely, or not fully sincerely, because sincerity admits of degrees, but even then I pray insincerely. I pray insincerely if any one of the conditions (a) to (c) is missing.

I hope you would not deny the value of a sincere prayer and not hackle me about the accuracy of my account of it, even if you are not satisfied with the latter.

God : I do not want to. But may it not be that you feel you are sincere but are not?

Man : Perhaps you mean that I may be guilty of self-deception, that I may be *posing to myself*, without realising that I am, that I am praying sincerely when in fact I am not. I would not enter into the controversy about whether or not self-deception is possible, nor about how it can be explained if it is, and explained away if it is not, though it seems to be. I would not, because, even if its possibility is granted, that would not relieve me of my dissatisfaction over a sincere prayer's remaining unresponded to. All of my prayers may not be sincere, but some of them definitely are. That is, at least some of the time I feel I am praying sincerely, I pray sincerely, and do not deceive myself into believing that I am though I am not. And, it cannot be denied that some of these sincere prayers receive no response from you. They are neither granted, nor is any indication given to me, even in an indirect, or a remote way, as to why they are not. No indication is given even of their reaching, or not reaching, you, nor of the fact, if it is a fact, of there really being an addressee they were meant for. If still I keep praying to you off and on for help, I do so because it does not seem to be coming from any earthly source.

I do not think you would say that *whenever* a prayer, I consider sincere remains unresponded to, it is not really sincere, that I only deceive myself into thinking that it is. This would amount to making unresponded prayer mean the same as an insincere

one and, therefore, to denying the obvious fact that all sincere prayers are not responded to. If you do, it would hurt my conception of what you are. I may somehow bear the suffering caused by your not granting a prayer by consoling myself in this or that way. But I cannot bear the agony arising out of your denial of what is too obvious a fact. The denial would imply that you are either unaware of, or inattentive to, what happens in my, or rather, your, world. If I believe that you are, I cannot keep unaffected my thinking of you as I have been used to, i.e. as one who knows everything and ignores nothing.

Moreover, this use of the instrument of self-deception if allowed, can make a dangerous cut at a very sensitive spot of our relationship. As I have already submitted to you, I feel sometimes, though vaguely and momentarily, that you have helped me out and then take that feeling to be some sort of an evidence of your existence. When in a credulous mood, I tend to think that this feeling is in no way less dependable than a normal means of knowledge, and that it should be stabilized. But in my self-observant, self-critical, moments I tend to find it too indecisive, too feeble to sustain the pressure of a serious rational scrutiny. At this point the possibility of my deceiving myself, if taken seriously, can very well be used as Occam's razor to cut the feeling as a means of cognition, completely off. For example, I may ratiocinate :

My emotional need for an unfailing source of help in hard times, not vitiated by the limitations from which natural and human agents of help suffer, prompts me to deceive myself into thinking that I have really been helped out in the present case by a source of the former sort, i.e. by you, and not by any one of the latter sort. It is the repetitive use of the self-deceiving exercise which stabilizes the thinking that you are such and such. The stabilization emboldens me to declare at the top of my voice : 'No need to worry at all, I am absolutely safe because god is looking after me all the time !'

This kind of thinking, or feeling, is so soothing that I announce it to be trans-rational, i.e. not justiciable in the court of reason, and thereby preempt its being proven, in a cross-examination by reason, to be devoid of the evidential significance it is taken to possess. All this would, if true, show that, in taking the thinking, or feeling, to be an indication of *your* having helped me, I have taken what is really the result of a grand self-deception, a grand self-delusion to be a grand truth discovered in a grand transrational experience.

Your responding to a prayer has for me not only the prudential value of benefiting me, but also the epistemic value of giving me an evidence of your existence. I take my receiving your response to be a mode in which I cognize that you exist as an objective being. Consequently, when my prayers repeatedly remain unresponded to, I become doubly restless, i.e. restless because I am deprived of the advantage I expected to get if they were conceded to, as well as because I am deprived of what would have been a confirmation of, or a good support for, my belief in your existence : I then suffer both as a person and as a believer.

God : It seems you attach a lot of importance to your sincere prayers. But should every sincere prayer be granted ? May not a sincere prayer be for something which you do not deserve and therefore ought not to be given to you ?

Man : That is possible. All of my prayers may not be fair or legitimate. I may have no moral right to some of the things I pray for. But some of them are ; at least some of the things I pray for (as well as some others for which I do not), I think, I certainly deserve. I would like to know if you think you grant me all that I deserve.

God : Yes, I do.

Man : Pardon my impertinence. I have innumerable experiences of legitimate prayers having not been granted. You cannot accuse me of having misjudged, in all such cases, that the rejected prayer was

legitimate when it really was not. I have been performing judging operations of this and some other sorts since the day you blessed me with the ability to think or cogitate. I might have been mistaken in some cases, or even in the majority of them, because, as my own maxim runs, to err is human, but certainly not in all of them. I cannot be mistaken in all of them for the simple reason that it is unthinkable that an unfailingly truth-loving and benevolent god, as I take you to be, has cursed me with a mind which can judge only erroneously.

Perhaps you would say that what you withhold in my present life you give in my future life or lives. But I am not going to be easily persuaded to believe it. Any claim to my existence after the end of the present life, in any form, in this or in some other world, is fraught with its indigenous problems in no way less serious than those connected with your existence, or with my concern with you. I do not want at the moment to enter into them because doing that would deflect our conversation from the course it is proceeding on, of course, with your permission. Moreover, even if I believe in the possibility of a future life, how can I be sure that I would get in it the balance of my dues? I find it extremely difficult in view of, as I have told you and perhaps annoyed you thereby, my experience of so many cases in which I have not received what I deserved. The relevant data provided by my present life do not encourage me to make a favourable induction about my future life (or lives).

God : You think I am sometimes unfair to you ?

Man : Save my soul if I do. To call you, the all-perfect creator of the universe, unfair would mean committing the dreaded sin of blasphemy. I do not have the slightest intention to be, in any way, disrespectful to you. What may look like blasphemy on my part is really the expression of a puzzlement I have failed to solve in spite of my best efforts.

My reason does blurt out, on certain occasions, that you have not

given to me all that ought to have been. But the same reason, noticing that it is getting inclined to attribute thereby some unfairness to you, revolts against itself, causing in my mind some sort of a civil war. When I feel a human agent denying to, or withholding from, me what is deservedly mine, I forthwith call him unfair or unjust. Doing this does not cause in me any situation of the type mentioned above because my concept of a human agent does not preclude the possibility of the latter's being sometimes unfair. But to call god unfair is, to me, a contradiction in terms. To think of you as unfair or unjust is to mutilate my idea of what you are, or should be. That is why I shudder from calling you unfair even in a situation I feel you have not given me what you ought to have : I tend to think that you are unfair but also that you cannot be. It is these opposed tendencies of mine which cause in me the puzzlement, the conflict, which sometimes assumes the form of what I have called a civil war.

My conceptual handicap is that I would not call an unfair being, howsoever great in other respects, a god. I would prefer believing that you do not exist, that there is no god, to believing that you exist and are even in the least unfair. If I take to this course, I may look like sinning against you, but, I hope, I have made it amply clear that I am not.

Sometimes, in order to reduce my torment, I try to rationalize the situation. I speculate (a) that I might not have *really* deserved what I have prayed for and have been therefore denied, or (b) that the *right time* of my getting the latter might not have yet arrived, or (c) that I might have been *granted it in a form* I have not so far been able to identify, or (d) that it might not really have been in my *interest* to have got it, or (e) that, for some conclusive reason, unknown or unknowable to me, the good god has denied it to me, etc. etc. None of these moves is a hypothesis waiting for confirmation or disconfirmation in experience. Rather, they are all defence mechanisms, devices, for protecting my picture of a per-

fectly fair god against apparent empirical counter-instances any one of which would damage it if allowed to impinge on it from any side. In a few fortunate cases they sustain for quite some time. But in a good number of cases they buckle down under the pressure of reason's probings occasioned by some fresh counter-instances.

You see my dilemma : I want to retain the belief that you exist which involves the belief that you are never unfair. But facts of life pull me in another direction. To resist yielding to them I harness my rationality to generate some contrary forces, like the ones I have called defence mechanisms. But the prospect of their becoming successful is very uncertain. I make all the preparations I can to shield my belief that you are all-perfect. But I fail to stop some crude realities of the world I have to live in from eroding it and, consequently, the emotional succour I expect to drive from it. This is my predicament. I do not know how to get over it.

God : You really want to ?

Man : Yes, very sincerely.

God : Do it with the help of faith.

Man : Faith ?

God : Yes. Faith in me, faith in my judgement, faith that what is done by me to you is the very thing which ought to have been done, faith that nothing is done by me which ought not to have been done, which is not the best for you.

Man : But if whatever is done is the best that can, or should, be done and vice versa, there is no point in praying for anything, for something better than what is done, or is going to be done.

God : Pray for what you think is the best for you, or deserved by you. When something is given to you and does not seem to you to be the thing you had prayed for, or the thing you thought you had deserved, use your faith to convince you that the given is really what you had prayed for, or deserved.

Man : May be faith is my remedy. But examples are not lacking in which the gap between what I pray for, or think I deserve, and what is given to me is so great that it cannot be denied, or even ignored. It seems, therefore, that faith would not always succeed in convincing me that what I have prayed for, or what ought to have been given to me, has actually been given to me.

God : You would not think of the gap if your faith is stable.

Man : But how can it be when even the faintest ray of reason reveals the gap?

God : Your reason is prone to show you gaps and differences. Don't worry. Strengthen your faith. Strong faith would make it unprone, or at least stop it from being unduly prone.

Man : You want me to make my reason unprone, or less prone, to noticing differences ? This is a matter on which I feel tempted to disobey you. I know it would be a sin to do that. I beg you to kindly pardon me if you think I am committing the sin. The fact is that to me this sort of reason's proneness does not seem to be undesirable. Rather, it seems to be one of my most important assets. I do not know what sort of a lowly creature I would have been had I been bereft of my reason, or my reason had been bereft of its proclivity to distinguish between things of different types, or between different tokens of the same type. It is reason which helps me to avoid confusing, or to detect that I have confused if I have, one thing with another, when their difference, though important, is not obvious. Of two such things, one may be very greatly important, while the other only peripherally, as a means to achieving a worthwhile objective, or to improving the quality of life. It is only reason which can tell me which is which and help me to make the right choice.

Moreover, to make reason unprone, or less prone than what it naturally is, to recognize differences where they exist, would be something like making fire unprone, or less prone than what it naturally

is, to burn inflammable materials. Fire would then cease to be fire, or normal fire, and so would reason do. Faith which flourishes on the demise, or debilitation, of reason, cannot steer me through the tough struggle for existence which living in the world you have put me in requires me to go through. As far as my experience goes, without the use of reason, or with that of a debilitated one, I cannot survive in the struggle. If per chance I do, I would only survive but not live a life worth living.

God : Faith does not cause reason's demise, nor its debilitation. It only helps it to become a little different. That is definitely for its betterment.

Man : I do not see how the process can be described in this manner. To make fire unprone to burn, or less prone to burn, is not to make it only a little different from what it naturally is. And, in no way it is to make it better. I can call such a fire only a little different from a natural one only if I want to be courteous towards it. But if I want to be true to the fact of the matter, I would prefer to call it de-natured, i.e. dead, or debilitated. To call de-naturing a thing making it only a little different is a grievous understatement. Proneness to differentiation between distinguishables is one of the basic properties of reason. To make it unprone, or less prone than what it naturally is, would, therefore, mean destroying or altering its basic character and not making it only a little different. And, destroying or altering one of its basic characteristic or propensities cannot be said to be a way of making it better. A reason with dead, or dulled, discriminative ability would be reason only in name.

God : Don't think faith does any damage to the capabilities of reason. It, rather, transforms reason to make reason collaborative or cohesive with it. It lifts reason to a position from which reason can work in unison with it and thereby enable you to lead a happy, peaceful, life. A faith-inspired rational life would be free from the conflicts or dilemmas which have been causing in a lot of concep-

tual or emotional tension. A faith-cohesive reason, for example, would no longer be afflicted with, say, the conflict, mentioned by you a little while ago, between your conception of what I am and a particular set of empirical facts. These empirical facts your reason considers to be counter-instances to some of the constitutive features of the conception. But if it is made cohesive with faith, it would not do that. More specifically, nothing would then be a counter-instance to your thinking that I am absolutely fair by indicating or implying that I have been unfair to you by not responding to some prayer of yours, or by not giving to you what you deserve.

Man : Yes, reason may then become cooperative, or rather compliant, with faith, because it would work under its subjection, or subjugation, and behave like a never-disobeying child. A life in which faith becomes its supreme guide by forcing, or enticing, reason to stop its probing propensities, would certainly not be very dignified or attractive. The peace which you would then bless it, or rather me, with, would not be very different from the one you allegedly grant to my soul after my (physical) death. Occasions are not lacking in my history of faith's having done the miracle of making reason subservient to it, sometimes, silencing it completely, sometimes making it speak only faith's language, and thereby giving the illusion that my life has become peaceful and tensionless. But like any other illusion, it does not last long. After every period of depression, short or long, reason revives itself and starts speaking its own language, sometimes even more assertively, or aggressively, than it earlier used to do.

I want to assure you that I have no prejudice against faith. As made by you, I am *not merely* a rational being. I cannot survive without using reason, but I also need faith. I cannot do without it either. Any suggestion to subjugate reason to faith perturbs me not only because I see in it reason's humiliation, but also because I see in it a danger to the power and utility of faith. Reason

has built into, as I have told you, not only the power to correct, but also to re-activate or resurrect itself. Therefore, if it becomes a recurrent process that faith subjugates it and then, sooner or later, it emancipates itself from the subjugation, emerging each time more and more self-confident as a result of its success, it may one day make faith lose whatever influence or utility it so far had in my life.

It may even happen that, as a result of the struggle, or transaction, between reason and faith, reason may become more friendly with faith and faith more appreciative of the role of reason. It would be an ideal situation if both work as allies, or co-operators, in fashioning my comprehension of the relationship between you and me, or in fashioning the general course of my life. But then faith would at the most be an equal-level companion of reason, and not an unquestionable authority which it cannot question, or to which it must submit in the cases in which the two do not see eye to eye with each other. But even in the ideal situation there must be an understanding as to which would be the final adjudicator in a case of disagreement because the possibility of the latter cannot be ruled out of court. This role can be given only to reason because only reason, and not faith, has the ability to assess claims, to examine pros and cons for a position taken by either one, to notice agreements or disagreements, to recognise the strengths or weaknesses of its own stand as well as of faith's etc. Even to recognise, or admit, that in a particular case reason should submit to faith, or faith should submit to reason, or that a certain item does or does not fall within the jurisdiction of either one, would be an exercise which only reason, and not faith, can do.

It is not in faith's interest either to reduce reason to the status of a never-dissenting disciple, or even to that of a baby affectionately held by it in its arms. This is so because, to be stable, faith must take some help from reason. I have mentioned to you some problems which stand in the way of my believing that you are a

perfect being which as per my understanding of your nature, you must be if you exist, I have also shown that I can retain the belief only if am able to solve them in a way compatible with this understanding. The stability of my faith in you depends on the solution of these (and may be some other) problems. I can have the faith only *after* I have the solution. Therefore, I cannot use the former to yield, or even to help me to arrive at, the latter. The predicament I expressed to you sometime ago clearly explains my point. To illustrate, I cannot use faith to solve the problems posed by your not giving to me what I deserve, or by your unresponsiveness to my prayers. Rather I can have faith only after solving them in a manner which makes them cease to be counter-instances to, say, your omnipotence, kindness, fairness, etc. No attempt to solve them can be made without using reason, and a proposed solution of any one of them would survive only if it satisfies reason. Sometimes I do accept a solution even if reason does not fully approve of it. But then the problem concerned does not really vanish, or cease to bother me. I have only made peace, or rather truce, with it. But my mental condition thereby generated is not one of faith, nor is it congenial for the emergence of the latter. Lacking a rationally satisfying solution, in this state of the mind, I quite often oscillate between superstition and skepticism. I become superstitious when I take a mere rationalization of a counter-instance to be its satisfactory explanation; I become skeptical when I discover that I have taken a rationalization for a satisfactory explanation and do not find the latter in sight.

God : Should I take it that the way to faith would become smooth if all of your prayers for the things you deserve are granted ?

Man : Not very easy to give a positive answer.

God : Why not ? Have you not been arguing for quite some time that your not getting what you have deservedly prayed for poses to be a counter-instance to my being you think me to be ?

Man : Yes, I have. But from this it does not follow that my getting the prayed-for is a clear evidence of your being. It would be a clear evidence if it were clear that your agency was involved in my getting it. But as I have suggested earlier, that is never the case. Let me explain what I mean. It would involve repeating some of the things I have said earlier. But I hope repetitions would not matter in a timeless dialogue like ours. Have I not been permitted to use the repetition, or recitation, of your name (s) as a bridge for crossing over the ocean of my earthly existence (*bhavaśāgara*)?

God : Say what you want to.

Man : My getting the prayed-for would be a good evidence of your being provided it is given by you in an unambiguous manner, i.e. in a manner which makes it clear that it is you who have given it to me. This you do not do. Whenever I get it, there are available some natural, human or nonhuman, phenomena to some of which its causation may quite well be attributed. There is no guidance available either from my world, or from you, as to how to disambiguate the cause of my having received what I have. Moreover, the causally relevant natural phenomena are observable, or if not observable, inferable from some observable, ones. On the other hand, your agency is not only not observable but not even inferable equally strongly from something observable. Naturally, therefore, reason feels inclined to attribute my getting what I have got to some natural object, event, or law, or at the best only weakly, haltingly, inclined to attribute it to your agency. The latter inclination very often gets overridden by the naturalistic one, or if it survives at the moment, it is generally overridden, or forgotten, in the course of time.

But, please, don't think that I value only your approval of a prayer. Your disapproval or rejection of it is evidently as important as the latter. It is true that an infructuous prayer causes in me an experience of unhappiness. But if it is made known to me in a definitive, unambiguous, manner that its infructuousness is not the

effect of an earthly cause but of its rejection by you, my belief in your being would be as strongly confirmed as it would have been by a positive response to the prayer. I may then complain, appeal, to you against your judgement, or accept it most obediently and try to improve my performance. I would not reject, question, or doubt your existence, or even be agnostic about it. But here again, as in the case of the allegedly positive response, there is no mechanism to help me decide whether some natural object, event, or law, has caused the prayer's failure, or an act of its rejection by you. Neither in the case of a prayer's success, nor in that of its failure, I can use the method of difference to be sure that I got, or failed to get, what I prayed for because you gave it to me, or withheld it from me, and not *because* of a law of natural causation.

God : Would you be a little more specific ?

Man : I am sure you know the kind of thing I have in mind. I believe you are asking me, out of kindness, to make me feel important.

It is easy to be specific. I do not have to dive deep to pick out examples of what I mean. Take the following case :

I am suffering from a serious disease D. The cause of D has not yet been identified, and therefore no specific remedy has been produced. A doctor tries to help me by giving sometimes the drug M, sometimes N, on the basis of the then dominant symptoms. M and N have been sometimes effective, sometimes not, and there is no dependable statistics available about the percentage of their success. I take M and N in a half-hearted manner, and also take P,Q,R, etc, on the advice of some friendly neighbours. I do some yogic exercises as well. In addition, I pray to you very sincerely and devotedly. After some time I feel much better, and a day comes when I have no complaint. The medical check up reveals that I am now free from the disease. A theist then says that you have responded to my prayer and cured me, my naturalist doctor says anyone, or a combination, of the things I did, or some natural change in my general metabolism, etc., has cured me. By studying

such data, he hopes, the cause and cure of the disease would some day be found out. He does not think it at all relevant to consider the possibility of the cure having been effected by my praying to you, or by your agency in any way.

The above is not a unique case. Whenever I appeal to you, I do not just do that. I do so many things. And, even if I do nothing else except appealing, praying, to you, so many things keep happening, occurring, coming in my contact, for example, metabolic changes occurring in my body, climatic changes occurring in my surrounding, etc.

Because of all this, it is impossible for me to isolate the role of your agency, if any, to conclude that what I have got is an evidence of your having responded to my prayer and therefore of your existence. If I have already reposed my faith in you, I would do what the theist in the above example does. But my doing so would be an evidence of my faith in you, and not of your existence. Faith in you is by itself no evidence of your existence, nor does it have any intrinsic credibility. It would acquire credibility, or dependability, only when it is based on facts, on sound reasons, if there are any, in favour of your existence. But even then it itself would not be an evidence of your existence; it is rather the facts, the reasons, which make faith credible, or reasonable, which would be, if there are such facts, or reasons.

God : You want to have faith that I am such and I such only after first having evidence that I am such and such ?

Man: Yes, that seems to be right way.

God : But not the only right way. Why don't you first have the faith, lead a life guided by it, and then identify the evidence if you still feel the need for it?

Man : That won't be very rational, or even natural. Faith in you, along with the awareness that no adequate evidence is yet available for your existence, would be worse than a superstitious belief. The

latter is also unsupported by adequate evidence, but the believer is unaware of this fact. Moreover, this sort of faith would be merely an adopted one without any knowledge of its ancestry, i.e. without having found its roots in reason or in facts. It would be highly unreasonable to expect it to provide, or to entrust it with the task of providing, proper guidance for worthwhile living. Moreover, if I start with faith before having any genuine evidence and then try to ascertain the evidence, if there is any, the search may be prejudiced by my faith. I may then consider something a good evidence though it is not. I think this is what I do when I become a theist on some emotional ground, without consulting reason, or in spite of the caution sounded by reason.

God : But the chances of getting your prayers favourably responded to by me would be much brighter if you have reposed in me your unflinching faith. And, when they would be responded to, you would be having the kind of evidence you need about my agency and thereby would get your faith further fortified.

Man : I have already told you that instances of my prayers, made with unflinching faith in you, but not having been responded to by you, are not lacking. However, I admit that I might have misjudged the character of such instances.

But even if I succeed in having it, in spite of reason's resentment because of the unavailability of adequate evidence, it is not clear how my faith would improve the chances of my prayers' faring better. Rather, it seems that it cannot, or should not. In itself it is neither a necessary, nor a sufficient, condition for entitling me to get a favour or help I am not otherwise entitled to, nor its lack a reason for disentitling me from getting what I otherwise am entitled to.

Having faith is always accompanied with, or implies, the normative feeling that it is something worth having, something I ought not to have been without. There is also a very close link between faith and devotion though of a slightly complicated kind. To believe

that you *are* what I think you are, is to believe or realize that you are the most adorable, reverable, being. Therefore, if I have faith, I admit that I *ought to* have devotion for you, though because of the devil of the weak will in me, I may not always have the good luck of being actually devoted to you. But unless I believe that you are such and such, I cannot either believe that I *ought to* be devoted, or be actually devoted. That is, my faith implies my admission that I ought to be devoted but not that I am devoted. On the other hand, my devotion implies that I actually have faith as well as that I ought to have had it, because having faith implies the latter.

Like faith, devotion also need be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for your attending to my cry for help. The cry should be attended to only if it deserves to be attended to. Neither devotion can justify attending to an undeserving cry, nor its lack not attending to a deserving one. An upright judge, like you, would not, or should not, deny what I deserve on the ground that I have no faith in, or reverence for, him, or do the other way round.

Since you have specifically asked me to have faith, I would like to elaborate in a little detail that faith in the source of help is not at all a reason for receiving a favourable consideration from the latter. May I give an example ?

God : Go ahead.

Man : Thank you for your condescension. Suppose writing with excruciating stomachache (or even otherwise) on a deserted road, I cry 'If there is anybody somewhere near here, please help me.' I am not at all sure that there is some one; I may be almost sure that there is none. But even then, in case there is a *normal* person, within hearing distance, he would hear my cry and in all likelihood come out and help. He would not consider my not believing that he is there and is such and such to be a reason for not helping me, nor my believing to be a reason for helping. My believing that he is

(there), or believing what sort of a being he is, would not entitle me to his help. Only my deserving it would. My believing would not matter even to his hearing my cry. That would depend on his hearing ability.

Coming back to my receiving help from you, i.e. a favourable response to my prayer for help, the relevant facts are the following : (a) That you exist, (b) that you are capable and willing to help, (c) that I deserve the help prayed for, (d) that you know that I deserve the help, and (e) that you are fair, i.e. willing to give me what I deserve. None of these facts (a) to (e) is dependent on my having the faith that you are and are such and such. All of (a) to (e) must be facts as per my conception of what you are. And, if they are, then I should get the help even if I have no faith that you are, even if I have not cried for it, i.e. even if I have not prayed for it. I do not see, therefore, how faith would improve the chance of my getting your help, or how is it relevant to getting the help. Nor do I see how it would convince me that you always give to me what I deserve, when on several occasions I notice that what I have got is very different from what I have deserved. It is also obvious that, since faith does not entitle, nor does lack of faith disentitle, me to get something from you, you cannot, or should not, say that, if I am an atheist, a sceptic, an agnostic, or only a hesitant believer, I do not have any right to your blessings, or not as legitimate a right as I would have had if I were a staunch believer. Rather, blessing me then may be more advisable because it may help me to replace my doubt or unbelief by faith.

It is clear, thus, that a fair-minded helper, in deciding whether or not to give me the help I ask him to, would not care to ascertain if I have faith in, or devotion for, him. The only thing he would like to know, is if I deserve it. Since faith and devotion both are equally irrelevant to the validity of my claim for what I deserve, may I speak of either one though intending to mean both?

God : Certainly.

Man : Should I then say that if I deserve something, I deserve it, whether or not I am devoted to you ? I think I can because I cannot think of a more upright judge than you. But, then, may I also hope that I would get what I deserve, i.e. you would give me what I deserve ?

God : Yes, you can. You would get what you deserve even if you are not devoted. But this does not mean that devotion is non-functional. Like other desert-yielding things, it too generates for you some entitlement, some desert, which you did not have before becoming devoted. Because of your having been devoted you would deserve and get something additional to what you would have deserved and got because of your other entitlements. The additional thing which you get, on being devoted, therefore, belongs to the class of things deserved as rightfully as the other deserved things do. Thus, devotion improves your chances because it makes you more deserving, because it improves your entitlement.

Man : Does it mean on my being devoted to you, you do something for me which you would not have otherwise done, and I deserve what you do?

God : Yes, it does.

Man : This is a very pleasing information. I am grateful to you for letting it be known to me. In some of my reflective moods, I do wonder what use is my having been devoted to you, or your kindness which I expect it to arouse, if I am to get only what my own doings have made me entitled to. You say that that is not necessarily the case in so far as my devotion by itself makes me deserve something, that it can help me to get something additional to what my own doings on their own can. In all propriety I should now feel delighted. I do find in me an inclination to do that. But I also notice in me a counter-inclination, extremely difficult to pacify or ignore. Perhaps you would say that it is another wayward child of my reason, the habitual peace-breaker. Would you mind if I lay it before

you?

God : Not a bit.

Man : Let me express it rather crudely :

If my devotion for you, independently of my other doings, can persuade you to do something for me, I may very well remain contented with what it may enable me to have, and do nothing else. It is devotion for you who is a perfect being, whose powers are unlimited, who can give me anything whatsoever if it pleases him to. Then, why should I not have only devotion for you ? Why should I not exclusively absolutely depend on my devotion for you, which means depending on you, and not at all on my actions, for getting everything I consider worth getting, pray for, or aspire after ? There seems to be no need for my doing even such actions which are promotive of public welfare, which are morally commendable. I may not even care for my bodily existence, or only do the minimum required for its maintenance. That I have actually followed this inclination several times in my undatable history must have been known to you. It is well known to me. It is also obvious to me that I could not have done that unless you had allowed me to. Can I do anything at all if disallowed by you ?

God :

Man : I knew you would not condescend to answer my question. But since it is an expression more of a puzzlement than of a request for information, I do not mind your reticence. But I do want to say something further to infuse a little more blood in my puzzlement.

Thinking of your omnipotence, and your kindness for me, I feel that there cannot be set any limit to what you may do for me when pleased with my devotion, and therefore, that devotion can procure for me anything whatsoever, no matter what my earlier doings make me deserve. Perhaps that is why, in my prayers, I characterize myself as extremely degraded and you as extremely affection-

ate towards me, as one 'enslaved to his devotee',⁷ always ready to run to him in moments of need. If you were to be guided exclusively by the entitlement accrued to me from my earlier doings, i.e. from what I have done before becoming a devotee, it would mean that my devotion plays no role in my getting anything from you. Even if you partially modify what my devotion has entitled me to in the light of what my other doings have, it would mean that devotion does not entitle me to anything independently of my other doings. All this would imply that you are not completely free to give me everything you are pleased to give (because of my devotion).

When you give me something because I deserve it on account of a doing of mine, you have to find out what is it that I deserve and then to give that thing and only that thing to me. For example, if I save an old man's drowning child, and you think because of it I deserve to have a son, you have only to bless me with a son, and not with anything else, say, with the power to become invisible if and when I wish to be. What I want to say is that your unlimited freedom to give me anything whatsoever need not be invoked here.

But my devotion for you works directly on you. If it entitles me to anything, it entitles me to your being pleased with me. It does that directly, by just being my devotion for you, and not through the instrumentality of anything else done by me. It establishes a direct relationship between you and me, and makes you pleased with me for my merely being your devotee, i.e. for my being what I am. Therefore, if you then give me anything, you give out of your pleasure, and not out of your sense of distributive justice. There cannot be any limit to what you may do out of your pleasure. That is why, as a devotee, I feel tempted to think that I may ask you to give me anything whatsoever, even something undesirable, and to optimistically believe that you would. I sometimes characterize you as actually giving me whatever I want, sometimes as giving me the

freedom to ask for whatever I want and then giving the thing I ask you to,⁸ no matter whether or not it is morally desirable. This sort of optimism may make me believe that devotion can provide me, even on being a great sinner, a short route to heaven, as it allegedly did to the harlot.⁹ That is why reason cautions me against the optimism, and against devotion too.

God : Don't let your reason misguide you in this manner. Devotion involves, or requires, moral disciplining of your personality. You cannot, on being, or while becoming, a devotee stop doing what is morally required of, or commendable for, you. Nor can you stop caring for your bodily existence because a healthy body is necessary for leading a good moral life. You cannot be a genuine devotee if you are immoral or, indifferent to morality. Therefore, when you are a devotee you would not wish for anything immoral or undesirable. There would be no question of your seeking, or devotion's yielding, anything immoral or condemnable.

Man : This would mean that I would not, or should not, being a devotee, ask for anything morally undesirable, and that when pleased with my devotion, you would not (or cannot ?, or should not ?) give it to me even if I ask for it. But did not the devotee Bhasmasura and Ravana, to name only a few, ask for undesirable powers ? And, on being pleased with their devotion, did you not give to Bhasmasura the immoral power to burn anyone to ashes by simply putting his palm on the victim's head ? And, to Ravana the power which made him so invulnerable that even your incarnation Rama found it impossible to kill him without the help of (your) Sakti, even though he was an inveterate sinner ?¹⁰

God :

Man : Have I annoyed you ?

God :

Man : Pardon me, if I have.

Perhaps there is something wicked in the problem which has led us to this unpleasant point. May I go back to it ?

God : Do as you like.

Man : I was hesitating to have stable faith in you because of inadequate evidence. I told you that if my prayers were unambiguously responded to by you, they would have provided me some adequate evidence, but they were not. I proceeded to say that, therefore, in spite of my wish and need to have the faith, I was not being able to have it. You asked me to have faith even without adequate evidence because faith would improve my chances of getting my prayers favourably responded to, and the latter would then provide corroborative evidence for the faith I had begun with. I pointed out that faith implies devotion, and both of them were irrelevant to improving the chances of my prayers receiving any favourable response. I recited the truth that, as per your own decree, I get only that which I deserve. I then pointed out that my devotion (or faith) would be dysfunctional in helping me to get a prayer responded to if, because of my own doings, I did not deserve the response, and would be unnecessary if I did. You then informed me that devotion could make me deserve and get something so far not deserved and I tried to show that it might then help me to have even some undesirable things. At this point you said that it involved good moral living as a precondition and therefore the latter possibility was not there. I replied that it was very much there because of your having limitless powers. I also pointed out some (alleged) instances of your having granted some undesirable powers to some devotees. Is this a fair account ?

God : Yes, it is.

Man : Thank you very much. It seems to me that my original problem remains still unsolved. I wanted to know how my devotion (or faith) would improve the chances of my prayers' getting responded to. You have said that devotion makes me deserve something so far undeserved. This means that it gives me some new entitlement.

But giving me a new entitlement is very different from improving my chances of getting what I am already entitled to, to be more specific, improving my chances of getting favourable responses to the prayers for things I am already entitled to. Would you still say that it does the work ?

God : Yes, I would because it does.

Man : But how ?

God : I have said that devotion is not dysfunctional because, though you would continue deserving what you do and getting what you deserve even without being devoted, it gives you a new entitlement. But this is not the only thing it does. It makes you a good person and thereby improves your chances of getting what you deserve.

Man : But you also said that devotion presupposes or requires moral purification. This means I have already become a good moral person before becoming devoted. My devotedness, thus, does not make me a good moral person but depends on my being one. Rather, I can be a good moral person even without being devoted, as I sometimes am when I am an unbeliever. Of two morally good persons, if one is an unbeliever and the other a believer, the former is not less morally good than the latter. I am morally good because I am morally good, and not because I am a believer or a devotee.

God : You may be a good moral being without being devoted. On being devoted you become a good person, a good being, and no longer remain a mere good moral being. The being in you would then be qualitatively better than the being in a mere good moral being. Naturally a good being's chances of getting what he deserves should be better than those of a mere good moral being.

Man : Perhaps that is the way it should be. But the truth seems to be rather different. It seems to me that the goodness which devotion brings to my being is very much, if not exclusively, due to morality in a much more important sense than in the sense that

morality is a precondition of devotion. Devotion presupposes, or involves within itself, faith. Faith always has some content. For example, when I have faith in you I believe that you are such and such, that between you and me there exist such and such relations. that you may do such things to me or for me, on my fulfilling such and such and such conditions, etc. Devotion, or faith, can make me a better being only if the content of faith is replete with sound moral beliefs or ideas. On the other hand, if it contains a wrong moral idea, or a perverted one, it may make me a corrupt, degraded, being though I may continue (incorrectly) thinking that I am a better being than one who lacks the faith I have. For example, if I have, as a constituent of my faith, the belief that you have created me in your own image and made me qualitatively superior to other beings, I may think it justified to kill some of them if required for my survival or welfare. I would obviously have been a better being had I been an atheist with the naturalistic belief that all beings were qualitatively equal.

Similarly, if it is a constituent of my faith that renouncing social living is necessary for following the required discipline for realizing you, pleasing you, etc., my faith would make me renounce society and therefore all social actions, including those for relieving or reducing anyone's suffering. Then as well I would be inferior to what I would have been if I had been a benevolent atheist. It surprises me a lot, therefore, when you say that, 'if I am ignorant of, irreverential towards, or skeptical about, you or your words, I shall loose this world, the other one, and happiness.'¹¹

Faith would make me a better being only if it has a sound moral content. But even atheism, or faithlessness, would do that if it has a sound moral content. This means it is not faith, and therefore not devotion which depends on it, but morality, which is needed to make me a better being. Instances of my doing condemnable things under the influence of a faith with unsound moral content are extremely easy to locate. It is lamentable that the con-

demnable things so done look to me dignified or commendable because of their having been done under the overall patronage of faith in you. All such instances of faith cannot be called non-genuine. And if they are, I fail to understand why you let me have non-genuine faith and do the condemnable things I do, the more so because I do them in the name of, or as sanctioned by, my faith in you, i.e. virtually in your name. Do I not then do the sin of defiling you ? That is what it seems to me. It is another puzzle : why do you let me commit the sin ?

I hope you do not mind highlighting the excellence of morality which is a social, earthly thing, and not divine.

God : No, why should I ?

Man : But then it seems that to be a good being, and therefore to deserve and get what I deserve, I need only morality : I need neither faith nor devotion. Moreover, if morality determines what I deserve and therefore what I get, it determines you as well, or at least it should.

God : Why ?

Man : For a good logical reason.

My morality sets the limits to what I deserve.

What I deserve I ought to get, and nothing should come in the way of my getting it. Therefore, you, on whom my getting it depends, since everything depends on you, ought to arrange the affairs of the world in such a manner that I get it. The limits of my deservings, therefore, also determine the limits of your governance of the world, of your freedom to give, as well as to withhold from, me whatever you may give to me, or withhold from me. What all this means is that neither to get what I deserve, -rather, to get all that I can, since as you say, I cannot get anything else, -nor to improve the quality of my being, I require faith or devotion. I may not say that there would be something positively wrong in

having them. But it does seem to me that there is nothing which obligates me to have them.

God : Fine. Dispense with faith and be an atheist. Devotion would automatically become unwarranted.

Man : You are giving me a threat, it seems.

God : No, only a choice.

Man : Yes, I have the choice, and I do exercise it not infrequently. If you pardon my audacity, I would say that it is not an absolutely bad choice.

God : A life without referring to me ?

Man : Yes, that is what it is then. Give me a minute to show how it is not all agony and anguish :

Suppose I am apprehending a natural calamity, a drought, for example. If I am a believer, I pray to you, with my absolute devotion, to cause its non-occurrence. But unfortunately my prayer is not granted, and the calamity occurs with all the horrowing effects I had anticipated. Now I *suffer* not only its effects. In addition, I suffer a feeling of frustration and humiliation because of my prayers being ignored by you. I also have a feeling of resentment against you because you could have prevented the calamity's occurrence, or made it less distressing, but you did not. If my devotion for you does not give way, I may not resent, or resent only in a subdued tone. I may then feel a sense of guilt and curse myself : 'I am a fallen creature, I have been given the punishment.'

The self-cursing mood may alternate with a self-consoling one: 'There must be some point in his punishing me. He is really very kind. He could have made the punishment more severe, but did not. Let me pray to him to give me strength to bear it, to save the little peace I have been left with'.

I may also try to gather strength and say with a resolve : I must

have sinned in the past, but I will be very careful now onwards. I will not swerve from the right path. I pray, help me to persevere in spite of my adversities, to curb my unruly passions pressing me to turn away from you, from the path of righteousness.'

In all the three cases, I interpret the calamity as a punishment deserved on account of my sins. I feel that I am a fallen creature, completely at your mercy, and cannot have a better future unless you allow or help me to have. These feelings increase the suffering caused by the calamity. They also hurt my self-respect, my individuality, my agency. I cannot have a respectable relationship with you as long as such feelings have their hold on me. My devotion makes me think that this is what ought to be, that it would be unbecoming of me to think of a respectable relationship between us. As I have told you, it encourages me to characterize myself in as lowly terms as I can, as 'crooked, wicked, self-centred.'¹²

But the real problem is that I do not know what sort of sins I have I committed and when I committed them. Therefore, I do not know exactly what I should do to antidote them. Consequently, my self-cursing and self-consoling moods are likely to be temporary occurrences. Even the self-resolving mood is not likely to be as effective as it is in the case of earthly matters. In matters pertaining to you I do not know exactly what sort of future conduct would help me to avoid the punishment which my past conduct has led you to inflict on me. In earthly matters the situation is a bit better because relevant facts and results are verifiable or predictable to a tolerably satisfactory extent. Therefore, I know in most cases, with a tolerably good amount of accuracy, what to do to avoid or facilitate the occurrence of what.

If, on the other hand, I am not a believer, but a naturalist believing only in natural causation, there would be no non-natural agent, like you, against whom I can have a feeling of resentment or frustration, a grievance or a complaint. Natural causes are not agents I can complaint against, since I can have no communion with them.

I may only try to control or change them, and that too in a limited way. I would suffer no doubt, but my suffering would not be compounded by feelings of frustration, sin, etc. I may take the calamity as unavoidable, as a natural event I have so far not developed means to control, and decide to work harder in that direction with greater vigour. But I would not take it as a punishment.

I am not saying that, as an unbeliever, I would, in all respects, be better off than as a believer, but only that I would not, in all respects, be worse off.

God : You link your devotion (as well as faith) with your desires, with what you wish and expect to get from me. Therefore, when you do not get what you pray for, your devotion (as well as faith) buckles down and you tend to become skeptical about my existence.

Man : There is nothing wrong with my having desires. You have made me a being who is naturally disposed to desire so many things. Therefore, I do not see anything wrong in linking my devotion with desires, i.e. in praying you to give me something, nor in feeling frustrated and unhappy when the prayer is ignored. Rather, I feel like saying that, if there is anything wrong here, it is in ignoring my prayers, in not fulfilling my desires, in running the world-show in such a manner that it does not let some of my worthiest desires to be fulfilled. Had it been the case that my legitimate prayers were always responded to by you, no matter favourably or unfavourably, and unambiguous indications were always given that it was you who responded to them, I would never have felt skeptical about your existence, in spite of my prayers and devotion having been linked with my desires. If you are what I think, or want you to be, the all-perfect creator and caretaker of the world, why should I not ask you to curtail my suffering and feel aggrieved when you do not? To whom, should I go, if not to you ? what sort of a thing praying would be if it is not *for* something ? Even praying to make me devoted to you is praying

for the fulfilment of a desire. When I feel aggrieved for your not granting a prayer, and tend to become skeptical about you, why do you ignore me, my turning away from you, my anger towards you, my skepticism ? Do I not need some attention, some cajoling, some persuading, some loving gesture, from you, so that I may restore my faith in you ?

God : I never ignore you. I always care for you.

Man : But, then, why are not my prayers responded to, and I am left to become a prey to my own skepticism ? I do not want to believe that you let me suffer without relief so that I may keep coming to you again and again for help. That would mean you are cruel, and would lower you in my estimation. I do not want that to happen. I do not want my god to have anything uncommendable in him. It is a pragmatic *a priori* for me that you are perfect in all respects.

God : As I have been saying to you all the time, your prayers are responded to, though not always to your satisfaction. Sometimes you do not realize that they have been. It seems you think I am one whose primary role is to attend to your prayers. Therefore, when you feel that I have not attended to some of them you become skeptical about my existence itself.

Man : Yes, you are a role-performer. I would not say that your primary role is to attend to my prayers. But certainly it is one of the things which I expect you to do, and a thing very important for me. To confess, I take you to be one who, if real, would perform the role of the father of the universe, who would look after all of its inmates. But not infrequently I feel that you are not performing the role. Since I take the role to be central to your being, I then naturally find it difficult to sustain my faith in, and consequently devotion for you.

God : Make your faith and devotion unconditional, do not condition them to your assessment of my performance of what you think to be my

role or roles. Have them because I am god and because you are man, and not because of what I do, or am expected by you to do. I do perform roles, an infinite number of them. But that is not your concern. Only remember the fact that I am and have devotion for me simply because I am. Let what I do be left to me.

Man :

God : Don't muse. If you are unconditionally devoted, your prayers would cease to be requests for something; they would be only expressions of your reverence. Even when they continue to be requests, you would not feel aggrieved if they seem to you to have been rejected or ignored. You would still remain composed, contented and happy. The agony of not having been looked after by me would not afflict you. You would be a happy man whatever may happen to you, or in your world, and your world would be a happy world to you.

Man : Yes, that is true. If I am devoted to you whatever may happen to me, I would remain happy whatever may happen to me, since I would not then care what you do to me. I would only care for the fact that you are and what you are.

God : Then, why are you depriving yourself of this golden possibility ?
What is the hurdle ?

Man : Your hiddenness.

God : How is that ?

Man : I would love to love you absolutely unconditionally. But I can only if I am clearly and distinctly aware of the fact, if it is a fact, that you are and are such and such. I expect your responses to my prayers, as I have been repeatedly saying, to help me in having the awareness. But they are either not visible at all, or are so ambiguous about their source, that I cannot be sure of their really being your responses. I keep, therefore, only groping to find out if you really are, feeling sometimes as if I were searching for a black

cat in a dark place which was not only not there but was not at any other place as well. I knock at several doors for help with little success. In the journey I pass through several sensitive areas which throw up to my reason powerful stimuli for making me an unbeliever, or even a cynical pessimist. Sometimes I quiet it down by inventing some defence mechanisms, sometimes I simply refuse to listen to its promptings. But each time my success is short-lived and accompanied with the feeling of having impoverished thereby the quality of my life.

God : The journey is strenuous, I know. But don't stop without reaching the destination. The time available to you is inexhaustible.

Man : I know it is inexhaustible. But I cannot reach the destination unless you come forward to help me.

God : How can I help you ?

Man : By shaking off your hiddenness, by revealing yourself to me, directly, clearly, distinctly. Your hiddenness has sometimes made me an unbeliever, sometimes a dogmatic believer, sometimes a vain philosopher giving an (unsuccessful) set of allegedly rational arguments to prove your existence, sometimes an everzealous logician exulting over his alleged success in proving the latter invalid.

God :

Man : You again have become silent. Respond, my god. I pray, respond.

God :

Man : Choose your way to reveal yourself. But reveal. Change me, my mind, my reason, if you want to, to convince me that you have revealed yourself, if you have. Don't reveal yourself only if you please to reward my unconditional devotion, as in some tales you have been depicted as doing. Reveal to enable me to have unconditional devotion grounded on knowledge of what you are. Only by revealing yourself you would dispel my disbelief, or convert my instable belief into stable knowledge.

God :

Man : Silent still ! Can't I break your silence ? Do you reveal yourself in silence ? Yours ? Mine ?

God :

Man :

NOTES

'Man' has been used in the dialogue, in a gender -free sense, to mean a human being, and not a male, as contrasted with a female, human. It has been called an *another* recording because it has a predecessor which appeared , under the title 'Man' and Man's God : A Timeless Dialogue in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.XII, 1985, pp. 113-42 and later in a revised form in my *Normativity, Regularity and Rules of Language*, Poona University, 1989, pp 165-94, and a *recording* because, in man's main dialoguing with God, with this or that end in view, it is constantly going on. At least, an attempt at dialoguing is seldom absent.

1. Salutation to your feet
2. My Master
3. God
4. From here onwards the duality is suspended, and the dialogue proceeds as if it were with god himself and not with the god of man's conception.
5. Perfection does not admit of degrees. We cannot say that X is more perfect than Y. Therefore, though in a large part of philosophical and theological literature god has been described as the most perfect being, it is wrong to do that. The description is intended to say that nothing is superior to him which can, quite correctly, be said by calling him a perfect being, since there cannot be any Y more perfect than him simply because 'more perfect' makes no sense.

6. Santa Tukārām : Quoted by Bāl Gangādhār Tilak in his *Śrīmadbhāgavadgītā Rahasya* (Hindi Version), p.430.

'O Foundation of the Universe, listen to one thing in privacy. If my actions liberate me, what is God's beneficence ?'

7. English rendering of, 'Bhagvāna bhakta ke vasha mai' a popular saying among devotees.

8. Māgahu vara prasanna main tātā -Tulsidasa, *The Ramacaritamānasa*, Balakānda, 176.

'Ask for any blessing, I am pleased with you' : told by Brahma to Rāvana, his younger brother Kumbhakarna and younger step brother Bibhīšana, when he was pleased with their devotion expressed in penances done by them. Rāvana asked for being unkillable by any being except a monkey or a human being, Kumbhakarna for six month's sleep at one stretch in a year, and Bibhīšana for being absolutely devoted to god. Each one was blessed with what he had asked for.

9. There is a story in the devotional literature of India that a harlot was uttering the words 'Rama', 'Rama', while training her pet parrot to utter them, or rather, to make similar sounds. Uttering the names of god is taken to be a respectable practice among devotees. The god of death sent his soldiers to bring her soul to hell which she deserved on account of her sinful actions. The soldiers, hearing her uttering 'Rāma', 'Rāma', thought she was uttering them out of devotion for god. They knew full well the unfailing role of devotion in making god pleased with the devotee and rewarding him. They, therefore, put her soul in heaven and not in hell to which she was entitled to : 'Suā padhāvata gaṇikā tara gai' (The harlot got liberated while teaching the parrot.)

10. As the story goes, Śīva, being pleased with their devotion, gave to the demon Bhasmāsura the blessing that he could burn anyone to ashes by simply putting his palm on the victim's head, and to the demon-king Rāvana that if one of his ten heads was cut off by someone, from the drops of blood falling on the ground another would immediately spring

up and replace the cut-off head. Bhasmāsura wanted to put his plam on the head of Śiva. Śiva had to run from one place to another to save himself until Bhasmāsura was cunningly persuaded to dance with his palm on his own head, thereby burning himself to ashes. In the case of Rāvaṇa, because of the blessing, Rama found it impossible to kill him. He then worshipped Śakti, the goddess of power, and prayed her to collect in her sacred love the blood falling from Rāvaṇa's cut-off head before its reaching the ground and then to drink it. She granted his prayer and acted accordingly. Only then Rāma could kill the great sinner.

11. 'Ajñaścāśraddhānaśca saṁśayātmā vinaśyati; Nāyam lokoasti na paro na sukham saṁśayatmanah. The *Bhagavadgītā*, Chapter 4-40.
12. English rendering of a line from a devotional song.