

DISCUSSION - II

A NOTE ON 'TATTVAMASI'

In his article 'Is "*Tattvam Asi*" the Same Type of Identity statement as "The Morning Star is the Evening star?" (*IPQ*, Vol.XXV no.1, pp.1-13), Dayakrishna has raised perhaps the most important issue concerning the knowledge claim made by the Advaita Vedantins regarding their metaphysical thesis, one half of which has been expressed by the statement "*Tattvam Asi*" that states identity between the empirical *jīva* and the trans-empirical *Brahman* (*jīvo Brahmaiva nāparā*), the other half of the thesis being a claim about the identity of empirical world-objects and the transempirical *Brahman*, though it is stated in a slightly different way as "*Brahma Satyam Jagannithyā*". I shall restrict my remarks only to the identity purportedly claimed in "*Tattvam Asi*".

Identity of *Jīva* and *Brahman* is allegedly the cornerstone of Advaita *Vedanta* - a system which naturally claims the status of *mahavākya* for the statement under discussion. The System stands or falls with it. Establishing the identity between *jīva* and *Brahman* or which is the same as establishing the knowledge claim to that identity therefore becomes for that system a matter of logical necessity. Defense of that identity claim would obviously involve showing that the concerned statement is true, not analytically, but synthetically, i.e. as a matter of fact. Even before that is done, it is necessary to show that it is meaningful.

The temptation to liken it with "The Morning star is the Evening star" certainly arises out of the implicit grammatical similarity between the two. That one statement comes from the pen of philosophers who belong to Indian tradition while the other has its roots in the West is strictly irrelevant for a fair philosophical debate. That the statement "*Tattvam Asi*"

has been 'the subject of interminable controversy where the question is raised as to how exactly it is to be understood or interpreted' (p.¹), though historically correct, need not unduly deter us from taking a fresh look at it. Dayakrishna indeed wants us to take a fresh look at it. I do not however understand what he means by his appeal in the end to widen the issue "to cover not only these two diverse traditions of philosophizing but that it should go beyond them".(p.13) I believe that there is no philosophical issue at which we cannot have a fresh look. In fact the beauty of any philosophical issue lies in the possibility of its permission to look at it afresh. If Dayakrishna however believes that the other statement, viz., "The Morning Star is the Evening Star", does not have such a long history as the statement "Tattvam Asi" has, he is quite mistaken. That statement has had also a very long history behind it before it came to be accepted as a true statement of identity in the field of astronomy. Certainly Frege did not contribute anything to its truth-determinant-conditions. It was not he who first formulated that statement. The fact however remains that that statement was first used by Frege in the nineteenth century as an example 'to bring to the attention of the philosophical world in the West a distinction which has since become famous and has led to a great deal of philosophical discussion'. (p.1) If we take into account the history of the astronomical discovery that the morning star is after all the evening star (and this may also mean that what appears as the Morning star in the Western hemisphere appears at the same time as Evening star in the Eastern hemisphere, and consequently what appears as an Evening star in the Western Hemisphere appears at the same time as the Morning star in the Eastern Hemisphere) we come to know how the truth of that statement of identity was established by following the procedures of scientific method which involved reference to observational evidence, framing up of legitimate hypothesis, use of established astronomical laws and theories in the field of astronomy. The case of "Tattvam Asi" differs vastly from the case of astronomical discovery about the planet venus. Better to call it metaphysical hypothesis. The question would then be : Whether any metaphysical hypothesis could be regarded as an identity statement in the sense of identity as referential identity. There is no possibility of anyone claiming analytical

identity for the statement "Tattvam Asi". The statement must be then claimed to be informative and cognitively significant. It must also be shown to be meaningful and true, and the onus of proving this must lie on the shoulders of the Advaita Vedāntins who staunchly believe in that mahāvākya . The following considerations will suggest that it is reasonable to think that as philosophers, the Advaita Vedāntins have not taken, to use Austin's phrase, "something more nearly their own size to strain at".

In the statement "Tattvam Asi", while it is clear what the expression 'tvam' refers to, it's not at all clear what the expression 'tat' refers to. The expressions 'tvam' and 'tat' are demonstrative pronouns in Sanskrit language and their referents will certainly depend upon the context in which they are used. The statement, it is clear, can occur only in a dialogue situation where 'tvam' is used to address the second person who hears, the speaker referring to himself as 'aham'. In any dialogue these two pronouns are indexical and they will change their referents depending on who the speaker is and who the hearer is. Since the context is exclusively dialogical, the expression 'tvam' presupposes that the person to whom it refers is capable to communicate and comprehend the Sanskrit language. In using this term, viz., 'tvam', no distinction is made on account of sex, age or any other physical features of human body. "Tat' is however used never to refer to persons but to material objects and material objects are never capable of having a dialogue amongst themselves. There can be dialogue about material objects amongst persons but not the other way round. One can therefore safely say that the personal pronouns 'tvam' and 'aham' (in English language: 'you' and 'I') acquire whatever significance they have basically from the dialogical contexts. Since the natural dialogues are always amongst human persons, it is extremely odd to think of an identity between 'tat' and 'tvam' or again between 'tat' and 'aham'. Thus, 'tvam' and 'tat' can never refer to one and the same entity and can never be the terms between which referential identity could possibly exist. The sentence 'Tattvam Asi' is grammatically correct but 'systematically misleading', in as much as it masquerades itself as an identity statement and takes on the garb of a very profound truth about human persons. In story-writing, people

imagine dialogues amongst trees, trees and human beings, animals, animals and trees, animals and human beings, gods, goddesses and fairies and amongst all sorts of inanimate objects but all of us know that they are aesthetic literary pieces having no cognitive significance whatsoever. Coming to the natural human situations the point can be made in a different way. If 'x' is told that thou art the recipient of this year's *Jnanapeeth* award, or that you are the person selected to deliver Tagore lectures at University of Pune in the year 2000 A.D. or so many other things of the form that 'you are such and such', 'x' will have no problem of grasping the meaningfulness of what is being said about him (assuming of course that he knows the language in which it is being said). 'X' may have many different sorts of reactions to those statements such as, believing or not believing, getting happy or tensed, feeling great or embarrassed and so on and so forth but he will never complain of not having understood the meaning of what was said. Normally people don't have problems of understanding what is being said to them about themselves and how they should react to it. If on the other hand 'x' is told, "Tattvam Asi", thereby implying that "you are Brahman", 'x' would not know what is being said about himself and how to react to it. Of course, it may be explained to him that he is empirical *jiva* and what it means to call him *jiva* - what it is to be a physical body, an organic one, having waking consciousness of objects outside that body, having all sorts of internal sensations like pain, pleasure, hunger and thirst, feelings and emotions, having illusions, reveries, hallucinations and dreams, having thoughts and ideas, having what we call moral and aesthetic sensations and perceptions, compulsions and freedoms to do certain things. It may be also explained to him how his organic body passes with regular intervals through the phenomenon of sound sleep. And then if it is added that your *jiva* on account of which you do all these things in your life, is truly and ultimately Brahman; that all that you are indulging in as a *jiva* in this world is unreal (*mithya*) along with the world itself, reaction of 'x' would be that of a dumb-founded person and certainly one of bewilderment. He will say that he understands fully well his own description as *Jiva* but would not know what it is to identify his *Jiva* with Brahman because for him the expression 'Brah-

man' has no use at all. In fact Brahman is not an expression that belongs to anyone's language used to speak about this world of persons, animals and things. "*Tattvam Asi*" and "*Jivo Brahmaiva nāparā*" - these and such other statements would be meaningless for everyone to whom we speak or have a dialogue in which we want to say something about the other person meaningfully or in a cognitively significant way. It is thus a case of Pseudo-Identity. The structures of metaphysics and religion are all founded on such pseudo-identities. Supposing some one were to tell me that my sons and daughters were God's children, I would not know what kind of identity is being conceived because I know for certain what they are and who they are and the expression 'god's child' has no use for me. I cannot possibly conceive any situation in which the said expression can have any use for me or for any one for that matter.

That the statement 'Tattvam Asi' is a case of pseudo-identity may also be brought out in a slightly different manner on logical grounds. In Logic, 'x' and 'y' are regarded as holding identity relation (or as being identical with each other) if and only if every property that belongs to 'x' also belongs to 'y' and *vice versa*. This definition which was formulated by Leibnitz and which is too well known is called the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles. One can easily see that this relation is transitive, symmetrical and totally reflexive. Most important point to note is that the relation of identity can be meaningfully conceived only in terms of properties possessed by objects. Unless we have clear notion of what should count as a property and which properties individuals can be said to have we cannot even start thinking whether the relation of identity holds between them. It is obvious that one *jiva* cannot be identical with another *jiva* because of lots of qualitative and quantitative differences amongst them. They are also numerically different. It is therefore not conceivable that all these distinct and different *jivas* are collectively or distributively identical with Brahman. Brahman is said to be propertyless whereas *jivas* can be distinguished by us from one another as separate individuals only by reference to the distinct properties which they possess. Can we dissolve all the differences amongst the several *jivas* into homogeneity of one Brahman? This

reminds us of Hegel's characterization of Spinoza's substance as lion's den where one notices only the foot-prints of the in-going animals and none of the out-coming ones. How can we obliterate the vital distinctions between different kinds of *jivas* that exist in this world and further very distinct kind of features that characterise the various individual *jivas* whom we assign the highly dignified designation of human beings? Advaita *Vedantins* introduce confusion worst confounding by identifying all the *jivas* with Brahman and treating them as several distinct appearances of one Brahman. The confusion can be shown to emerge in the following way.

In order to convince any disciple that 'Tattvam Asi', the Preceptor or the Guru must have to have the knowledge of what is being referred to by 'Tat'. 'Tat', according to the Preceptor who is an Advaita *Vedantin*, refers to Brahman. The Preceptor thus must have had the knowledge of Brahman before he informs the disciple that 'Tattvam Asi'. When the disciple is told with some insistence of his identity with Brahman, the disciple is bound to ask the question as to how the Preceptor himself came to have the knowledge of Brahman and *jiva's* identity with Brahman? I am sure that each one of us will certainly allow this modest shade of skepticism in the disciple that I am talking about. I really do not see however how the Preceptor will be able to handle this skeptical doubt of the disciple? The Preceptor cannot simply dictate that he himself had realised the identity between his own *jiva* and the Brahman - that '*Aham Brahmasmi*'. If he does that then he lands himself into solipsism of Metaphysical sort which will cut every possible route to Tattvam Asi' If he cites authority of a few ancient Upanishadic *R̥ṣis* and *Munis* and claims in their behalf that they had realised for themselves the identity between their own *jivas* and the Brahman, then the preceptor will land them into metaphysical solipsism which will cut routes to both '*Aham Brahmasmi*' and '*Tattvam Asi*'. There is no problem in philosophy which is more important than the problem of other minds. To throw light on the nature of other minds, we cannot create solipsistic islands of individual experiences and explain the nature of this world of persons and objects. There can be no piece of demonstrative reasoning nor any inductive model to reach the kind of iden-

tity which the Advaitin looks for between *Jiva* and Brahman. How do I then come to know that 'Tattvam Asi'? And how do others come to know that 'Aham Brahmasmi'? Will intuition or what is called '*anubhuti*' help us? Can I have intuitive experience of other *jivas* being ever identical with Brahman? Can others have any intuitive experience of me being ever identical with Brahman? The identity of *Jiva* and Brahman, if at all holds good, must be objective and universal but then such an identity will have to overcome all the difficulties we encounter in solving the problem of other minds. Till such difficulties are overcome, the supposed identity between Brahman and *jiva* must be regarded as a case of pseudo-identity. Awareness of my own personhood can never be a matter of illusion under normal circumstances. A man under rare circumstances like schizophrenia or some other kind of psychosis characterized by dissociation from environment and deterioration of personality may have mistaken identity of his own with some other character. I need not work out the implication of this in asking someone to identify himself or herself with Brahman. Language of appearances will also not help us. From a few cases of illusions and appearances that we have in our life, nothing can be generalised about the whole of our waking experience. The material objects in the context of which we have such experiences on only a few occasions cannot be said to have all only an ephemeral being. We cannot deny them reality in their own right. If that is the case with material objects in the world, how can we deny reality to other *jivas* which, for aught we know, are embodied ones? How do we know that other persons have dreams? How do we know that other persons have sound sleep? Do animals have dreams? Do children have dreams? All these are troublesome questions for a philosopher who wants to go beyond common-sense and science.

The Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles, on the basis of which I have tried to develop above considerations, I am aware has not gone unchallenged in the history of Logic. Issues concerning analyticity of sentences and the synonymity of meanings have been raised and discussed at length by thinkers after Frege down to Quine in this context. If analytical, it's only a truism, and if synthetic, it's hypothetical. The difficulties expe-

rienced in applying the principle to the real world of our experience of persons and things are well known in the field of Law and jurisprudence, where the questions involved are not only about knowing the evidence but of identifying persons for dispensing justice in the light of the known evidence. Some times we find it extremely difficult to affirm the identities of persons inspite of very good evidence for identification because we can never correctly identify their intentions in doing certain actions. Errors are possible at every stage. If this is the case with our mundane existence, how very difficult it is, nay, almost impossible, to identify *jivas* with Brahman. Philosophers have however thought they could prove their metaphysical claims without facing the tribunals of logic and experience.

Before I close this already elongated note, I do want to refer to a recently emerging trend of approaching the pure philosophical side of Advaita *Vedānta* by applying phenomenological investigation to one's own conscious experience. Mentioning that the beauty of phenomenology is that it permits us to look at experience rather than language, Prof. Beena Gupta in her recent work *The Disinterested Witness (A Fragment of Advaita Vedānta Phenomenology)*, Evanston Ill. North Western University Press 1998, has thought that the phenomenological approach "leads us to a point where linguistic and interpretive differences, though recognized, are transcended in the horizon of pure experiential consciousness and its structures" (p.xi-xii). Prof. Ramkrishna Puligandla also in his very recently published article ('The Message of *Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad* : Phenomenological Analysis of Mind', *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.XXVI, no.2,pp.) has also recommended this approach very strongly in order to correctly interpret the Advaitic position on the reality of Brahman. In this brief note I do not wish, nor do I have enough preparation by way of careful and scholarly study of the two references given above, to examine in detail their arguments. This may be done some time later. I am glad to see that in recommending to us to look at experience rather than language, they are using language to convince us of their approach. So the matter, I suppose, can be handled at the level of philosophical arguments. I can use language alone to communicate what I want to say. Phenomenological method, so

far as my understanding goes, does not take into account the logic of the language but makes exclusively an ultimate appeal to intuition, But will not this appeal to intuition make philosophical argument utterly impossible *ab initio*? How am I to convince myself and others too, that the horizons of pure experiential consciousness that I reach are the same ones reached by others? How shall I be able to convince the disciple on the basis of my own realization that 'Tattvam Asi'? Dependence on intuition alone will create an iron curtain of solipsism, each individual *jiva* claiming 'Aham *Brahmasmi*' with no approach to other minds. I am pointing out to this consequence as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Language, with logic or no logic, at least gives me free hand in getting to know other people, understand them, their lights and delights, their woes and miseries and to live with them in a community. We know that Husserl who introduced this method for the first time in the West, wrote, : "The 'I' and the 'we' which apprehend, presuppose the hidden 'I' and 'we' to whom they are present". This is as good as saying that we are appearances unto ourselves. This assertion of transcendental subjectivity must end up with a radical sort of subjective idealism. If I mistake not, it does at least in the case of Husserl. Phenomenological method, in the case of Husserl, makes an uncritical assumption that there are independently of any linguistic context, objects that are epistemologically absolute data. George Nakhnikian has drawn our attention to this by remarking that this is the Husserlian counterpart of logical atomist's assumption of ultimate absolute simples out of which the world is to be logically constructed (Refer to his Introduction to Part x : Edmund Husserl, in *Readings in Twentieth Century Philosophy*, The Free Press of Glencoe, London, 1964, pp.621-631). Keeping aside for the moment the powerful criticism of this generic view by Wittgenstein, how would phenomenologist like to go about relating these absolute data with the world of our experience - the world of other minds and external bodies? Will the language of appearances help us? Nakhnikian further remarks that "shifting of the burden away from language and upon the self-evidently given indicates a some what *naive* view of the role of language: "We can make our speech conform in a pure measure to what is intuited in its full clarity" - wrote Husserl, as if lan-

guage were the sort of thing that the phenomenologist could create at will in the image of ultimate facts"(p.631). I wish phenomenologists take this remark seriously enough. Search for philosophical truth without language is like search for a black cow in the pitch of darkness. Phenomenological route to Brahman takes us to a dead end. It does not throw any light on the nature of the identity supposedly stated in 'Tattvam Asi'. Can one therefore reaffirm the claim that it is a case of a Pseudo-identity?

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