

DISCUSSION - I

ARE MAHĀVĀKYAS IDENTITY VĀKYAS?

It is only too appropriate that in the specially dedicated issue of the *Journal*, two giants of philosophy have come forward to exchange notes with their directly contrary views on a vital question about assimilation of Advaitic Mahāvākyas with Fregean Identity Vākyas.¹ Professor Daya Krishna² favoured assimilation if only to throw light on the analytical rigour of the identity logic behind Mahāvākyas, while Professor Dravid³ questioned its credibility. That is, while Daya locates a Fregean problematic within Advaitic thought, Dravid emerges as a defender of the *status quo*. Daya formulates a Fregean case for Advaitins claiming that the following pair of statements namely,

Atman = Brahman = (im)pure consciousness

Atman = Brahman = Pure Consciousness

embody the identity Mahavakyas, since they are manifestations of one and the same consciousness. So his major problem is why should there be a temporal transition scale from

Atman = (im) pure consciousness

towards

Atman = Pure Consciousness

and still they are not to be regarded as a Fregean identity Vakyas. That question is adequately answered only if we know how to explain the unique way in which both Atman and Brahman are individuated. It is not that the two different modes of individuation overlap, but one is a more fine-graded

form of individuation than the other is. If we read only the question about the temporal transition then Daya's underlying problematic becomes one in which the so-called spiritual transition from the difference towards an identity (and back from the identity towards the difference as evidenced in Sāmkhya's system) is much more pronounced. Overlooking the fact that the above temporal schema cannot be fitted into Frege's version for a moment, we can still stipulate that the Advaitins should be obliged to defend the spiritualistic basis of the identity if they really want to present a case *contra* Frege. But in doing so they should not forget that they are turning the epistemic discovery into a non-epistemic one. But, when this is precisely the target of Daya's questioning they must give him the benefit of doubt. In other words, Daya's question becomes: can be Advaitins (taking their atman-centric posit of Atman) show that the identity between

Atman = Brahman

is one that is the same as

Water = H₂O

which is a *posteriori* and necessary. In other words, can they prove it to be natural kind terms like the one above so as to fit this into a Fregean schema?

It is not that Daya refuses to look at the differences between the two pairs of identity vakyas, but he hold them to be on a different key as if to explicate the above question. That is, while Fregean identity is about objects of consciousness, Advaitic identity is about consciousness of objects (I ignore for the moment the distinction is considered to be one between a mathematical identity $x+y=4$ and the morning star and evening star; I take to be the same). An immediate fallout is that while Fregean is not about the so-called ontology of illusion, Advaitins posit such ontology. The second difference is that while Fregean identity is a *posteriori*, which is about physically identifiable objects, Advaitins is about psychological cognition, that is, epistemic in his sense. (It is too difficult to make anything about these distinctions and hence I ignore). On the spiritual side, what they say about can be couched *pace* Daya, as a claim about monad

(exact equivalent to the concept of Atman). Such equivalence can be granted on the assumption of pantheistic relation they hold between them. If so, their pantheistic mode of talk comes to the following pair :

$$\text{Monad} = \text{Monad}$$

which is false in the light of Leibniz's law of identity, which asserts that no two monads are alike. So they must hold

$$\text{Monad} = \sim \text{Monad.}$$

But what they say is that

$$\text{Monad} = \sim \text{Supermonad (I}_1\text{)}$$

$$\text{Monad} = \text{Supermond (I}_2\text{)}$$

which still requires an identity. On either of the above ways, Daya's point may be construed as holding that they can deny this, only at the risk of escaping from Frege's distinction between sense and reference. *A fortiori*, Śamkara's problematic is Frege's problematic, wittingly or unwittingly. (We must also see if this is what they accept: if they do, they have not gone beyond the poetry of pantheism which is unepistemic, let alone defending it, that comes to naught.)

Now, granting that they are so assimilable, in Daya's way, the problematic becomes one in which the sameness and difference is nothing more than the problem of sense and reference. Considered thus, the second pair only changes the sense of the first pair. For Dravid, Daya's understanding is questionable both from the textual as well as a logical point of view, and even so, it represents a distorted version of something other than the celebrated Advaita vedanta, and hence Daya has totally misunderstood the unity of identity and non-identity (I₂) for the precise reason that the identity of identity and non-identity (I₁) can never be assimilated into the Fregean mode. The precise reason why such assimilation is not warranted by Advaitians is that it commits one to make the following statement

$$\text{(im)pure consciousness} = \text{Pure Consciousness}$$

as conveying the same referents and different senses. Dravid can never grant this since, Mahāvākyas as they are they embody an exhortation of spiritual change from one level of being to yet another level. On the one hand this has nothing to do with empiricism, nor has it to do with semantics as such. Were it to be so, on the empirical side at least, this should identify

empirical consciousness = absolute consciousness

or else on the side of the semantics of suggestive meaning, it should identify

that which is material substance = that which is endowed by potness

or

pot = which has its locus in potness

which is an ordinary derivation (which lends a subject-predicate structure to the above sentence) from the following pair:

The pot = that which is endowed by potness

The pot = that which is a material substance

What then is the objection ? Again, the Advaitic semantics *in situ* however goes as follows taking the following pair as suggestive:

My house = that which is on the Ganges

My house = that which is on the bank of Ganges

so as to derive

That which is on the Ganges = (is an attribute of) that which on the bank of G.

What it boils down to is that the sense of both sides are dropped while the referents are retained as shown in the following analysis of Thou art That

Thou = That = absolute consciousness

which is to be characterised as if at all non-dual identity.

In a sense the crucial issue that divides Daya from Dravid is that while the former accepts identity of identity while the latter accepts only the identity of non-identity. Thus while the opposition between Atman and Brahman (the opposition is one between self and non-self) is brought out by

$$\text{Atman} = \sim\text{Brahman.}$$

The identity among these three namely,

$$\text{Atman} = \text{Brahman} = \text{Pure Consciousness}$$

cannot be anything but non-dual (not one and not two, but it is two in one, that is the denial of duality).⁴

On the other hand, Frege's paradox arises on account of

$$\text{Morning Star} = \sim \text{Evening Star}$$

and an *a posteriori* knowledge reveals that

$$\text{Morning Star} = \text{Evening Star} = \text{Venus.}$$

In presenting the above I have violated the conventions governing Frege's discussion of identity statements. Frege's query is that in between the two following statements flanked by identity sign, the choice of one rather than the other leads towards a paradox. Thus the identity is paradoxical between

$$\text{Morning Star} = \text{Morning Star}$$

and

$$\text{Morning Star} = \text{Evening Star.}$$

Frege uses this as an argument to establish that meaning of these expressions may be understood in terms of a cognitive difference. We cognise them to be same in one mode and cognise them to be different in yet another mode. This is especially so in oblique contexts where one is substituted for the other. Such a substitution Frege argues will yield a false conclusion. Thus

I believe that Rover is a dog

Rover = Dover

Therefore, I believe that Rover is Dover (False).

One need not necessarily follow the above strong Fregean argument. We can swiftly change it into a case for presenting a dynamic identity statement in which certain awareness is generated. Accordingly, I hear from the owner of the dog that its called Dover, and hence I can substitute validly Dover for Rover making the conclusion as true. If this is acceptable then we can understand the two identity statements as having a focus on both the problems of identity and difference. That is to say, it is expressing an identity as well as difference. In other words, it conveys to me the identity of identity as well as identity of non-identity. This is what I try to formulate in a more succinct way at the initial stage. Now my question is: if this is understood as a non difference, What is the bar in calling it as non-dual. This is what I think Daya can be construed as doing: that is, if the difference is denied, then it is nothing but Fregean. If so then the point that divides their argument comes to naught. Nevertheless, Dravid claims that he has no mood to accept this, precisely because the sense of both expressions does not jeopardise the referents of the expression. That is since they have one and the same referents, there is no significance in the statement that the senses are different. Thus the sense difference in

Morning Star = Evening Star

does hardly convey any significance. That is if

Morning Star = Morning Star

is reducible to a mere tautology, then what significance we are supposed to attach to

Morning Star = Evening Star

when both stand only for Venus, Dravid asks. In support of this, Dravid puts forward

That = Thou

or

Atman = Brahman

are having radically different connotations as brought by

That = other than Thou

and

Thou = other than That.

Unless Dravid wishes to demonstrate that such a retention of reference is based on the understanding of them as natural kind words, he cannot reserve the right to dismiss the sense as devoid of any significance. Does this not say

That = ~Thou

which is the same as above Fregean Vākyās ? And from a semantic point of view,

That = that which is not present before the speaker

and

Thou = the one who is addressed by the speaker

What else we do when we synchronise these two into the statement of Mahāvākya ? Dravid owes an explanation as to what makes him to drop the dynamism of the identity (which reduces his problem to absurdity) so as to retain referents-only-case, without bothering to explain further why they cannot be regarded as natural kind terms. For example, he never realises that this is no different from

Morning Star = the star which appears on the eastern horizon

and

Evening Star = the star that appears on the western horizon which admits the dynamic identity statements without demur. Moreover

in the comparison, in point of refutation, it stipulates that in the following identity,

That = Morning Star

and

Thou = Evening Star.

The L.H.S. are demonstratives and the R.H.S are adjectives of '*morning*' and '*evening*'. What makes this to be different from a Fregean mode?

In lieu of the sense-meaning and reference-meaning, he argues, we should adopt a suggestive mode, which enjoins

Empirical self = absolute self

which are partially meaningful (i.e., sense) but they are dropped when it is read as

Empirical self = absolute self = pure consciousness

which retains only the reference meaning. Granting that, one may demand the proof to show that they are natural kind words, which can never enter into identity relation. No Advaitin has ever shown to be so. So we can construe it in the following way. If this is not identity, he should tell us then: what else it is ?

One wonders where exactly the difference lies, if they are construed as given at the beginning. If so there cannot be any difference between Mahāvākyas and Fregean Mahāvākyas, despite the spiritual anchorage which can be dispensed with for purposes of rigorous understanding. My hunch is that suppose we make the identity and non-identity as flip sides of the same problematic (which looks quite plausible), then the line that divides Daya and Dravid is still thinned out. Daya is not incorrect after all? Then why the hue and cry ? If they want to defend, the onus is on them to prove that

Thou = That

is not an identity statement at all. They cannot do so, once they agreed

that it is so (Dravid also agrees) and then try to mix it with a dose of mysticism⁵.

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NOTES

1. The issue was dedicated to the memory of its late founder Professor Dr S.S.Barlingay, who encouraged all shades of opinion. I owe a word of thanks to Professor Dr S.V.Bokil, Chief Editor, for encouragement that kept me trying this problem.
2. Daya Krishna 'Is Tattvam Asi the same type of Identity Statement as The Morning Star and the Evening Star' in this *Journal* xxv 1 (1998)pp. 1-15.
3. N.S. Dravid 'A Note on 'Is Tattvam Asi the same type etc' in this *Journal* xxv 4 (1998) pp.527-532.
4. As early as 1984 Professor Bina Gupta addressed herself to this problem in the light of her research on *Sākṣin*, translating this as Witness-Consciousness. The problem about this is that it brings in the 'Kantian contraband' (Rorty's term). For the recent treatment see her *The Disinterested Witness* (A Fragment of Advaita Vedanta Phenomenology). Evanston, Ill. North Western University Press, 1998.
5. According to late Professor B.K.Matilal, mysticism cannot be used to explicate unless it is for a logical illumination. He laid this as a policy of the *Journal* for which he was the Editor.

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