

AN ADVAITIC EMENDATION OF KANT : A STUDY IN COMPARATIVE METAPHYSICS¹

We shall attempt to explain and clarify the central problems involved in the philosophical investigations of Kant and Saṅkara. During Kant's time the claims of both science and morality were at stake. Encouraged by the success of mathematics the rationalist philosophers tried to apprehend even the noumenal reality through the categories of the understanding. Philosophy, as a matter of fact, sought the assistance of mathematics because of the clearness and certainty which distinguish the conclusions of the latter and which she wished to obtain for her own. In excess of her zeal she was not content with striving after this ideal of indefectible certitude but forgetting the real diversity of the two fields, strove to imitate other qualities which are not transferable. Instead of learning from mathematics philosophy became subservient to it. Not only this, what is worse is the application of the categories of the natural sciences which are valid only in the realm of sense-experience, to the transcendent reality which is never given in sensibility. This unauthorised and unwarranted extension of the categories of the understanding could produce nothing but 'transcendental illusion'.² It blurred the distinction between the principles valid within the realm of moral and religious consciousness. On the other hand, the empiricist philosophers challenged the efficacy of scientific reasoning by denying the necessity and universality of its governing principles. No doubt they accepted the validity of mathematical judgments but they maintained that the judgments of mathematics have nothing to do with the matters of fact. No *apriori* judgment can be made about the nature of reality. Experience is the only and exclusive source of the knowledge of reality but experience can give only what is contingent and probable. Universal certainty and apodictic validity is something for which experience cannot manage to account. As Hume pointed out, whatever appears to be necessary in experience can be accounted for by the laws of association based on customs, habits etc.³ Experience gives only what is psychologically necessary. In this way, the sceptics robbed physical sciences of their secure ground. It is in this predicament that Kant's contribution to philosophy is to be evaluated.

Kant's aim was to safeguard the claims of both science and morality. He did it by studying critically the origin, validity and the limits of the concepts of the understanding. Thus his problem is of twofold nature : to determine both validity and limit of the universal principles of knowledge. The first is necessarily related with the second. That is to say, the validity of the principles of understanding is confined to the reality given in sensibility. The purpose of the transcendental deduction of the categories is to establish this point clearly. He also proves negatively that when these principles of understanding are applied to anything which is super-sensible or transcendent, they cease to be valid and we get only 'transcendental illusion'. Thus Kant succeeds in defending the claims of science and morality against the attacks of dogmatists and sceptics by creating a dichotomy between knowledge and faith and consequently between the known and the unknown or phenomenon and the noumenon. In this way, he constructs successfully the metaphysics of experience but is unable to discover the nature of higher reality positively. He postulates it only as an ideal which can be believed but never known either objectively or subjectively.⁴

It is on this point where an Advaitic emendation of Kantian philosophy can be suggested. Kant left philosophy in an impasse. It was for his successors to find the way out. Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, made important contributions towards this end. But the efforts of the post-Kantian German idealists are not absolutely flawless. All these systems failed to realise the importance of self-awareness. They failed to realize the importance of immediate experience which alone can solve these tedious problems. Bradley made some improvement in this respect. But his doctrine of self which is almost a relapse into empiricism makes him unable to solve this problem. Though Bradley was one of the greatest advocates among the exponents of immediacy in western philosophy, he could not realize that only genuine immediacy is that of self.⁵ Śaṁkara's philosophy must be viewed as an important and valuable rejoinder to all those systems which either make the really real unknown or make it known through the principle of mediacy or divorce self from genuine immediacy. In the opinion of Śaṁkara self is the highest reality which is capable of being realised in immediate experience or Ātmānubhūti.⁶ Here Śaṁkara's views appear to

be quite in consonance with those of Kant in so far as he maintains that discursive intelligence cannot apprehend the self.⁷ But like him he does not take help of faith. He solves this problem with the help of reason itself as for him self-knowledge is the highest mode of knowing.

Both Kant and Śaṅkara have the same epistemological problem before them, i.e. the problem of the knowledge of the unconditioned. Kant had solved the problem of the limit of the theoretical activity of reason in knowledge. He, as a matter of fact, defined the scope of agreed knowledge in philosophy and consequently put philosophy on the sure path of science. Kant admitted the philosophical knowledge, the knowledge of the unconditioned, as merely an ideal. He laid much emphasis upon the *aprioriness* of knowledge characterized by necessity and universality but he paid almost no attention to the realization of self as the sole and only reality in the intuitive awareness or any other form of higher experience. To say that noumenal entities are postulates of ethics and morality realizable in practical reason, is simply the denial of their theoretic awareness. Kant believed in a metaphysical reality but he denied knowledge of it. It was a challenge to reason. The half-hearted solution which Kant found in Practical Reason was actually no solution. A theoretical problem requires a theoretical solution. But Kant could not meet this demand due to his restricted assumptions and limited metaphysical outlook. But Śaṅkara does not have recourse to practical reason to safeguard the freedom of the self. He relies upon the more natural and common experience and explores the implications of the various phases of experience, waking, dreaming, sleeping etc. Kant missed this mainly because it is not the vogue in the West to explain these phases of life.⁸

Kant could not possibly solve the problem of the knowledge of the unconditioned due to his forced distinction between the intellect of man and that of God. In his opinion man's intellect is discursive while the divine intellect is supposed to be intuitive. This distinction between the human and the divine intelligence made it difficult for Kant to account successfully for the ultimate issues of epistemology. What he failed to realize is the essential identity of the human and the divine intelligence. Śaṅkara could solve these problems successfully, because he realized the essential

oneness of man and God.⁹ According to Kant man and God belong to two absolutely different and disparate realms and what is the privilege for the God is the privation for the man. Due to this predilection Kant maintained the view that God knows the thing-in-itself through an intellectual intuition¹⁰ and man can manage to have an access to it only through faith. But this dichotomy of intellectual intuition and faith is almost foreign to the advaitism of Śaṅkara. According to Śaṅkara there is only one way of knowing the unconditioned which is the same as the ultimate reality. It is the direct experience of it—the Anubhava or Ātma-pratyaya.¹¹ Kant invents faith for this purpose. Thus he failed to resist the temptation to apprehend the ultimate reality. It is only his narrow conception of knowledge which led him to forget that faith is only another name for the higher knowledge. And because he could not realise it, he failed to give the correct account of this mode of knowing. Ultimately intellectual intuition and faith are simply different expressions for one and the same thing, if the same ultimate reality is known to God through intellectual intuition and revealed to man through faith. Samyagjñāna is vastutantram. It is of one and the same form (Ekarūpam) and Anubhava is the means to it.¹² The self for Śaṅkara is not a subject in the sense in which it means an agent as distinguished from knowing and the object of knowledge. It is knowledge or consciousness as such.

So far as the knowledge of the unconditioned in the objective attitude is concerned, Śaṅkara would like to agree with Kant. The unconditioned cannot be known as an object of knowledge. When such an attempt is made, it results into a sort of philosophical smuggling amounting to 'transcendental illusion' in Kant and Adhyāsa¹³ in Śaṅkara. Both of them realized correctly that self is the presupposition of whatever is known objectively and consequently cannot be dragged to the realm of that which depends on it. It is at the back of all psychic activity and therefore psychically unknowable. But while Kant makes self unknowable and unspeakable, Śaṅkara would like to make the case for both these possibilities. Though the unconditioned or self is objectively unknown, it can be subjectively realized and though it is literally unspeakable it is expressible symbolically. Śaṅkara makes it possible to know and speak about self within

theoretic consciousness. When we speak about the self or the unconditioned, it should not be understood literally but analogically or symbolically. It is dogmatism to maintain that the sole function of language is either to describe the facts of natural sciences or to express our emotional ejaculations. In speculative metaphysics language is used for neither of these purposes. It is used there symbolically. The metaphysical reality is expressible in language though it is not meant. It is only suggested symbolically. By investing language with a symbolic dimension, the Advaitin lifts linguistic expressivity to a higher altitude, from where it could negotiate to express the unthinkable. The Mahāvākyas like Tattvamasi do express a non-discursive situation—one purely metaphysical in essence. As a matter of fact, we start speculative thinking with spiritual experience of Brahman or self. And whatever is said about Brahman and his power may be regarded as the conceptual formulation of this experience. But this conceptual formulation is to be interpreted only symbolically. The intelligible contents of pure consciousness as expressed in the Ātmanic metaphysics of Śaṅkara are to be understood only symbolically.¹⁴

We have maintained that there are two dimensions of knowability, one Kantian, limiting knowledge to objects given in experience, and the other, Advaitic, extending the sphere of knowability beyond objects of sense-experience. The Advaita criticism of Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā philosophies indicates beyond all doubts, that Advaitism is much aware of the unknowability of the unconditioned as an object as is Kant, but Kant stops short of this and his dialectic is used simply to demonstrate the unknowable nature of the unconditioned. But the dialectic in Advaita is double-edged. It points to the limitation of thought but vindicates the scope of reason (Pure Reason) by showing that it is also knowledge, knowledge-in-itself, i.e. knowledge which neither contemplates an object, nor does lose its intelligibility. Those who deny outright the possibility of such intuitive knowledge (Anubhava) in the name of reason are actually dogmatists in disguise. The account of experience as we find in Śaṅkara is essentially an attempt to get beyond the dogmatism of the type of Kant and analyse experience in a wider and more comprehensive sense and consequently to bring out the full significance of the higher and the

more subtle forms of perception of reality already present in it. What Kant actually gives is not a theory of knowledge as such or of true knowledge, a knowledge of reality-in-itself, but essentially a theory of scientific knowledge which can at the most ward off the attacks of scepticism against it. This is the minimum which a rationalist can legitimately do and Kant attempted to accomplish that end.

We maintain that agnosticism is not the legitimate culmination of philosophical enquiry. And to justify and vindicate metaphysics in an irrational key is also the defeat of philosophy. The unknowability of the unconditioned is a necessary corollary of the objective attitude. To think that all that is known and is knowable, is an object to a subject, is to insist on the phenomenalisation of the noumenal. To maintain that the unconditioned is realisable through moral effort, amounts to a phenomenalisation of an 'idea of reason', if not in cognitive consciousness, in volitional consciousness at least. So philosophical thinking in Kant has got an indissoluble tendency towards objectifying what is not at all objectifiable.¹⁵ But Śaṅkara, while denying the knowledge of the ultimate reality as an object, very clearly admits the possibility of its knowledge as the ultimate knower. In every act of knowledge, in every event of cognition, we are conscious of its existence but not as an object but as a subject. Here we have clearly discerned an Advaitic emendation of Kantian epistemology. Ward's pure ego, Alexander's enjoyment and Śaṅkara's Aparokṣānubhūti,¹⁶ are all knowledge par excellence and yet not the knowledge of an object. Kant no doubt claims to have effected a Copernican Revolution in philosophy by shifting the centre of gravity of knowledge from the object to the subject, but his revolution remained incomplete, in so far as Kant lapsed into the objective attitude, and forgot that the subject is essentially free and even when it is unobjectifiable it is knowable par excellence. In case Kant would have managed to realise the essential knowability of the self, as freedom from objectivity, he would have given to the unconditioned a better status in knowledge-situation than he has, and would not have connected it with a moral volition that negates the cognitive mode of consciousness. If the Kantian approach to the epistemology smacks of a failure, the blame consists in the very motive for philosophising in the Kantian strain.

But such an awareness on our part with a reference to the limitation of Kantian approach is no condemnation of Kant. It is simply an attempt to vindicate metaphysics by showing the way in which a metaphysical statement symbolises a theoretic function. Philosophy from the standpoint of Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara has its beginning and end in revelation. It begins with Śruti and ends in Anubhūti thereby making the spiritual heritage of mankind a personal possession.

Kant realised in the Dialectic of his Critique of Pure Reason that the human reason in the true sense was wider than understanding. It never remained satisfied with the conditioned. It always craved for the unconditioned—the limitless. But the prejudices for the conclusions reached in the Analytic compelled Kant to restrict knowledge only to what is given in sensibility. He had, therefore, no alternative except to maintain that reason in the wider sense can give only ideas of reason, which function only as 'heuristic maxims', and remain only problematic concepts. These ideas of reason remained only ideals of knowledge just to guide our understanding. They were only regulative principles. As man was devoid of intellectual intuition, there was no possibility for him to realise their nature in the theoretic mode. Kant, no doubt, pleaded for the possibility of their realisation in the Practical Reason and the other ethical works,¹⁷ through faith. But faith was either identical with higher reason or not. If latter, it was only a poor subterfuge. Had Kant understood his conclusions clearly, he would have realised that higher reason has an access to the highest mode of being. Śaṅkara did realize and hence he maintained that discursive knowledge is incapable of revealing the ultimate reality but the ultimate reality is not beyond the Ātmānubhūti. We cannot agree with Professor A. C. Mukerji on any other point more than when he says that Śaṅkara's epistemology is to be distinguished, on the one hand, from the rationalism of Leibnitz and Hegel and from the agnosticism of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, on the other. It is rational intuitionism as distinct from antirational mysticism.¹⁸ Thus thought in his schemes of things far from being a useless superfluity represents an unavoidable stage of discipline leading to the highest form of experience in which the

ultimate reality becomes self-luminous and self-revealed. This higher experience, in the Advaitism of Śaṅkara, although differing from logical ratiocination or discursive knowledge, is yet to be regarded as the inspiration, the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge.

Allahabad University,
Allahabad.

Ramlal Singh

NOTES

1. By an Advaitic emendation of Kant I simply mean a correction of Kantian epistemology in the light of the Advaitism of Śaṅkara. A comparative study which consists in mutual supplementation of arguments and consequent clarification of issues alone can point out the new constructions in epistemology and thus help the growth of the philosophical heritage.

2. See N. K. Smith's translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, MacMillan and Company, London, 1964, pp. 299-300 for Kant's views on Transcendental Illusion.

3. See Hume, Enquiry, Section IV, Part II.

4. See Prof. G. R. Malkani's article published in 'The Philosophical Quarterly', Amalner, India, Volume XVIII, No. 1, April, 1942, pp. 1-8.

5. Bradley's doctrine of Immediate experience has been criticised even by James Ward in one of his articles to *Mind*, New series, Volume 34, 1925, entitled 'Bradley's doctrine of Experience', pp. 13-38.

6. See Śaṅkara *Bhāṣya*, on *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.2.

7. Śaṅkara's view about the limitations of reasoning in apprehending the self or the highest reality can be gathered freely from his comments on the sūtra 'Tarkāpratiṣṭhānāt' in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra*.

8. See, Prof. T. R. V. Murti's article 'The Rational Basis of Advaitism', published in 'The Philosophical Quarterly', Volume VI, No. 1, April, 1930, p. 70, Amalner, India.

9. Jīvo Brahmaiva Nāparaḥ.

10. For Kant's view on Intellectual Intuition, see, N. K. Smith's *Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, MacMillan and Company, 1918, p. 160.

11. See Śāṅkara Bhāṣya on Brahmasūtra 1.4.7.

12. Samyagjñānamekarūpam Vastutantratvāt —Śāṅkara Bhāṣya, on *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.2. See also Śāṅkara Bhāṣya on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* 4.5.15.

13. See for a detailed account of Śāṅkara's theory of Adhyāsa, the introduction to *Śāṅkara Bhāṣya on Brahmasūtra*.

14. See K. C. Bhattacharya's *Studies in Philosophy*, Volume 1, p. 95.

15. See Professor S. S. Roy's *The Heritage of Śāṅkara*, Udayana Publications, Allahabad, 1965, p. 170.

16. See Prof. N. K. Devaraja's *An Introduction to Śāṅkara's Theory of Knowledge*, Motilal Banarsi Dass, pp. 184-185 for the nature of Knower as 'Aparokṣa'.

17. Cf. *Ground Work of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

18. *The Nature of Self*—Second Edition, The Indian Press, Allahabad, 1943, p. 367.

