

## THE ADVAITA VEDANTA OF ÇANKARACARYA \*

SUMMARIUM. - Theologia hindu fundamentum invenit in illis libris sacris qui Upanisades audiunt, quorum principaliores fuerunt conscripti inter saecula octavum et tertium ante Christum. Sunt documenta speculationum et experientiarum spiritualium 'sanctorum sapientium' hinduismi, qui tam mire et profunde locuti sunt de Deo ejusque attributis quod humana ratio de se haud ultra progredi valeat. Sed mirabilis speculatio non parum vitata est defectu verae notionis creationis, ita ut creaturae considerentur aut emanationes vel evolutiones Dei aut omnino non reales.

Haec vacillatio Upanisadum influxit etiam in scholas ex eis ortas, quae veniunt generali appellatione Vedānta. In hoc studio proponimus famosam illam scholam *Advaita Vedānta* (Vedānta Monista) elaborata a Çankarācārya qui floruit in India meridionali saeculo nono post Christum, et inter omnes philosophos Indiae facile princeps eminent. Selectos textus ex ejus opere principali, *Vedānta-Bhāṣya*, opportunis commentis interjectis, ita ordinamus ut tota doctrina ejus clare et concise eluceat. Çankara totus fuit in defendendo absolutam realitatem, infinitam perfectionem et omnimodam immutabilitatem et independentiam Dei; quod et fecit felici exitu. De mundo autem, ob carentiam notionis productionis ex nihilo, obviam habuit hoc dilemma: aut mundum realem admittere infitiando immutabilitatem et independentiam Dei, aut mundum quid mere ideale judicare contra sensum communem. Ingeniosam ergo instituit distinctionem inter realitatem et objectivitatem, et mundum objectivum quidem docuit sed non realem. Animas vero ipse concepit ut apparenter distinctas a Deo quandiu in hoc mundo objectivo sed irreali versantur, sed entitative unum atque idem cum Eo.

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\* In the transliteration of Sanskrit words we have followed the scheme adopted by the International Congress of Orientalists at Athens in 1912, except in one particular which is explained below.

All the vowels are pronounced as in Latin. «E» and «O» are always long in Sanskrit. As regards the rest, a short horizontal line placed above them indicates when they are to be lengthened.

Consonants too follow the Latin pronunciation; but one letter stands for only one sound. Thus «G» has always the hard sound as in «good»; its soft sound as in «gentle» is represented by «J». «C» is always soft as in the Latin words «cena» or the English and Spanish «ch» as in «cherry». The function of the hard «C» as in «cat» is taken over by «K». «H» is always aspirated.

The dot below turns dentals into cerebrals. Hence «Ṭ» and «Ḍ» sound almost like those letters in English. «S» is pronounced like the «sh» in «ship». «R» is to be pronounced as if the «R» were followed by an indeterminate vowel as in some English words, e. g., the vowel at the end of the definite article when followed by a consonant, «the man». «Ñ» is likewise a cerebral, the tip of the tongue turned up to touch the palate instead of the root of the teeth.

«Ñ» is the same as in Spanish. For the sibilant of the class of «C» we have preferred to use «Ç» instead of the accented S of the Athens scheme, both because «Ç» is the more logical choice and, on the other hand, S is already overworked. To produce the sibilant «Ç» hold the tongue against the palate as if to pronounce «ch» (cheese) and instead of closing the gap, let the air hiss out.

## Introduction

Hindu theological speculation first took an intense and deliberate form in the books known as the Upaniṣads which are the concluding portions of the four Vedas, the most ancient and authoritative of the Hindu Scriptures. It was a crisis of conscience that occasioned the Upaniṣads. The Vedic religion with its simple cult of deified forces of nature had been superseded about 1,000 B. C. by an exaggerated form of ritualism that kept multiplying mechanical ceremonies and mystic formulae until the whole complex became unintelligible to the common folk and unconvincing to the intelligentsia. Men of good will began looking for a more spiritual and rational form of religion. Some of them repaired into the forest and betook themselves to meditation. The records of their speculations and spiritual experiences, known as the *Āranyaka* (forest treatises) led the way for the more philosophical Upaniṣads.

The Upaniṣads represent the sincere search for truth of an intensely religious people caught in a spiritual *impasse*. *Brhadāraṇyaka*, the greatest of the Upaniṣads, gives expression to this state of mind in a prayer imbedded in its very exordium: « From falsehood lead me to Truth; from darkness lead me to Light; from death lead me to Immortality! ». *Çvetāçvatara Upaniṣad* opens with this query: « What is the cause: Brahman? \* Whence are we born? Whereby do we live, and whither do we go? O ye who know Brahman, (tell us) at whose command do we abide, whether in pain or in pleasure? ». It is not surprising therefore that, in spite of grave aberrations like pantheism and phenomenalism, this sincere quest maintained for centuries led to some astounding flashes of intuition like the one expressed in the opening verse of *Iça Upaniṣad*: « Fullness is That (Brahman), fullness this (cosmos); out of That Fullness this proceeds; take away this from That; That remains ever Full ».

The Upaniṣads, though not systematic treatises, contain between them all the fundamental doctrines of higher Hinduism, and are the only portions of the Vedas that continue to influence the Hindu mind. For this reason, as well as because they come

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\* The root *Bṛh* or *Brah* (to grow, dilate) has given rise to several important terms, the most important being *Brahman* (neuter form) which stands for the Impersonal, Transcendental God of the Vedānta. In determining the gender of pronouns referring to Brahman we have been led not so much by considerations of grammar as by the exigency of the context. For the rest, even the Vedas are not consistent on this point.

The other words from the same root are: *Brahmah* (masculine), one of the gods of mythology and member of the *Trimūrti* (divine triad); and *Brāhmaṇa*, the ritualistic section of the Vedas. The same word was originally used to denote the priestly caste as well; but to avoid confusion, the practice today is to use the term *Brāhmin* for the priestly caste.

at the close of the Vedas, they have been given the title *Vedānta* (end and purpose of the Vedas). In later usage, however, the term stands not so much for the books themselves as for the theology derived from them.

Çankarācārya's Advaita (monistic) Vedānta, though professing to be a continuation and elaboration of the doctrine of the Upaniṣads, is in fact only one of the schools derived from those ancient scriptures. The Upaniṣads themselves, the most important of which were written between the eighth and third centuries B. C., were not the product of one age or one particular trend of thought. They represent diverse tendencies and contain conflicting statements regarding the three great topics of enquiry, God, the soul and the world. There are portions of the Upaniṣads that are clearly theistic, others that are monistic and yet others that are dualistic. The dominant tone however seems to be monism.

Some time in the second century B. C., or somewhat earlier, there appeared an important work named *Brahama-sūtras* or *Vedānta-sūtras*, attributed to a certain Bādarāyaṇa. He was the first author to attempt a systematization of the theological contents of the Upaniṣads, on the lines on which Jaimini systematized the ritualistic contents of the Brāhmanas. And like the latter it is composed in the « sūtra » style, that is, in extremely condensed mnemonic formulae which are nothing more than algebraic symbols unintelligible without commentaries. While Bādarāyaṇa brings in the views of different schools of thought, condemning some as unorthodox and trying to reconcile others among themselves, his own judgements on some very important questions are not clearly set forth. This has given rise to vastly divergent interpretations of his mind. Brahma-sūtras very soon came to be considered the basic text of Vedānta theology, and all the great Vedāntins have written commentaries on them, and based their own systems on them. The most important of these commentaries is the *Bhāṣya* of Çankara who interprets the sūtras in an entirely monistic sense. Rāmānuja on the contrary interprets the sūtras in a theistic sense in his *Çrī-Bhāṣya*. Of the different theological currents that have emerged from the Vedānta sūtras the most important are the *Advaita* (monism) of Çankarācārya, the *Viçīṣṭādvaita* (qualified monism) of Rāmānuja, and the *Dvaita* (dualism) of Madhvācārya. In the opinion of several important authorities (notably Thibaut among the earlier and Dasgupta among the more recent ones), Bādarāyaṇa himself was more a theist than a monist, and Rāmānuja's interpretation represents the author's mind more faithfully than Çankara's does.

Çankara was not the first to concentrate on the monistic elements of the Upaniṣads and build a theology based on them. That

honour goes to Gauḍapāda, the teacher of Govinda who taught Çankara. Gauḍapāda's most important work is a paraphrase (*kārika*) of the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad which is the shortest of the Upaniṣads but the most pronounced in its monistic views. Çankara himself makes the confession that the *advaita* creed was recovered from the Veda by Gauḍapāda, and at the close of his own commentary on Gauḍapāda's *kārika*, says that he adores by falling at the feet of that great *guru*, the adored of his adored, who on finding all the people sinking in the ocean made dreadful by the crocodiles of rebirth, out of kindness for all people, by churning the great ocean of the Veda with his great churning rod of wisdom recovered what lay deep in the heart of the Veda and is hardly attainable even by the immortal gods. We therefore present first a digest of *Māṇḍūkya-kārika* before entering upon the Advaita of Çankara.

## I. - THE ADVAITA OF GAUDAPADA

### Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad

This little Upaniṣad consists of only twelve short verses in which Brahman is identified with the mystic syllable AUM (pronounced and written OM) and described in its four different states or aspects. We quote below the most important verses.

1. All this world is the syllable OM. Its further explanation is this: the past, the present, the future — everything is just OM. And whatever transcends the three divisions of time — that too is just OM.
2. For truly, everything is Brahman; and this Self within is Brahman; the Self has four quarters.

The four quarters are four states of being. Brahman, like the human soul with which it is identical, manifests itself in four different states. The first three are of common experience, namely, the waking state, the dreaming state, and sound sleep. The fourth is the supra-cosmic state in which Brahman is transcendent, absolute, indefinable.

3. The first quarter is *Vaiçvānara* (the Cosmic Being) with the waking state for his field, outwardly cognitive, seven-limbed, nineteen-mouthed, and enjoying gross objects.

We cannot stop to explain the cosmology and psychology alluded to in these figures of speech; suffice it to say that this

verse describes Brahman in his waking state manifesting himself as the material cosmos or *Vaiçvānara*. It must be borne in mind that to the Upaniṣadic thinkers the waking state is the least perfect condition of the soul, because in it the soul is bound to the objects of sense and limited to a particular place and time. In the dreaming condition, on the other hand, the soul moves about freely without any limitations of time and place; it is therefore a superior condition. Finally, in dreamless sleep the soul is, for the time being at least, totally liberated from all bondage and enjoys bliss. In ordinary mortal experience this state is enjoyed only in tiny morsels, but from it can be deduced by analogy the fourth and ultimate state in which this liberty and bliss are infinite and eternal.

4. The second quarter is *Taijasa* (the Luminous) with the dream state for his field, inwardly cognitive, seven-limbed, nineteen-mouthed, and enjoying subtle objects.

In the previous verse the material plane of the cosmos was considered, which is Brahman in his waking state. Here the psychic plane is studied, the particular manifestations of which are sensations, imaginations, dreams etc. This is Brahman in his dreaming condition.

5. When one who is asleep feels no desires, sees no dreams - that is deep sleep. The third quarter is *Prājña* (the Intelligent) having this state of deep sleep for his field, with experiences all unified, with cognition reduced to a mere indefinite mass, full of bliss, enjoying bliss, and forming the gateway to all definite cognitions.

Above the psychic plane comes the intellectual plane wherein all sensations, imaginations and particular ideas merge in one indefinite mass of superconscious bliss. This is Brahman in deep sleep. Deep sleep in human beings is the microcosmic reproduction of this macrocosmic state of Brahman, because after every such sleep one emerges with the vague consciousness of having enjoyed a blissful state. It is to be noted that in Vedānta philosophy the whole macrocosm is taken to be a living being manifesting on a cosmic scale the various phases of being observed in the microcosm of man.

6. This is the Lord of all — their knower, their inner controller, their source, their origin and dissolution.

The above aspect of Brahman is also what Advaita Vedānta considers to be the inferior Brahman or *Içvara* the Personal God. Personality is only an outward expression of Brahman, not his

inward nature, and valid only for the duration of the cosmos. Though the foregoing description started with the material plane, the actual cosmic process is in the reverse order, the first manifestation of Brahman being the personal *Içvara* from whom proceed the rest of the orders of being.

7. The fourth, the wise say, is not inwardly cognitive, nor outwardly cognitive, nor cognitive both-wise; neither is it an indefinite mass of consciousness, nor consciousness nor non-consciousness. It is unseen, unrelated, inconceivable, uninferrable, unimaginable, indescribable. It is the essence of the one self-consciousness common to all conscious states; it is the cessation of the phenomenal; it is tranquillity; it is bliss; it is non-duality. This is the Self and it is to be realized.

Here we have the fourth state, which is Brahman in himself, the absolute, impersonal, indescribable, immutable substratum behind the phenomena of the cosmos. We do not dwell long on the interpretation of this idea as the following pages will make it clear.

The remaining verses of the Upaniṣad are not of particular interest to us here. They merely repeat the same four states as symbolized by the mystic syllable OM (AUM). Its three components, the letters A, U and M stand respectively for the three first states, and the whole syllable OM for the fourth, that is, Brahman considered in himself.

We now pass on to Gauḍapāda's paraphrase of this important Upaniṣad.

### **Māṇḍūkya-kārika**

This short treatise of 215 verses in « anuṣṭubh » metre is the first attempt to base the Vedānta entirely on reason. At the time it was written, Buddhism was making a last stand and Hindu theologians were hard put to it replying to the subtleties of Buddhist logic. Vedānta-sūtras, the only systematic text of the Vedānta, were themselves totally dependent on the Hindu scriptures which the Buddhists did not accept as authoritative. Hence a purely rational defence of the Vedānta was necessary. Gauḍapāda undertook that task, and in fulfilling it went more than half way to meet the Buddhists. Owing to its rationalistic and Buddhist bent, the work is considered dangerous by the Hindus and is not allowed to beginners.

The work is divided into four chapters or Prakaraṇas.

I. - *Āgama Prakaraṇa* (scripture chapter) begins with the interpretation of the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad. The scripture authority

is brought in merely to satisfy the Hindus, but once the topic is introduced that way the author relies only on reason for its demonstration. The Buddhist *anātma-vāda* (no-self-theory) is summarily disposed of. In order to understand the true nature of the *ātman* (self), argues Gauḍapāda, it must be studied in all its three states of being, namely, the waking state, the dream state and deep sleep. Through them all there runs a persisting substratum; otherwise it would not be possible to remember them or to coördinate them. Therefore the Buddhist contention that there are only passing phenomena, no persistent things, or in other words, there is only *becoming*, no *being*, cannot be true. The analogy is carried forward to the cosmos as a whole: as the individual *ātman* coördinates the experiences of one's different states, so the absolute *Ātman* coördinates the experiences of all and gives unity and continuity to the whole universe. As the little world of each individual rises out of a potential state and reverts to it as the individual passes from deep sleep to dream and waking state and back again to deep sleep, so also the whole universe appears and disappears as the absolute Self passes through corresponding states. This is the cosmic appearance of Brahman. Beyond it lies the transcendental state of Brahman the absolute, immutable, indefinable.

II. - *Vaitathya Prakaraṇa* (illusion chapter) deals with the illusoriness of the cosmic appearance. As far as the world is concerned, Gauḍapāda goes all the way to meet the idealist Buddhists. He accepts their principle that *satya* (real) and *nitya* (eternal) are convertible terms, and therefore *whatever has beginning and end has no middle either*. He also agreed with the Buddhists in maintaining that the waking state and dream state are not fundamentally different from each other. He argues that from the standpoint of the dreaming state, dream experiences are as coherent as waking experiences are in the waking state. So too their practical utility: dream water quenches dream thirst just as well as the so called real water quenches real thirst. His attitude finds a perfect echo in these words of Descartes: « When I consider the matter carefully, I do not find a single characteristic by means of which I can certainly determine whether I am awake or whether I am dreaming. The visions of a dream and the experiences of my waking state are so much alike that I am completely puzzled, and I do not really know I am not dreaming at this moment ». <sup>1</sup> Or of Pascal who wrote that if a peasant were to dream every night for twelve hours that he is a king, he would be as happy as a king who dreams every night for twelve hours that he is a peasant.

<sup>1</sup> Renati des Cartes *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, meditatio 1.

But Gauḍapāda did not admit the total subjectivism and nihilism of the extreme Buddhists. While conceding that the whole universe is a dream, he insisted that there is a real dreamer behind it, the absolute Ātman (Self) or Brahman. Besides It everything is illusory, even the individual ātman. Hence he logically concludes with the Buddhists that in absolute truth *there is neither death nor birth, nor bondage nor release, nor anyone seeking after liberation.*

III. - *Advaita Prakaraṇa* (chapter on non-duality). This is the central theme of the Kārika: the apparent multiplicity of this dream world does not in any way compromise the absolute unity and simplicity of Brahman. Space remains simple and indivisible even though jars and other recipients seem to break it up and enclose parts of it within their walls. Appearances notwithstanding, *ghaṭākāṣa* (space within the jar) is identical with *mahākāṣa* (cosmic space), neither a part of it nor a product of it. Thus, at one stroke, all the diverse creation theories are thrown overboard together: the question of production does not come in at all. Gauḍapāda's own theory is the *ajāti-vāda* (non-production theory): nothing is produced, there is neither birth nor death nor bondage nor liberation in reality; there is only the one immutable Brahman that exists and dreams all the rest.

IV. *Alāta-çānti Prakaraṇa* (chapter on the extinguishing of the brand). This expression is particularly Buddhistic. They compare existence to *alāta-cakra* (fire brand circle). A glowing brand swung rapidly round produces the illusion of a fiery wheel. Continued existence of things, they say, is just such an illusion: phenomena endure only for one infinitesimal instant, and are succeeded by others, but their rapid succession gives occasion to the illusion of continuity. Gauḍapāda not only adopts this peculiarly Buddhistic expression, but commences this chapter with a salutation to Buddha « the best of men ». He makes use of all the arguments of the Buddhists to refute the reality of the world, but parts company with them in his conclusion by maintaining that these arguments disprove only pluralism, not monism. He particularly attacks the doctrines of creation, emanation, evolution and whatever else that implies the reality of the world. According to him the only rational position is that of *ajāti-vāda* (non-production theory) which once accepted dispenses one from the need of finding an explanation for the world.

All this is said from the standpoint of absolute truth. However, as long as one is under the spell of *avidyā* (illusion) one has to live by relative truth. In the earlier stages of the spiritual life one needs the concept of a Personal God and the practice of religion, as only by these means can one prepare oneself for the realization of the liberating truth of *ajāti-vāda* that « there is no



birth, no death, no bondage, no liberation nor anyone to be liberated ».

Guḍapāda's great merit is that he established the reality of the One Absolute Being, though he left the creatures in the condition of dream objects. It was the first step back from the absolute nihilism of Mādhyamika Buddhists. The next step was taken by Çankarācārya who granted the creatures, not indeed reality, but objectivity: from subjective dreams they were converted into objective illusions as we shall explain later. The third step was that of Rāmānuja who maintained that the world is real, but in a sense one with God, after the manner of the body with the soul. Finally we have Madhvācārya who defends perfect dualism: the world neither a product nor a part of God, but eternally coexisting with Him and totally controlled and governed by Him.

But along side of this growing appreciation of the reality of the world, there is also evident a progressive deterioration of the concept of God, at least as regards His absolute independence and immutability. This was inevitable in the absence of the right idea of creation.

## II. - THE ADVAITA OF ÇANKARACARYA

(PRELIMINARY NOTIONS)

It is commonly accepted as certain that Çankara was born between 700 and 800 A. D. at Kaladi in Malabar. His father Çivaguru was a Yajurvedi Brahmin of the Taittirīya branch. In his eighth year Çankara took to asceticism and became the disciple of Govinda, Guḍapāda's disciple then residing in a mountain cell on the banks of the Narbuda. In all his works Çankara subscribes himself as the pupil of Govinda. From there he proceeded to Benares and thence to Badarikāçrama. He wrote commentaries on the *Brahma Sūtras* and ten of the important Upaniṣads. He travelled all over India engaging in debates and defeating his opponents everywhere. Four monasteries were founded by him at almost the four ends of India, the most celebrated of which is the one at Çringeri in the Mysore Province. According to tradition, he died at Kedarnath in the Himalayas at the age of thirty two.

The principal works of Çankara are his commentaries on the *Brahma-sūtras*, ten Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavat Gita*, together with his *Upadeça-sāhasri* and *Vivekacūḍamaṇi*. There are besides several devotional hymns composed by him and a few other works attributed to him. Çankara's commentary on the *Brahma-sūtras* touched off a chain reaction which was to continue vigorously for several centuries. Sureçvarācārya's *Vārttikas* and Naiṣkarmyasiddhi, Vācaspati's *Bhāmati*, Padmapāda's *Pançapāḍika*, and Ānanda-

giri's Nyayanirṇaya are the immediate successors of Çankara's Bhāṣya. They were followed by many more in the following centuries.

As the basis of this study we have taken Çankara's 'magnum opus', his *Vedānta-bhāṣya* or commentary on the Brahma-sūtras (\*) with occasional reference to some of his other works. His doctrines will be presented entirely in his own words, with a running commentary to clarify and assess them. As this is supposed to be simply the writer's own appraisal of Çankara, no other author is cited. Works on Çankara are plentiful; he is the most celebrated of Indian philosophers and the most written about.

Before entering upon the main topics of discussion, we have to prepare the ground with a few preliminary notions.

### Vedānta Epistemology

All philosophical discussion in India is invariably preceded by a treatise on *pramā* (valid knowledge) and *pramāṇa* (means and criteria of knowledge) in order to determine the reliability and objectivity of knowledge. And every school has to refute the views of several others before it can establish its own.

Without going into the intricate questions regarding the process of knowing, we restrict ourselves to the central point of the objectivity and reality of knowledge. Is our knowledge related to anything outside? and if so, are those things real? Here we have on the one hand the Yogācāra or Vijñānavāda Buddhists who were out and out idealists who maintained that all knowledge is purely subjective and does not point to anything outside the thinking subject, or, to be more exact, the chain of thought phenomena. On the other hand we have the Hindu schools of Nyāya, Sāṃkhya and Mīmāṃsā all of which defend the objectivity and reality of knowledge, that is, that knowledge refers to things outside, and that those things exist independently of the knowing subject. Çankara's position is very peculiar. As seen above Gauḍapāda had only insisted on the absolute reality of the Supreme Being, Brahman; for the rest he subscribed to the idealism of the Buddhists, probably was a Buddhist himself as Dasgupta thinks. To him the waking state and the dream state do not differ from each other, both are equally illusory, subjective phenomena.

But Çankara could not bring himself to defy common sense altogether, and for that very reason found himself in a most em-

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\* For the text of Çankara's Bhāṣya we follow the English rendering by George Thibaut published as Volumes XXXIV (1890) and XXXVIII (1896) of the SACRED BOOKS OF THE EAST edited by F. Max Müller, Oxford University Press, London. SBE in the foot-notes stands for 'Sacred Books of the East'. Explanatory notes within square brackets, inserted in the text, are ours.

barrassing situation. His dilemma was this: knowledge, to be of any use at all, has to be objective, that is, pointing to something outside the knowing subject; idealism was therefore out of the question. But at the same time the principles of his Advaita Vedānta would not tolerate the reality of the world. It took all his ingenuity to negotiate a way out of this *impasse*, and the key he found to the solution of the problem is a subtle distinction between *reality* and *objectivity*. All knowledge, he claimed, is objective; in order to stop all possible loop-holes, he even went so far as to grant a certain objectivity to dreams and hallucinations, though of an order far inferior to that of waking experience. But that is as far as he would go: every knowledge is objective, but every object is not real. There can be illusory objects. The trees and lakes seen in a mirage are not creations of the imagination; the sight is out there, independent of the seer, but the objects seen are unreal. There is difference, therefore, between reality and objectivity. All real things are objective, but not all objective things are real.

On the plane of absolute reality there is only one being, Brahman; all else, however objective, lies on the plane of illusion. Dreams and waking experiences agree in being at bottom only illusions, but have this surface difference between them that while dreams touch objects of particular illusion, valid only for that individual and for a short duration, waking experience embraces objects of cosmic illusion valid for all subjects and for the whole duration of the world process. Corresponding to these three orders of reality and objectivity, there are three grades of truth: *absolute truth* (pāramārthika satya) the object of which is only Brahman as he is in reality; *empirical truth* (vyāvahārika satya) concerning the objects of cosmic illusion, that is, the world of the waking state; and *apparent truth* (prātibhāsika satya) regarding the objects of dreams and hallucinations.

#### **Adhyāsa** (*superimposition*)

But here the question arises: how can illusions be objective if there is no reality in them? The answer is that illusions do not stand by themselves, they are always superimposed on some reality. Here comes in the famous example of the rope-snake. A person walking at dusk comes upon a piece of rope lying on the way and mistakes it for a snake. The snake is certainly imaginary, but it is seen out there on the road, which could not have happened had there not been a piece of real rope lying there. As it is, the *avidyā* (delusion) of the seer projects the imaginary snake onto the real rope, and by virtue of the sustaining reality it becomes an objectivity to the particular individual. Here we have the case of an individual illusion. But the rope itself is another

illusion of the cosmic order projected by a cosmic *avidyā* on the absolute reality Brahman.

But whence this 'delusion' so universal and persistent as to create a whole world of illusions and sustain it for endless ages? It is an inexplicable mystery, answers Çankara, and we cannot adequately explain it. It has been always there from beginningless eternity, and is the only explanation for this cosmic appearance and for the transmigration of souls. That this delusion is deep rooted in human nature can be easily deduced from our own experience. Thus, argues Çankara, we all habitually superimpose on the soul, which is a pure spirit, all the qualities of the body and even of extracorporeal things. This is an evident case of *avidyā*, because spirit and matter are opposed to each other like subject and object, « I » and « thou ». Çankara opens his *Vedānta-bhāṣya* with these words:

« It is a matter not requiring any proof that the object and the subject, whose respective spheres are the notion of the 'Thou' and the 'Ego', and which are opposed to each other as much as darkness and light are, cannot be identified. All the less can their respective attributes be identified. Hence it follows that it is wrong to superimpose upon the subject — whose Self is intelligence, and which has for its sphere the notion of the Ego — the object whose sphere is the notion of the Non-Ego, and the attributes of the object, and vice versa to superimpose the subject and the attributes of the subject on the object. In spite of this it is on the part of man a natural procedure — which has its cause in wrong knowledge — not to distinguish the two entities (object and subject) and their respective attributes, although they are absolutely distinct, but to superimpose upon each the characteristic nature and the attributes of the other, and thus, coupling the Real and the Unreal, to make use of expressions such as 'That am I', 'That is mine' ...

« In this way there goes on this natural beginningless and endless superimposition, which appears in the form of wrong conception, is the cause of individual souls appearing as agents and enjoyers (of the results of their actions), and is observed by every one ». <sup>2</sup>

From the above it will be plain that the *avidyā* or 'delusion' that Çankara speaks about is not merely a subjective state of mind from which illusions arise, but an objective 'something', transcendental and eternal. In its cosmic aspect it is called *Māyā*, in its individual aspect it is *avidyā*. As *Māyā*, the mysterious power of Brahman, it produces this illusory yet objective cosmos inclu-

<sup>2</sup> SBE. XXXIV, pp. 3, 4, 9.

ding the individual « ego »; as avidyā, the individual delusion, it causes the individual « ego » to superimpose the cosmos and itself on the immutable Self, Brahman, seeing them in the place of Brahman, just as the snake is seen where there is only the rope.

What is the nature of this Māyā? Is it real or unreal? As a staunch monist Çankara could not admit any reality outside Brahman: so Māyā is not real. But as a man of common sense he could not deny the objectivity of the world: so Māyā that caused it cannot be absolutely nothing; it must be something objective which is neither *sat* (being) nor *asat* (non-being). All that we can say about it is, that it is *anirvacaniya* (indefinable). Māyā remains the central mystery in Çankara's system, and a stumbling block to every one including himself.

### The Problem of Error

The above theory will be utilized by Çankara in solving the problem of error, a question hotly controverted by Hindu dialecticians. What is the intrinsic nature of error? is it something negative or something positive? The classical example adduced in all these controversies is that of a person who seeing mother-of-pearl believes it to be silver. All admit that the ideas of silver and mother-of-pearl taken by themselves are not false. In what therefore consists the essence of falsehood? According to the schools of Nyāya and Kumārila-mīmāṃsa, error consists in the false attribution (*anyathā-khyāti*) of the idea of silver already existing in the mind to 'that' which is now seen. Prabhākara-Mīmāṃsa and the Jainists, on the other hand, think that falsehood consists not in any positive misapprehension, but in something negative, namely, non-discrimination (*a-khyāti*) between the two ideas of which one is newly acquired, the other recalled by memory. Rāmānuja, the uncompromising realist who defends not only the objectivity of all knowledge but also the reality of all objects known, explains error as partial truth: every erroneous judgement is true as far as it goes, only it does not go far enough to be fully true. According to him, the man who calls mother-of-pearl silver is pronouncing a partial truth, because the elements of silver are there in the shell in question (as all elements are to be found in varying proportions in all substances) though in a negligible quantity. The error consists in seeing only a part (*sat-khyāti*). To Çankarācārya also every idea, even an erroneous one, must have an objective content, though the object may not be real. So the man who seeing shell thinks it is silver is not conjuring up the image of silver in his mind, but is actually experiencing an objective, though illusory, vision of silver; it is a product of that indefinable Māyā and therefore termed « *anirvacaniya-khyāti* ».

**Pramāṇa** (*means of knowledge and criteria of truth*)

Çankara admits sense perception (*pratyakṣa*) and reasoning (*anumāna*) as valid means of knowledge as far as the phenomenal world is concerned; but they have no intrinsic validity when Brahman is the object to be known.

« But, it might be said, as Brahman is an existing substance, it will be the object of other means of right knowledge also... This we deny; for as Brahman is not an object of the senses, it has no connection with those other means of knowledge. For the senses have, according to their nature, only external things for their object, not Brahman ». <sup>3</sup>

But even reasoning, according to Çankara, cannot reach out to Brahman, because reasoning can only build upon the data supplied by the senses, and these data do not point to anything beyond themselves.

« If Brahman were an object of the senses, we might perceive that the world is connected with Brahman as its effect; but as the effect only (i. e. the world) is perceived, it is impossible to decide (through perception) whether it is connected with Brahman or something else ». <sup>4</sup>

Evidently, Çankara does not believe in the possibility of reasoning from a known effect to its unknown cause; he rather conceives of causality as a relation between two things which is known only when the two correlates are apprehended.

For supra-mundane knowledge, therefore, man has need of other means, which are testimony of the Scripture (*çabda-pramāṇa*) and Intuition (*sākṣātkāra*). Of the two, Scripture comes first, because without the initial and basic knowledge of Brahman it alone can give, even intuition is impossible: « for the comprehension of Brahman is effected by the ascertainment, consequent on discussion, of the sense of the Vedānta texts, not either by inference or by the other means of right knowledge ». <sup>5</sup>

But Scripture is not the only source of religious truth. Here Çankara takes exception to Jaimini's contention that supra-mundane knowledge can be had only from the Scriptures. Indeed, positive laws of religious practice can be ascertained only from the Scriptures; but spiritual knowledge can be acquired by intuition as well.

<sup>3</sup> SBE. XXXIV, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem* p. 17.

« Scriptural text etc., are not, in the enquiry into Brahman, the only means of knowledge, as they are in the enquiry into active duty (i. e. in the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā), but scriptural texts on the one hand, and intuition etc. on the other hand, are to be had recourse to according to the occasion; firstly, because intuition is the final result of the enquiry into Brahman; secondly, because the object of the enquiry is an existing (accomplished) substance ». <sup>6</sup>

So intuition is another, and a very important, means of knowing Brahman. In fact, the higher knowledge of Brahman comes only from intuition which alone liberates the soul, while the Scriptures provide the initial and indispensable knowledge to build upon.

Reasoning, however, is not to be despised, for it can be of great service in clarifying and confirming the teaching of the Scriptures:

« While, however, the Vedānta passages primarily declare the cause and origin etc. of the world, inference also, being an instrument of right knowledge in so far as it does not contradict the Vedānta texts, is not to be excluded as a means of confirming the meaning ascertained. Scripture itself, moreover, allows argumentation; for the passages, Brhad. Up. ii, 4, 5, and Chān. Up. vi, 14, 2, declare that human understanding assists Scripture ». <sup>6a</sup>

Of these four Pramāṇas or means of right knowledge, namely, sense perception (pratyakṣa), inference (anumāna), scriptural testimony (śabda) and intuition (sākṣātkāra), the first and the last agree in one important respect: they both have individuals as objects, not universals, and grasp them experimentally (anubhava) generating the certainty of immediate evidence. The term *pratyakṣa* means « before the eyes », and *sākṣātkāra* means « realizing as if with the eyes »; the latter could be rendered better by « intuitive realization ».

#### **Prameya** (*object of knowledge*)

God, the world and the soul are the three topics most systems of thought in India treat about. To Advaita Vedānta there is only one reality, Brahman. The Brahma-sūtras begin with the aphorism: « athāto Brahma jijñāsa » which means, « now therefore an enquiry into Brahman ». Nevertheless, the world and souls

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>6a</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

are aspects of Brahman and objective. Hence the threefold division comes in handy here also. We shall follow that order in this treatise.

### III. - WHAT IS BRAHMAN?

The second *sūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa defines Brahman in these words: « janmādi asya yatah » (lit: Whence the origin etc. of this), which has been paraphrased by Çankara as follows:

« The full sense of the *sūtra* therefore is: That omniscient omnipotent cause from which proceed the origin, subsistence and dissolution of this world — which world is differentiated by names and forms, contains many agents and enjoyers, is the abode of the fruits of actions, these fruits having their definite places, times and causes, and the nature of whose arrangement cannot even be conceived by the mind, — that cause, we say, is Brahman ». <sup>7</sup>

On the face of it, this definition favours the reality of creation and the personality of God the Creator. Rāmānuja and others invoke this *sūtra* in support of their position, and many authorities believe them to be closer to the mind of Bādarāyaṇa. But to Çankara the above *sūtra* is not a real definition (*sva-lakṣaṇa*) of Brahman, but a circumstantial definition (*taṭastha-lakṣaṇa*), something like defining the rope of the famous example as 'that which appears as the snake'. In other words, it defines not the Higher Brahman, that is, Brahman as he is, but the Lower Brahman, that is, Brahman as apprehended by *avidyā* (delusion). And this knowledge has all the validity of the 'empirical truth' we have explained above, and remains valid as long as this illusory, but objective, cosmos lasts. The *sūtras* begin with the definition of the Lower Brahman because that is the only way the unenlightened can grasp Him.

#### The Twofold Brahman

This is an important point in Çankara's Vedānta, a point vehemently criticized by his adversaries. According to this doctrine, not only are there two different aspects of Brahman, both objective, one absolutely true and the other empirically true, but there are two religions as well: the higher religion consisting in the knowledge of the Absolute Impersonal Brahman, and the lower religion in the worship of the Personal Içvara. Of these, as we

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem* p. 16.



shall see later, only the higher one is conducive to final liberation.

« Brahman is apprehended under two forms: in the first place as qualified by limiting conditions owing to the multiformity of the evolutions of name and form (i. e. the multiformity of the created world); in the second place as being the opposite of this, i. e. free from all limiting conditions whatever. Compare the following passages: [here are quoted a number of texts from the Upaniṣads]. All these passages, with many others, declare Brahman to possess a double nature, according as it is the object either of *jñāna* [wisdom] or of *avidyā* [delusion]. As long as it is the object of *avidyā*, there are applied to it the categories of devotee, object of devotion, and the like... From all this it appears that the following parts of the Cāstra has a special object of its own, viz. to show that the Vedānta texts teach, on the one hand, Brahman as connected with limiting conditions and forming an object of devotion, and on the other hand, as being free from the connection with such conditions and constituting an object of knowledge ». <sup>8</sup>

### Is Brahman Knowable?

While the intrinsic nature of Brahman can be known only by intuitive realization (*sākṣātkāra*) the existence of Brahman is, or rather should be, self-evident to everybody. For all are conscious of their own selves, and the Self of all is in reality Brahman alone.

« Moreover, the existence of Brahman is known on the ground of its being the Self of everyone. For every one is conscious of the existence of (his) self, and never thinks 'I am not'. And this Self (of whose existence all are conscious) is Brahman ». <sup>9</sup>

But while all perceive the existence of the Self, all do not realize that Brahman is that Self. Hence the need of other proofs.

« But if Brahman is generally known as the Self, there is no room for an enquiry into it! Not so, we reply; for there is a conflict of opinions as to its special nature. Unlearned people and the Lokāyatikas [the rationalists] are of opinion that the mere body endowed with the quality of intelligence is the Self; others that the organs endowed with intelligence are the Self; others maintain that the internal organ is the Self;

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 61, 62, 64.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem* p. 14.

others again that the Self is a mere momentary idea; others again that it is the Void. Others again, (to proceed to the opinion of such as acknowledge the authority of the Veda), maintain that there is a transmigrating being different from the body and so on, which is both agent and enjoyer (of the fruits of actions); others teach that that being is enjoying only, not acting; others believe that in addition to the individual souls there is an all-knowing all-powerful Lord. Others, finally, (i. e. the Vedāntins) maintain that the Lord is the Self of the enjoyer (i. e. of the individual soul whose individual existence is apparent only, the product of *avidyā*). Thus there are many various opinions, basing part of them on sound arguments and scriptural texts, part of them on fallacious arguments and scriptural texts misunderstood ». <sup>10</sup>

Hence the need of the Scriptures even to know for certain the existence of Brahman. But once that is known we can easily confirm it with arguments of reason. Such rational proofs become a necessity when we have to deal with ill-informed or unbelieving people.

« Although it is the object of this system to define the true meaning of the Vedānta texts and not, like the science of Logic, to establish or refute some tenet by mere ratiocination, still it is incumbent on thorough students of the Vedānta to refute the Sāṃkhya and other systems which are obstacles in the way of perfect knowledge... Here an opponent might come forward and say that we are indeed entitled to establish our own position, so as to define perfect knowledge which is the means of release to those desirous of it, but that no use is apparent of a refutation of other opinions — a proceeding productive of nothing but hate and anger. There is a use, we reply. For there is some danger of men of inferior intelligence looking upon the Sāṃkhya and similar systems as requisite for perfect knowledge, because those systems have a weighty appearance, have been adopted by authoritative persons, and profess to lead to perfect knowledge ». <sup>11</sup>

### Arguments for the Existence of God

The following are the principal heads under which Çankara's rational proofs of the existence of God may be summed up.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 14, 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem* p. 363.

### 1° *The Principle of Causality*

On the nature of causality Hindu philosophers are divided into two camps, one viewing causation as a mere transformation, the other as true generation. In either case, their principal preoccupation is with the material cause. The first group defends what is called *Sat-kārya-vāda* (effect-in-cause theory) according to which the whole effect pre-existed already in the cause, so that it is the cause itself that now appears transformed into the effect. The opposite sentence is called *Asat-kārya-vāda* (effect-not-in-cause theory) which holds that in every production something new is brought into being which was not latent in the material cause. Çankara belongs to the first school, which goes well with his fundamental tenet that all creation is nothing but an apparent transformation of Brahman.

Coming to the argument from causality: we see that everything in this world has a proportionate cause, that is, a cause containing within itself all the perfections of the effect. Now, none of the particular causes can account for the whole cosmos so immense and inconceivably perfect. Therefore there must be an infinite and almighty cause to account for it.

« The origin etc. of a world possessing the attributes stated above cannot possibly proceed from anything else but a Lord possessing the stated qualities; not either from a non-intelligent *Pradhāna* [Prime Matter which, according to Sāmkhya philosophy, spontaneously evolved into this world], or from atoms, or from non-being, or from a being subject to transmigration; nor, again, can it proceed from its own nature (i. e. spontaneously, without a cause), since we observe that (for the production of effects) special places, times and causes have invariably to be employed ».<sup>12</sup>

### 2° *The Order of the Universe*

Here Çankara is retorting the teleological argument of the Sāmkhya philosophers. From the evidently purposeful arrangement of the universe they had concluded that there must be rational beings for whose understanding and enjoyment it is all destined. If you see a well prepared bed — an example used also by Greek philosophers — you must conclude that there is some human being for whom it is meant. Now, this argumentation is all right as far as it goes, concedes Çankara, but from the same evidence they ought to have first come to the conclusion that the world must have originated from an intelligent cause.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 16, 17.

« If you Sāmkhyas base your theory on parallel instances merely, we point out that a non-intelligent thing which, without being guided by an intelligent being, spontaneously produces effects capable of subserving the purposes of some particular person is nowhere observed in the world. We rather observe that houses, palaces, couches, pleasure-grounds and the like — things which according to circumstances are conducive to the obtainment of pleasure or the avoidance of pain — are made by workmen endowed with intelligence. Now look at this entire world which appears, on the one hand, as external (i. e. inanimate) in the form of earth and the other elements enabling (the souls) to enjoy the fruits of their various actions, and, on the other hand, as animate, in the form of bodies which belong to the different classes of beings, possess a definite arrangement of organs, and are therefore capable of constituting the abodes of fruition; look, we say, at this world, of which the most ingenious workmen cannot even form a conception in their minds, and then say if a non-intelligent principle like the *Pradhāna* [prime matter] is able to fashion it! Other non-intelligent things such as stones and clods of earth are certainly not seen to possess analogous powers. We rather must assume that just as clay and similar substances are seen to fashion themselves into various forms, if worked upon by potters and the like, so *Pradhāna* also (when modifying itself into its effects) is ruled by some intelligent principle. When endeavouring to determine the nature of the primal cause (of the world), there is no need for us to take our stand on those attributes only which form part of the nature of material causes such as clay etc., and not on those also which belong to extraneous agents such as potters etc. ». <sup>13</sup>

Here, particularly in the last sentence, we see Çankara insisting on the importance of the efficient cause. It is not always that he does so. The general tendency of Indian philosophers, including Çankara, is to glorify material causality even to the exclusion of all other forms of causality. Indeed, whenever they mention cause without any specification, it is invariably the material cause they have in mind.

### 3<sup>o</sup> *The Need of a Prime Mover*

Here again Çankara is principally at grips with the Sāmkhya philosophy. It is a realistic school of thought trying to explain the world without God, by reducing all things to two eternal first principles: Prime Matter (*prakṛti* or *pradhāna*) and Spirit (Pu-

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 364, 365.

ruṣa). Spirits are innumerable, intelligent, but devoid of all activity. Matter is the source of all activity, but remains vague, indeterminate and dormant until the presence of the spirits rouses it. It is a fortuitous contact of the spirits and matter that sets going the cosmic process, the two working together « after the manner of the lame and the blind », that is, like a blind man strong of limbs directed by a lame man with clear sight mounted on his back. In all this it is Pradhāna or matter that generates the force, while Puruṣa or spirit remains a mere witness, a catalyst as it were. But all other Hindu schools deny that matter can be the prime source of movement; spontaneous movement belongs to living beings. The first movement must come from some living principle, not matter. Once set in motion, matter can continue in it.

Çankara is so keen on refuting the errors of Sāmkhya because, for the rest, he has to accept most of the principles of Sāmkhya as the philosophical basis of his own Vedānta: there is no other philosophical school in India that presents a system as complete and consistent as Sāmkhya.

« Leaving the arrangement of the world, we now pass on to the activity by which it is produced. — The three *guṇas* [satva, rajas and tamas, the three potentialities of matter] passing out of the state of equipoise and entering into the condition of mutual subordination and superordination, originate activities tending towards the production of particular effects. [This is the claim of Sāmkhya] — Now these activities also cannot be ascribed to a non-intelligent pradhāna left to itself, as no such activity is seen in clay and similar substances, or in chariots and the like. For we observe that clay and the like, and chariots — which are in their own nature non-intelligent — enter on activities tending towards particular effects only when they are acted upon by intelligent beings such as potters etc. in the one case, and horses and the like in the other. From what is seen we determine what is not seen. Hence a non-intelligent cause of the world is not to be inferred because, on that hypothesis, the activity without which the world cannot be produced, would be impossible ».<sup>14</sup>

#### 4° *The Insufficiency of the Puruṣa*

Having established the need of an intelligent cause for the universe and a living agent to give it initial movement, Çankara proceeds to prove that the *Puruṣas* of Sāmkhya are useless for the purpose. These puruṣas are, according to Sāmkhya, pure spirits devoid of activity, out of all contact with matter. It is only their proximity that awakens prime matter to activity, and it is

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem* p. 367.

their image reflected in matter that induces order and rationality into the evolutionary process.

« Well then — the Sāmkhya resumes, endeavouring to defend his position by parallel instances — let us say that, as some lame man devoid of the power of motion but possessing the power of sight, having mounted the back of a blind man who is able to move but not to see, makes the latter move; or as the magnet not moving itself, moves the iron, so the soul moves the pradhāna [These are the favourite examples of the Sāmkhyas]. — Thus also, we reply, you do not free your doctrine from all shortcomings; for this your new position involves an abandonment of your old position according to which the pradhāna is moving itself, and the (indifferent, inactive) soul possesses no moving power. And how should the indifferent soul move the pradhāna? A man, although lame, may make a blind man move by means of words and the like; but the soul which is devoid of action and qualities cannot possibly put forth any moving energy. Nor can it be said that it moves the pradhāna by its mere proximity as the magnet moves the iron; for from the permanency of proximity (of soul and pradhāna) a permanency of motion would follow. [The gist of the argument is this: if prime matter and the spirit in a state of separation can ever be considered as close to each other, they must always be so; hence there is no reason for the cosmic evolution to start at a particular moment and cease at another]. The proximity of the magnet (to the iron), on the other hand, is not permanent, but depends on a certain activity and the adjustment of the magnet in a certain position; hence the lame man and the magnet do not supply really parallel instances. — The pradhāna then being non-intelligent and the soul indifferent, and there being no third principle to connect them, there can be no connexion of the two ».<sup>15</sup>

### Some Objections Answered

Besides adducing proofs of reason to confirm the scriptural doctrine of the existence of God, Çankara also tries to forestall some of the objections usually raised against the concept of God as Creator. We give below the most representative of those objections and their answers.

« But, an objection will be raised; your Self even if joined to a body is incapable of exercising moving power, motion

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 373, 374.

cannot be effected by that the nature of which is pure intelligence. — A thing, we reply, which is itself devoid of motion may nevertheless move other things. The magnet is itself devoid of motion; and yet it moves iron; and colours and the other objects of sense, although themselves devoid of motion, produce movements in the eyes and the other organs of sense. So the Lord also who is all-present, the Self of all, all-knowing and all-powerful may, although himself unmoving, move the universe ». <sup>16</sup>

Again, Brahman is absolutely simple, devoid of instruments of action, as Vedānta itself asserts. How can it then produce effects such as the world? Here we must bear in mind that almost all the philosophic schools in India hold that no substance is immediately operative, it needs instruments of action to operate with. Vaiçeṣika is the only school that makes God the solitary exception to this rule. To this difficulty Çankara replies thus:

« This objection is not valid, because causation is possible in consequence of a peculiar constitution of the causal substance as in the case of milk. Just as milk and water turn into curds and ice respectively, without any extraneous means, so it is in the case of Brahman also. And if you object to this analogy for the reason that milk, in order to turn into curds, does require an extraneous agent, viz. heat, we reply that milk by itself also undergoes a certain amount of definite change, and that its turning is merely accelerated by heat. If milk did not possess that capability of itself, heat could not compel it to turn; for we see that air or ether, for instance, is not compelled by the action of heat to turn into sour milk. By the cooperation of auxiliary means the milk's capability of turning into sour milk is merely completed. The absolutely complete power of Brahman, on the other hand, does not require to be supplemented by any extraneous help. Thus Scripture also declares: 'there is no effect and no instrument known of him, no one is seen like unto him or better; his high power is revealed as manifold, as inherent, acting as force and knowledge' (Çve. Up. vi. 8). Therefore Brahman, although one only, is, owing to its manifold powers, able to transform itself into manifold effects ». <sup>17</sup>

Hindu philosophers set great store by analogy, and love to adduce very homely examples which sometimes turn out to be extremely naïve and clumsy, as in this case. However Çankara cannot be

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem* p. 369.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 346, 347.

blamed for it, as he was only commenting on Bādarāyaṇa's *sūtra* which contained this allusion to milk.

Another objection against the doctrine of an intelligent cause of the world is thus formulated by Çankara himself:

« We know from ordinary experience that man, who is an intelligent being, begins to act after due consideration only, and does not engage in even an unimportant undertaking unless it serves some purpose of his own; much less so in important business... Now the undertaking of creating the sphere of this world, with all its various contents, is certainly a weighty one. If then, on the one hand, you assume it to serve some purpose of the intelligent highest Self, you thereby sublimate its self-sufficiency vouched for by the Scripture; if, on the other hand, you affirm absence of motive on its part, you must affirm absence of activity also. — Let us then assume that just as sometimes an intelligent person when in a state of frenzy proceeds, owing to his mental aberration, to action without a motive, so the highest Self also created this world without any motive. — That, we reply, would contradict the omniscience of the highest Self, which is vouched for by Scripture. — Hence the doctrine of the creation proceeding from an intelligent Being is untenable ».<sup>18</sup>

Having formulated the objection so eloquently, he gives the following answer to it.

« We see in every day life that certain doings of princes and other men of high position who have no unfulfilled desires left have no reference to any extraneous purpose, but proceed from mere sportfulness, as, for instance, their recreations in places of amusement. We further see that the process of inhalation and exhalation is going on without reference to any extraneous purpose, merely following the law of its own nature. Analogously, the activity of the Lord also may be supposed to be mere sport, proceeding from his own nature, without reference to any purpose. For on the ground neither of reason nor of Scripture can we construe any other purpose of the Lord. Nor can his nature be questioned. Although the creation of this world appears to us a weighty and difficult undertaking, it is mere play to the Lord, whose power is unlimited. And if in ordinary life we might possibly, by close scrutiny, detect some subtle motive even for sportful action, we cannot do so with regard to the actions of the Lord all

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem* p. 356.



whose wishes are fulfilled, as Scripture says. Nor can it be said that he either does not act or acts like a senseless person; for Scripture affirms the fact of the creation on the one hand, and the Lord's omniscience on the other hand ».<sup>19</sup>

Hindu philosophers generally speak about the activity of God as *Lilā* (sport) which certainly sounds awkward in translation. But the idea they wish to convey is that of an activity that is absolutely spontaneous, unfatiguing and pleasurable; and God's activity is just that. In order to safeguard the freedom of God, Çankara denies all motive in creation; motive to him is something that binds the agent to action and limits the action to a determinate end. The Vaiçeṣika school on the other hand believes in spontaneous motives that do not involve bondage or limitation. They claim that God has a very worthy motive in creation, which in no way impairs his freedom and perfection: that of doing good to creatures.

We adduce one more objection and Çankara's answer to it. If an all wise and benevolent God is the author of creation, how do we account for all the inequality and evil and misery we find in it? It is a perennial question and not an easy one for any theologian to answer. Here is Çankara's attempt at an answer:

« The Lord, we reply, cannot be reproached with inequality of dispensation and cruelty, 'because he is bound by regards'. If the Lord on his own account, without any extraneous regards, produced this unequal creation, he would expose himself to blame; but the fact is, that in creating he is bound by certain regards, i. e. he has to look to merit and demerit. Hence the circumstance of the creation being unequal is due to the merit and demerit of the living creatures created, and is not a fault for which the Lord is to blame... And if we are asked how we come to know that the Lord, in creating this world with its various conditions, is bound by regards, we reply that Scripture declares that... Smṛti passages also declare the favour of the Lord and its opposite to depend on the different quality of the works of living beings; as, for instance, 'I serve men in the way in which they approach me' (Bhag. Gīta. iv. 11) ».<sup>20</sup>

The doctrine of *Karma-samsāra* (transmigration) is supposed to solve many problems, most of all the baffling one of evil and inequality. Everywhere in the ancient world, the curiosity of man has dabbled in this idea. That this superstition was not unknown even to the Jews may be gathered from this question of the Disciples:

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 356, 357.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 358, 359.

« Rabbi, who hath sinned, *this man* or his parents, that he should be born blind? ». <sup>21</sup> That « this man » is very suggestive.

**But God the Creator is only the Lower Brahman**

After having so painstakingly demonstrated from Scripture and confirmed by reason the existence and perfections of God the Creator, Çankara concludes with this disconcerting admission:

« And finally, we must remember that the scriptural doctrine of creation does not refer to the highest reality; it refers to the apparent world only, which is characterized by name and form, the figments of *avidyā* [delusion], and it, moreover, aims at intimating that Brahman is the Self of everything ». <sup>22</sup>

So, God the Creator, the Personal *Içvara*, together with the cosmos he has created, is relegated to the realm of the illusory. They have neither reality nor absolute validity, but merely an empirical validity as long as *avidyā* [delusion] persists. This, Çankara reminds us, has to be borne in mind when reading the Scripture also; for there are parts of it that describe the Lower Brahman for the benefit of those who are steeped in delusion and are incapable of receiving true wisdom, so that these simple folk may at least practice the religion of worship of the Personal God and thus remotely prepare themselves for wisdom. Such parts of the Scripture have only an empirical value. Absolute value and eternal truth belong to those parts of the Veda that speak of the Impersonal Brahman as the Only Being with nothing besides; and they contain the wisdom that liberates.

« Brahman, we must definitively assert, is devoid of all form, colour and so on, and does not in any way possess form and so on. Why? [Here are quoted a number of passages from the Upaniṣads]. These and similar passages have for their purport the true nature of Brahman as non-connected with any world, and have not any other purport, as we have proved under I, i, 4. On the ground of such passages we therefore must definitively conclude that Brahman is devoid of form. Those other passages, on the other hand, which refer to a Brahman qualified by form do not aim at setting forth the nature of Brahman, but rather at enjoining the worship of Brahman. As long as these latter texts do not contradict those of the former class, they are to be accepted as they stand; where, however, contradictions occur, the passages whose

<sup>21</sup> *John*, ix, 2.

<sup>22</sup> SBE. XXXIV, p. 357.

main subject is Brahman must be viewed as having greater force than those of the other kind ». <sup>23</sup>

#### IV. - THE TRUE NATURE OF BRAHMAN

In the Introduction to his translation of the *Brahma-sūtras*, Thibaut has given the following summary of Çankara's doctrine about Brahman: « Whatever is, is in reality one; there truly exists only one universal being called Brahman or Paramātman, the Highest Self. This being is of an absolutely homogeneous nature; it is pure 'Being', or, which comes to the same, pure intelligence or thought (*caitanya*, *jñāna*). Intelligence or thought is not to be predicated of Brahman as its attribute, but constitutes its substance; Brahman is not a thinking being, but thought itself. It is absolutely destitute of qualities; whatever qualities or attributes are conceivable, can only be denied of it ». <sup>24</sup>

Let us hear what Çankara himself has to say about the true nature of Brahman. And the first thing he has to say is that Brahman is absolutely indefinable. « Every word employed to denote a thing, denotes that thing as associated with a certain 'genus', or act, or quality, or mode of relation »; <sup>25</sup> but Brahman belongs to no 'genus', possesses no qualities, does not act, and is related to nothing else; « there is nothing besides it of a like kind or a different kind, nor has it internal distinctions » (*sajatiya-vijatiya-svagatabheda-rahitam*). In short we have none of the data for a definition of Brahman; such data cannot exist.

« Brahman, we must definitively assert, is devoid of all form, colour and so on... 'It is neither coarse nor fine, neither short nor long' (Br. Up. iii. 8. 8); 'That which is without sound, without forms without decay' (Kaṭh. Up. I. iii. 15); ... 'That Brahman is without cause and without effect, without anything inside or outside, this Self is Brahman, omnipresent and omniscient' (Br. Up. II. v. 19)... On the ground of such passages we therefore must definitively conclude that Brahman is devoid of form ». <sup>26</sup>

Brahman is pure undifferentiated Intelligence.

« And Scripture declares that Brahman consists of intelligence, is devoid of any other characteristics, and is altogether without difference; 'As a mass of salt has neither inside nor

<sup>23</sup> SBE. XXXVIII, p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> SBE. XXXIV, pp. xxiv, xxv.

<sup>25</sup> Çankara, *Gīta-bhāṣya*, xiii, 12.

<sup>26</sup> SBE. XXXVIII, p. 155.

outside, but is altogether a mass of taste, thus, indeed, has that Self neither inside nor outside, but is altogether a mass of knowledge' (Br. Up. IV. v. 13). That means: That Self has neither inside nor outside any characteristic form but intelligence constitutes its nature; just as a lump of salt has inside as well as outside one and the same saltish taste, not any other taste ». <sup>27</sup>

For that reason Brahman is absolutely ineffable. Words can at best paint a caricature of him: silence is the only right attitude.

« Of a similar purport is that scriptural passage which relates how Bāhva, being questioned about Brahman by Vāçaklin, explained it to him by silence. He said to him, 'Learn Brahman, O friend' and became silent. Then, on a second and third question, he replied, 'I am teaching you indeed, but you do not understand. Silent is that Self' ». <sup>28</sup>

We quote a few pertinent texts from the short but very important Kena Upaniṣad, one of those Scriptures that Çankara heavily leans upon.

- i. 3. « The eye cannot approach It, neither speech nor mind. We do not therefore know It, nor can we teach It. It is different from what is known, and It is beyond what is unknown. Thus have we heard from the ancients who instructed us upon It. »
- i. 4. « What speech cannot reveal, but what reveals speech, — know That alone as Brahman, and not this that people worship here ».
- i. 5. « What mind does not comprehend, but what comprehends mind, — know That to be Brahman, and not this that people worship here ».
- i. 6. « What sight fails to see, but what perceives sight, — know That alone as Brahman, and not this that people worship here ».
- ii. 1. « If you think that you know Brahman well, then you know little ».
- ii. 3. « He knows It, who comprehends It not; and he knows It not, who comprehends It. It is the 'unknown' to the man of true knowledge, but to the ignorant It is the 'known' ».

Such a Brahman, if he is to be expressed at all in human terms, is best expressed by way of negation, that is, by saying what he is not rather than what he is. Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad,

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 156, 157.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem* p. 157.

after giving an elaborate description of the cosmos with its gross and subtle elements, senses, vital airs, individual souls etc. etc., concludes with this description of Brahman: « Now, therefore, follows a description of Brahman: *Neti, Neti* (not such, not such) is the best description of Brahman; because there is no description more appropriate than this ». <sup>29</sup>

Are we then to understand that Brahman is a mere negation? To cruder minds he may appear so, admits Çankara: « Brahman, free from space and location, attributes, motion, fruition and differences, Supreme Being, without a second, seems to the slow of mind no more than non-being ». <sup>30</sup> But to those that understand, that negative definition asserts a positive reality. The 'Neti, Neti' of the sacred text has to be interpreted in its context, says Çankara; and the context is that it comes as a conclusion to a description of the cosmos in its twofold aspect, gross and subtle.

« And, in our passage, the context points out what has to be considered as proximate, viz. the two cosmic forms of Brahman, and that Brahman itself to which the forms belong. Hence there arises a doubt whether the phrase 'Not so, Not so!' negatives both Brahman and its two forms, or only either; and if the latter, whether it negatives Brahman and leaves its two forms, or if it negatives the two forms and leaves Brahman. We suppose, the *pūrvapakṣin* [the opponent] says that the negative statement negatives Brahman as well as its two forms; both being suggested by the context...

« To this we make the following reply. It is impossible that the phrase 'Not so, not so!' should negative both, since that would imply the doctrine of a general Void. Whenever we deny something unreal, we do so with reference to something real; the unreal snake, e. g., is negated with reference to the real rope. But this (denial of something unreal with reference to something real) is possible only if some entity is left... « The passage of the Br. Up. under discussion has, therefore, to be understood as follows. Brahman is that whose nature is permanent purity, intelligence and freedom; it transcends speech and mind, does not fall within the category of 'object', and constitutes the inward Self of all. Of this Brahman our text denies all plurality of forms; but Brahman itself it leaves untouched... The passage 'Not so' etc. denies of Brahman the limited form, material as well as immaterial, which in the preceding part of the chapter is described at length ». <sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, II, iii, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Çankara-bhāṣya, Chān. Upaniṣad, VIII, i, 1.

<sup>31</sup> SBE. XXXVIII, pp. 167, 168.

However, the mass of mankind cannot be satisfied with a merely negative definition of Brahman: they need something positive to hold on to. For this reason the Scriptures also make positive statements about Brahman, for « the Scripture thinks: Let them first find themselves on the path of the existent, then I shall gradually bring them also to an understanding of the Supreme Existent ». <sup>32</sup>

If the best way to express Brahman is the formula « Not such, not such », the next best is to say « He is! »

« Not by speech, not by mind,  
Not by sight can He be apprehended.  
How can He be comprehended  
But by saying that 'He is'? (Asti)  
He can indeed be comprehended by the thought 'He is'  
And by discerning the nature of both (i. e. asti and neti).  
When He has been comprehended by the thought 'He is'  
Then His real nature manifests itself ». <sup>33</sup>

Brahman therefore is 'Being' in the fullest sense. He cannot be non-being, argues Çankara, because « even imaginary things must have something to stand upon ». If anything exists at all, even illusory things, then Brahman must be real. And if he is the ground of all 'being', he must also be eternal, unproduced, *Svayam-bhū* (Self-Existent).

« ...Brahman, whose Self is Being, must not be suspected to have sprung from anything else 'on account of the impossibility'. Brahman which is mere Being cannot spring from mere being, since the relation of cause and effect cannot exist without a certain superiority (on the part of the cause). Nor again can Brahman spring from that which is something particular, since this would be contrary to experience. For we observe that particular forms of existence are produced from what is general, as, for instance, jars and pots from clay, but not that what is general is produced from particulars. Nor again can Brahman spring from that which is not (asat), for that which is not is without a Self, and moreover scripture expressly rejects that view, in the passage 'How could that which is spring from that which is not?'... Nor does the fact of other effects springing from effects imply that Brahman also must be an effect; for the non-admission of a fundamental causal substance would drive us to a retrogressus in infinitum. And that fundamental causal substance which as a

<sup>32</sup> Çankara-bhāṣya, Chan. Up., VIII, i, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Kāṭha Upaniṣad, vi, 12, 13.

matter of fact is generally acknowledged to exist, just that is our Brahman ». <sup>34</sup>

But Brahman is more than mere existence; he is *Sat-Cit-Ananda*, that is, Existence-Intelligence-Bliss. Says Çankara: « It therefore is the task of the Vedānta texts to set forth Brahman's nature, and they perform that task by teaching us that *Brahman is eternal, all-knowing, absolutely self-sufficient, ever pure, intelligent and free, pure knowledge, absolute bliss* ». <sup>35</sup> In fact all perfections in the abstract may be predicated about Brahman who contains them all in a transcendental manner. In the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad we read:

« This immutable one, not being an object of sight, O Gargi, is never seen by any one, but is Itself the seer, being sight itself. Likewise, not being an object of hearing, It is never heard by any one, but is Itself the hearer, being hearing itself. So also, not being an object of mind, It is never thought of by anybody, but is Itself the thinker being thought itself. Similarly, not being an object of the intellect, It is never known by anybody, but is Itself the knower being intelligence itself ». <sup>36</sup>

To Çankara, Brahman is the *Mahāsāmānya* (transcendent universal): « There are in the world many *sāmānyas* (genera) with their *viçeṣas* (specific differences), both conscious and unconscious. All these *sāmānyas* in their graduated series are included and comprehended in the one great *Sāmānya*, i. e., in Brahman's nature as a mass of intelligence ». <sup>37</sup> Brahman, therefore, is a transcendental, self-subsisting, Universal, an indivisible totality of infinite perfections. He is absolutely homogeneous Being which is at the same time undifferentiated awareness and tranquil bliss.

If Vedānta's best definition of Brahman is total silence, its most intelligible one is this classic formula: *SAT-CIT-ANANDA-NITYA-PARIPURṂA*, i. e., Existence-Intelligence-Beatitude-Eternity-Infinitude.

(to be continued)

CYRIL B. PAPALI, O. C. D.

<sup>34</sup> SBE. XXXVIII, pp. 19, 20.

<sup>35</sup> SBE. XXXIV, p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> Brhadāranyaka Up., III, viii, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Çankara-bhāṣya, Brhad. Up., II, iv, 9.