

## ABSOLUTE FEELING

Historically philosophy, both Indian and Western, has been largely concerned with the definition of the absolute and the path which leads to it. Many philosophers have conceded that the absolute is, strictly speaking, ineffable, yet have maintained that it can be defined in a negative or figurative or analogical way which can give some intelligible indication, if not adequate comprehension, of it. Dogmatic philosophers have claimed that there is only one path, while liberal philosophers have taught that there are alternative and equally valid paths to the goal, like different trails leading up to the same mountain peak. In recent Indian thought, however, a new dimension has been introduced into philosophy with the notion of alternative absolutes, the notion that not only the philosophical path but also the philosophical goal is to be defined in several equally valid ways. These are not equivalent definitions of the one absolute, for they cannot be reduced to each other, nor are they many absolutes which might be attained one after another, but are alternative absolutes which exclude each other and among which, therefore, a choice must be made.

This theory was proposed by the late Professor K. C. Bhattacharya. His article *The Concept of Philosophy* is a definitive summary of his philosophical doctrine. In this article he distinguishes four "grades of theoretic consciousness": empirical thought or perception of physical fact, pure objective thought or contemplation of self-subsistent essence, spiritual thought or enjoyment of subjective reality, transcendental thought or belief in absolute truth. Consciousness of absolute truth (positive being—"what the speaking *I* is not") involves also consciousness of absolute freedom (positive non-being—"what truth is not") and absolute value (positive indetermination—"their indeterminate togetherness which cannot be denied to be either of them"). This triple absolute is the prototype of the three subjective functions knowing, willing, and feeling, and neither the three absolutes nor the three functions are combined in any unity. Since absolute truth is only one of the three absolutes, the theory of truth outlined in this article recognises the possibility of alternative theories of each of the other absolutes. Historically, he says, the absolute is conceived as truth in Advaita Vedānta, as freedom in nihilistic Buddhism, and as value in Hegelianism.

The insight and subtlety of Professor Bhattacharya's thought make all the more conspicuous one flaw in this article, a trivial point not essential to the theory yet of some interest to scholars. That is the identification of absolute "value," the absolute of feeling, with Hegel's absolute idea. Historically absolute truth emerges in the Brahman of Vedanta and absolute freedom in the nirvana of Buddhism. But one gets the impression that Professor Bhattacharya identified the third historical manifestation of the absolute too hastily, and only for the sake of completing his system. Hegel's absolute is an intellectual one which can nowise be regarded as primarily feeling or value. But what is more important, Hegel's absolute is not, like Brahman or nirvana, arrived at by reflection on experience, but is a purely abstract idea not grounded in actual experience at all. This fact is expressed very clearly by Professor G. R. Malkani where he says, in his article *The Problem of the One and the Many* (p. 20),

Hegel . . . minimised the value of actual experience, and in seeking to rationalise it, he merely succeeded in explaining it away. He did not render this experience more intelligible and more profound in significance or as revelatory of a higher reality ; but he substituted for it another experience altogether, which was declared to be a higher kind of experience or experience at the level of pure reason as such, but which was of very doubtful value.

Professor Bhattacharya's doctrine has been elaborated in the writings of Professor T. R. V. Murti. He has pointed out that the distinction of the three conscious functions—knowing, willing, feeling—can be established *a priori* by an enumeration of the possible relations between consciousness and its content: knowing is determination of consciousness by content, willing is determination of content by consciousness, and feeling is mutual determination of each by the other. In experience these three functions are confused, and their confusion is illusion. But in reflective consciousness, which is philosophy, any one of them can be freed from its confusion with the others to emerge in absolute purity. Pure knowing is absolute truth or objectivity. Pure willing is absolute freedom or subjectivity. Pure feeling is absolute bliss or unity of subject and object. These three—*sat*, *chit*, *ānanda*—are not three absolutes but alternative and incommensurable apprehensions of the one absolute. Historically absolute knowing is attained in Vedanta, absolute willing in Mādhyamika, and absolute feeling in Vijñānavāda.

Professor Bhattacharya's insight and Professor Murti's scholarship have combined in a system impressive for profundity and elegance. But the same criticism is inevitable: the dialectic of the alternative absolutes may be cogent, but something is wrong with the identification of their historical manifestations. The Vedantic Brahman is absolute truth, pure object or thatness freed of all subjective illusion. The Buddhist nirvana, the absolute indefinite of Mādhyamika or rather, as Professor Murti now reinterprets it, the absolute consciousness of Vijñānavāda, is absolute freedom, pure subject freed of all objective form. But no variety of Buddhist absolute, with its traditional subjective and negative emphasis, can be the eminently positive absolute of feeling defined as union of consciousness and content.

The completion of the system requires a correct identification of the third alternative philosophy. In seeking this we should avoid being misled by the connotations of *ānanda*. *Satchitānanda* is not an enumeration of the three absolutes but an analysis of one of them, the Brahman or absolute truth of Vedanta. *Sat* (being) can be identified with absolute truth, but it is only by stretching its meaning that *chit* (intelligence) can be identified with absolute will, and *ananda* (bliss) can not at all be identified with absolute feeling as defined in the Bhattacharya-Murti system. The shadow of bliss in ordinary experience is pleasure, which is not one of the three conscious functions but an emotional tone accompanying the satisfactory performance of any one of them, and absolute pleasure (bliss) is the emotional tone accompanying the realization of any one of the three absolutes—Brahman, nirvana, or the elusive third.

The definition of the third absolute requires consideration of the conscious function on which it is based and of which it is the pure expression. Feeling, as contrasted with knowing or willing, is defined as union of consciousness and content, that is, subject and object—a union in which the self, instead of distinguishing itself from the not-self (in order to reject one or the other), merges with it. This paradoxical identification of the self with something other than itself is what we call love. Love is the union of loving subject and loved object in a *feeling* determined by neither alone but by their mutual interaction. In ordinary experience love is confused with knowing (our opinions about the merits of the loved object) and with willing (our own desires). Absolute feeling must be absolute love freed from all such confusion.

That pure feeling is love is recognised by Professor R. Das in his article *Pursuit of Truth through Doubt and Belief*. After remarking that ideal knowledge is truth and ideal will freedom, he continues (p. 246) :

I like to describe the ideal of feeling as love....the feeling of unalloyed joy together with a sense of unity. Pure joy of course appears desirable for its own sake and is to be realised in feeling. I associate it with a sense of unity also, which seems desirable and is realisable only in feeling. The object of cognition is quite distinct from cognition; the object of willing is ahead of willing and is not one with it. Only in feeling can we realise our unity with the object.

He concludes that the forms of ultimate value are not the traditional truth, goodness, and beauty but truth, freedom and love.

The historical manifestation of the philosophy of absolute love is found in Christianity. God, by which Christians mean the absolute, has many names indicating his relation to creatures, but his *svarupa* is love. This is taught in the Christian scripture, and the whole doctrine of *agape*, which is the central philosophy of Christianity, is based on the fundamental principle that love is the intrinsic nature of God. This is quite different from the Platonic concept of the Good as supreme object of *eros* or the Vaishnavite concept of a personal God as supreme object of *bhakti*. For Christianity God is love.

This can be illustrated from the poetical, philosophical, and mystical literature of Christianity. The greatest classic of Christian poetry is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which the soul, after progressing through all the steps of the spiritual dialectic, attains to absolute love in the last verse of the poem—"the Love which moves the sun and other stars." The most elaborate system of Christian philosophy is Erigena's *Division of Nature*, in which God as the unity from which all things are derived by the dialectic of creation is called supreme goodness, but God as the unity into which all things are resolved by the dialectic of salvation is called supreme love. But poetical and philosophical accounts of love can only be symbolic. For a literal account of love we must turn to the mystical literature, in which love is considered in its own form, as a feeling.

Saint Bernard, in his book *On the Love of God*, describes the dialectic of love in terms of his own mystical experience. He distin-

guishes four grades of love, and these are analogous to Professor Bhattacharya's four grades of theoretic consciousness. Although *analogous*, they are not at all *similar* to them, since we are concerned here not with thoughts but with feelings. The dialectic of love is not a structure of intelligible ideas (what Professor Bhattacharya calls "speaking-ables") but a structure of ineffable feelings.

The first grade of love, according to Saint Bernard, is "when a man loves only himself for his own sake." This is analogous to the first grade of knowledge, perception of facts, in that it is the first primitive operation of the conscious function of feeling. In knowledge the newborn child is completely sensuous, knowing only material objects, and in feeling he is completely selfish, loving only himself. Persons who never progress beyond this stage remain epistemological materialists and aesthetic egoists.

The second grade of love is "when a man loves God for his own sake" (that is, for the man's own sake, not for God's sake). This stage results from the awareness of God as the source of all which is good for us. It is analogous to the second stage of knowledge, contemplation of the supersensuous but still as object, in that it is feeling for the supersensuous good but only as related to the sensuous good.

The third grade of love is "when a man loves God for *his* sake" (that is, for God's sake). This means that God is loved not for his goodness to us as loving (*tatāstha-lakṣana*) but for his intrinsic goodness as love (*svarupa-lakṣana*). This is analogous to the third grade of knowledge, *cognitive* enjoyment of reality, in that it is *loving* enjoyment of reality (God) as contrasted with appearance (creature), but still *as* contrasted with it, since this love excludes the creature and so is not yet absolute.

The fourth grade of love is "when a man loves even himself only for God's sake." Here the love of God excludes nothing but includes all creatures, even ourselves. This, analogous to the fourth grade of knowledge, absolute truth, is absolute love, in which the union of self and God (absolute subject and absolute object) is so perfect that they are merged into one (*tattvamasi*)—not by a *cognitive* apprehension of identity (Vedantic moksha) or *voluntary* fiat of identity (Buddhist nirvana) but by a *felt* identity of lover and loved. This mystical union, described by Christian mystics in erotic metaphors, is the culmination of the Christian *sadhana*. "To feel like this," says Bernard, "is to become God"

(sic affici deificari est).

Thus we see that Christianity conceives the absolute as love and describes the way of attaining the absolute as purification of the feeling function. The historical manifestations of absolute knowing, absolute willing, and absolute feeling are to be found in the three great philosophical religions—Vedanta, Buddhism, and Christianity respectively. Moksha, nirvana, and beatitude are three forms of absolute experience. The ways leading to them—by knowing, willing, and feeling—are radically different, and so far as we can see the absolute experiences themselves are radically different.

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