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*Śaṅkara on the Question: Whose is avidyā?**

The word "*avidyā*," which is variously translated as ignorance, nescience, illusion, is one of the most important terms in the philosophy of Śaṅkarācārya and his followers. It is by the concept of *avidyā* that these monistic philosophers explain the apparent diversity of the world. They claim that in truth there is one indivisible reality, that the experience we have of diversity is due simply to *avidyā*.

Now, the use of this concept leads to a logical dilemma. If this *avidyā* is a real entity, then monism ends. On the other hand, to say that it is an imaginary entity is to destroy the very doctrine of *avidyā*. As Descartes could not doubt that he doubted, so the Kevalādvaitins could not find illusion itself to be an illusion.

There are two ways out of this dilemma. One of them has been taken by most of Śaṅkara's followers and has come to be known as the typical Kevalādvaita point of view. In this system a new truth-value is set up, *anirvacanīyatva*, that which cannot be said to be either true or false. It is a direct consequence of the dilemma I have mentioned that the Kevalādvaita developed a multivalued system of logic, the most widely accepted system of this sort that the world has known.

There is, however, another way out of the dilemma, that is, not by solving but by avoiding it. This was the way chosen by Śaṅkarācārya himself. Most authorities on Śaṅkara have overlooked the fact that he differs from his followers in this matter. The difference has recently been pointed out, however, by Paul Hacker in an article in *ZDMG*.¹ Hacker there considers only the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*. I have thought it might be worth while here to make a cast, though it must be a very brief one, into other waters.

The premise from which all Śaṅkara's arguments on the subject of *avidyā* begin is this: One must realize that *avidyā* is not an inherent characteristic of the self or soul. As soon as it is seen not properly to belong to the self,

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¹ *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 100 (1950), 246-286.

the true nature of the self will be realized and *mokṣa* (release) will be obtained. The question of the exact modality of *avidyā* is inconsequential. One is reminded of the words of another religious teacher of India. The Buddha was asked a number of metaphysical questions by the fool Malunkyaputta. His answer was to liken Malunkyaputta to a man struck by an arrow, who would not let the surgeon draw the arrow till he discovered the name of the man who shot it and the wood of which it was made.

In at least three passages Śaṅkara discusses the question: Whose is *avidyā*? In each passage he denies the real connection of *avidyā* with the self or soul, but in none of these passages, it is worth noting, does he deny the reality of *avidyā* itself.

In *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* IV.i.3 the synonym *aprabodha* (unenlightenment) is used in place of the commoner term. This is in order to obtain a rhetorical effect in answering the opponent:

Whose then is this unenlightenment, it may be asked. To which we reply: Yours, since you ask about it. But [says the opponent], according to scripture I am God. Answer: If you are so enlightened as to know this, then you must know that unenlightenment is no one's.

Hacker well characterizes this passage as "not philosophically exact, but pedagogically impressive."

The same question is treated, but more philosophically and in considerably greater detail, in that commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* which is now definitely known to be by Śaṅkara.² Here Śaṅkara takes the passage "*brahmaiva san brahmāpyeti*" (IV.i.6) as scriptural evidence of *jīvanmukti*, release before death. In support of his view he shows that release of the self implies no real change within it nor any change in such qualities as *avidyā* which might have been supposed to have belonged to the self. For *avidyā* never truly belongs to the self. To prove this, Śaṅkara shows that one can be aware of *avidyā* only as belonging to the category of things known, never as belonging to the category of knowers. That is, whatever awareness we have of *avidyā* shows that it cannot be a part of the self. It cannot be, because, to use Śaṅkara's term, it is a *viśaya*, an object of knowledge.

The argument is first carried on briefly by means of a pun. The word *viviktatas*, distinctly, may mean distinctly, that is, clearly; or it may mean distinctly, that is, as something distinct or separate. "He who perceives *avidyā* distinctly, like a pot, cannot possess *avidyā*."

²Cf. Käthe Marschner, *Zur Verfasserfrage des dem Śaṅkaracarya zugeschriebenen Bṛhadāraṇyako-paniṣad-Bhāṣya*, typescript (Berlin: Alfred Lindner Verlag, 1933); also Paul Hacker, *Untersuchungen über Texte des frühen Advaitavāda* (Mainz: Ak. d. Wiss. und Lit. Abhandlungen der geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse, 1950), p. 1918.

The reason is obvious. One cannot possess a quality which is distinct or separate from oneself. But the opponent is soon placed in a still more difficult position:

But I do not know, says the opponent; I am a stupid man (*mugdho 'smi*). Surely this percept shows that I am in error through *avidyā*. No, [says Śamkara] because you have perceived it distinctly. One who perceives a fact distinctly cannot be in error concerning that fact. It is self-contradictory to say that a man both perceives a thing distinctly and is in error.

At this point Śamkara stops playing with his opponent and comes to the heart of the matter:

You say that a man perceives that he does not know and that he is stupid. That is as much as to say that ignorance and stupidity are perceived by that perceiver, that they are objects (*viśaya*) of perception, that they are an effect (*karma*). Then how can ignorance and stupidity, which are effects, be qualifications of the perceiver who is the effector?

Rather than pursue this passage to its conclusion, let me turn to the *Gītā-bhāṣya*. This also has generally been attributed to Śamkara, and I see no reason to doubt the ascription.

In the long commentary on *Gītā* XIII.2 Śamkara raises the same question: Whose is *avidyā*? But in the lines which follow, some new arguments are added. Granted that *avidyā* is not essential to the self, it might be supposed even in a real sense to have some connection with the self. No, says Śamkara, because such a connection can neither be perceived nor inferred. That it cannot be perceived is fairly obvious. I shall quote only the last part of the argument dealing with inference.

If your knowledge is by inference, how can you know the connections? At the time that you, the knower, know *avidyā*, the thing which is known, you certainly cannot also know the connection between yourself and it, for *avidyā* is related to the knower solely as being an object of his knowledge. Nor can one imagine a knower of the connection between the knower and the *avidyā* nor a knowledge having such a connection for its content, for we should then have to admit an infinite series. If one's connection with the known is known by a knower, then another knower may be set up, and another knower of that, and of that, and so on to infinity. But if *avidyā* is the known, or, for the matter of that, if anything else is, then the known is simply the known. Similarly, the knower is simply the knower; he cannot become the known. Such being the case, the self (*kṣetrajña*), which is the knower, is never affected by such entities as *avidyā* and sorrow.

In all these passages one sees that Śamkara never admits either horn of the dilemma. *Avidyā* is never said to be real. It is never said to be unreal. But no new modality is set up to solve the difficulty. One may even state

it as likely that Śaṅkara disapproved the postulation of a third truth-value. This is only a guess. But the concept is certainly as old as the time of Śaṅkara³ and one may hazard a second guess as to why he rejected it. If the characterizing of the phenomenal world as *anirvacanīya* makes the world no more real than it is in Śaṅkara's doctrine, it makes it a great deal less unreal. Such a characterization may well have seemed unsound to Śaṅkara's intuition.

What Śaṅkara does is to avoid the difficulty. He concentrates on what he considers the heart of the matter, the teaching that is necessary for the attainment of *mokṣa*. This teaching is that *avidyā*, whatever its modality, is never truly connected with the self. Here, as in other differences that may be noticed between Śaṅkara and his disciples, one may say that Śaṅkara's approach to truth is psychological and religious. His interest in metaphysics and logic is always subordinated to the center of his attention. His followers, while deeply attracted by this attitude, were gradually forced to construct a metaphysical system that is in all respects logically coherent.

³As noted by Hacker (ZDMG 100.255 n.1) *anirvacanīyatva* in the sense of a third truth-value is found in Maṇḍanamiśra. In the rare instances where Śaṅkara uses the word (e.g., on *Brahma-sūtra* II. i. 27) it has quite a different meaning. It is there applied to *nāmarūpa*, the cosmic stuff, in its unmanifested state where it *cannot be said to be this or that*, i.e., where it is undifferentiated. (Hacker, *op. cit.*, p. 263.)