



Shankara's Thought Charles Johnson

The glamour of India; the hot, luminous sky; palm trees, with their metallic glitter, fringing her sacred rivers; heavy-curtained mango groves, where the golden orioles make their nests; dainty footed gazelles on the sunlight-flooded plains; crimson lotuses in the green darkness of some quiet forest pool; white cloud-wreaths fleeing across the blue, and gradually gathering into lightning-riven masses; all this weaves together a picture of imperious, unforgettable beauty. And there is something of this glamour in all the great records of Indian philosophy and song; in the Vedic Hymns, the high earnestness of the Upanishads, the divine legends of Rama and Krishna the Hero; in all the treasured wealth of India's Golden Age.

Through all the long centuries that followed after the dim Vedic dawn had passed, two great men stand out above all the peoples of India; two teachers, whose thought is of highest value and world-wide significance.

These two teachers are Gautama Buddha and Shankara Acharya.

The influence of Gautama Buddha, already enormous in his life time, has grown steadily during two and a half milleniums; so great is it today that a third of all the world has "sworn into the words of this master." And yet, within India itself, it is almost certain that the influence of Shankara Acharya has been stronger, deeper, and more enduring.

Shankara's work in India was threefold; first, a practical reform of the great and powerful Brahman caste; then a series of commentaries on the text-books of Vedic wisdom; and, lastly, philosophic system, which for lucidity and coherence is equal to the best work that the thought of man has produced in any age or country. Of the first part of Shankara's work it is difficult to obtain any precise information; we can only say that his tendency was to draw the Brahmans away from ceremonial religion and ritual, and to insist on the preeminent value of discipline and self-development. "Sin and misery are the fruit of ignorance," he says, "and can only be removed by the opposite of ignorance, which is not ritual but wisdom."

The second part of Shankara's work, namely his masterly attempt to render the wisdom of the Upanishads, the Vedanta Sutras, and the Bhagavad Gita into the language and thought of his own time, can only be fully understood after a complete analysis and study of the great originals he commented on; a study that would require many volumes.

We may turn, therefore, to the third part of this great teacher's labours, his own philosophy of Identity: the Advaita system, which has dominated the thought of India for centuries.

We might make clear the philosophy of Identity, the Advaita of Shankara, by taking almost any of his treatises, and translating it step by step, with such comments as were necessary on the technical words involved. But perhaps it will be better to begin by realizing that the passage of the centuries since Shankara's day has made no difference at all to the fundamental problems of knowledge; indeed it would probably be true, to say that the great problems of knowledge as well as our powers of solving them, are precisely the

same as they were a hundred thousand, or even a million years ago. Now, as then, we find ourselves in the midst of infinities, with the vast world of mountain and river, of sea and sky pictorially unfolded around us, in ever changing, ever wonderful mystery. We are shut in between the perpetually descending curtain of the past, and the perpetually ascending curtain of the future; and the wide world drifts before us, as the white cloud drifts before the moon.

Yes, says Carlyle, I grant you that we are here; but where in the name of goodness is here? The whole of science is nothing but the attempt to find another name for the great gallery of pictures in the heart of which we so mysteriously find ourselves. The whole outer universe, says science, is nothing but the interplay of two things; force and matter. Matter again is nothing but a series of centres of force, and force is the producer of phenomena. Phenomena, again, are “appearances,” impressions produced on our consciousness. To sum up, the universe is the totality of “appearances,” of phenomena; the universe is a vast panorama, a picture-gallery; and so we end exactly where we began.

The realist declares that “the universe is real, because I see it;” this involves the admission that the test of reality of the universe is that it is seen; that it is an object of perception; that it is objective to consciousness. We have no other test of its reality than this, that it is objective to consciousness; and it is inconceivable that we should have any other test. It is inconceivable that we should be able to go outside the fact of our perception, and test the reality of the outer Universe independently. So far we can go and no further; and this perception is the starting point of Shankara’s philosophy.

The outer universe, he says, is a dependent reality; a reality dependent on our perception; a reality depending on consciousness; and not a primary reality. We can begin our study of being in no other way than by the recognition of these two; consciousness, the perceiver of the outer universe, and the outer universe, which is objective to consciousness.

But the reality of these two does not by any means stand on the same level. And the reason of this is, that consciousness is two-fold and has two branches. The first branch is “I perceive the outer universe”, and the second branch is “I am I.” Therefore consciousness not only perceives the outer universe, and thus supplies the only test of the reality of the outer universe; but it goes further. Consciousness further affirms its own reality to itself, and is therefore self-existent, self-affirmed, self-based. But we do not know at all—and we cannot conceivably know—that the objective universe is self-existent, self-affirmed, self-based; the objective universe has, therefore, only a subsidiary degree of reality; it is secondary, dependent on consciousness.

“I am I” is the only self-affirmed, self-existent, self-based reality; and “I am I” is the basis of Shankara’s philosophy. Now if “I am I” is the one reality, we shall be quite wrong in attributing to this primary reality the qualities and happenings of the subsidiary reality, the objective universe. We shall be quite wrong in attributing to consciousness the vicissitudes of what is objective to consciousness; as we should be quite wrong in attributing to the beholder the vicissitudes of what he beholds.

What then are the happenings, the vicissitudes that befall the objective universe? They are the world-old trinity of birth, growth, death; of beginning, middle, end, the end being the invariable prelude of a new beginning. This ancient trinity of birth and growth and death, of beginning and middle and end, which runs through the whole of the objective universe, must on no account, as we have seen, be attributed to consciousness, the beholder of the objective universe; just as the changes a man beholds must on no account be attributed to the beholder. We are therefore led to see that if beginning and end are not to be attributed to consciousness, then consciousness must be beginningless, endless; if birth and death are not to be attributed to consciousness, then consciousness must be birthless, deathless,

eternal.

This is Shankara's first great conclusion.

Starting from the self-evident truth that we have not, that we cannot conceivably have, any proof of the independent reality of the objective universe, which must thus for ever remain for us a secondary, dependent reality, he reaches this first conclusion: that consciousness, the primary reality, is beginningless, endless, eternal. Consider for a moment—Shankara would say,—consider for a moment this “I am I.” Trace it back within yourself, stripping it of all outer vestures and veils. Then, as you at first said, “I am the owner of such and such houses and lands and ornaments,” thus including many outward things in the notion of “I”; you must gradually learn to strip the inward reality of its outward vestures.

I am “the owner of all these things” is the first false notion; for these outward things are clearly not I, are clearly objective to consciousness.

“I am such a person, with such a name; I am a Brahman, or a slave,” is the second false notion; for name and condition are but outward conventional things.

“I am this body with its passions and powers;” is the third false notion; because the body with its powers is as clearly external and objective to consciousness as are house and lands.

“I am the emotions and fancies and memories which make up my mind” is the fourth false notion; for these emotions and memories are again external, objective to consciousness, just as one's bracelets and necklaces are.

Stripped of all these vestures, there is the pure residuum “I am I,” secondless, partless; the alone, lonely, and pure. Seize this secondless partless reality within yourself; within the manifold veils and vestures and disguises you call yourself; seize this “I am I” for a single moment, and you become immortal. You recognize that you were, are, and must be, immortal and eternal.

This “I am I” is the pure, absolute residuum. It is pure, because it contains nothing but itself; because it is freed from the veils and vestures and disguises which are subject to beginning and end; to birth and death. It is absolute, because it cannot conceivably be derived from anything else; no conceivable number of things which are not “I” compounded and added together in any conceivable way could make up this absolute unity, this “I am I.”

Seize the pure “I” within yourself for even an instant; and you reach the unshakeable conviction that this “I” could not be made up of any other thing, derived from any other thing; that “I am I” is absolute, self-based, self-existing. And if absolute, and not conceivably to be derived from any other thing, it is also not conceivably to be changed into any other thing.

Where should it go to? What should become of it? How could this only reality be conceivably hidden?

“I am I” can have had no beginning; “I am I” can have no end; and this you can realize directly, by seizing the pure “I” apart from veils and disguises.

And when you seize it, even for a single instant, you become eternal, you realize that you always were, always must be, eternal.

Such is the essence of Shankara's thought.

Charles Johnson. “Shankara's Thought.” *Theosophical Forum*. March, 1901.

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