

# A Realist view of Advaita

## Part III

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## Part III – The Preamble

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### THE TOPIC OF THE PREAMBLE

It is generally believed that the adhyasa-bhashya of Shankara's preamble to the Brahma Sutra Bhashya points to the unreality of the world. This view has gained such wide currency that it seems almost sacrilegious to question its authenticity. Yet a careful scrutiny of the preamble belies such a reading of its pages. The subject matter of the preamble is the superimposition between the Self and non-Self as enunciated in the opening words of the bhashya:

"It being an established fact that the object and the subject, that are fit to be the contents of the concepts 'you' and 'we' (respectively), and are by nature as contradictory as light and darkness, cannot logically have any identity, it follows that their attributes can have it still less. Accordingly, the superimposition of the object, referable through the concept 'you', and its attributes on the subject that is conscious by nature and is referable through the concept 'we' (should be impossible), and contrariwise the superimposition of the subject and its attributes on the object should be impossible. Nevertheless, owing to an absence of discrimination between these attributes, as also between substances, which are absolutely disparate, there continues a natural human behaviour based on self-identification in the form of 'I am this' or 'This is mine'. This behaviour has for its material cause an unreal nescience and man resorts to it by mixing up reality and unreality as a result of superimposing the things themselves or their attributes on each other." (BSB, Pre)

The preamble goes on to explain the nature of superimposition. It says that this superimposition is of the nature of avidya and that the ascertainment of the real entity after separating the superimposed thing from it is vidya. It points out that all forms of worldly and Vedic behaviour have as their ground this superimposition, and that such superimposition is common to both animals as well as learned people. The preamble ends with the note that the bhashya is begun in order to eradicate the source of evil and to facilitate the knowledge of Self. Nowhere in the preamble do we come across the statement that the world is false. The focus of the preamble is clearly the superimposition between the Self and non-Self and NOT the unreality of the world.

### THE NATURE OF SUPERIMPOSITION

What is it that is meant by superimposition? The Acharya answers: "It is an awareness, similar in nature to memory, that arises on a different basis as a result of some past experience. With regards to this, some say that it consists in the superimposition of the attributes of one thing on another. But others assert that wherever a superimposition on anything occurs, there is in evidence only a confusion arising from the absence of discrimination between them. Others say that the superimposition of anything on any other substratum consists in fancying some opposite attributes on that very

basis. From every point of view, however, there is no difference as regards the appearance of one thing as something else". (BSB, Pre).

Yes, superimposition is only the appearance of one thing as another. It is in the context of this mistaking of one thing as another that unreality arises - as a thing being unreal in posing (or appearing) as another thing. In other words, it is unreal because the real thing does not exist (at that place and time) in the locus where the object is cognised. The assertion of unreality ascribed to the thing - and it may be noted that it is to a 'thing' that unreality is ascribed - is not a statement of the absolute non-existence of the thing, but a denial of a real thing of the world as being existent in a locus where it is in actuality not existing. Thus, in the superimposition of the non-Self on the Self, the non-Self is said to be unreal as the Self, but it cannot, logically, be said to be absolutely non-existent. It is important to make this distinction.

## ERROR AND SUPERIMPOSITION

In speaking about superimposition, Shankara mentions the theories of error held by the other schools. I believe that it would be useful, in order to gain a proper understanding of Advaita, to examine these theories together with Advaita's response to them.

ANYATHAKHYATI is the Nyaya-Vaisesika theory of error. In this theory, the error occurs when there is an awareness of 'this', but due to either a defect of environment or instrument of cognition, and the similarity between the 'this' (rope) and the snake calls up the snake existing elsewhere through an extra-normal-sense-relation. This extra-normal-sense-relation is anyathatva, or otherwiseness, of the erroneous cognition. Both the rope and the snake are real, but the relation between the subject 'this' and the predicate 'that' in the cognition 'this is that' is false. According to Advaita, this theory is untenable because the perception of the snake (in the erroneous cognition) should then have the characteristic that snake is there (elsewhere, say in a forest).

AKHYATI is the theory of error held by Mimamsa according to which all knowledge is valid. There is no such thing as erroneous knowledge, for a contrary supposition will paralyse human action by raising doubt at every stage. In an erroneous cognition, we have two cognitions, one being of the nature of direct perception, and the other of the nature of memory, and fail to cognise the difference between the two. The two cognitions of 'this' and 'snake' synchronise without an apprehension of their difference. The memory, although essentially an apprehension of a previously apprehended object, presents itself as bare apprehension and the element of reference to the previous cognition is lost through some defect. Advaita rejects this theory because memory is never without a reference to place and time even if such a reference is vague (as carrying the vague notion of having seen it in some place and time). (Yet I feel that Shankara's explanation on superimposition has a remarkable kinship to the Mimamsa theory except for the fact that here the erroneous cognition is due to 'an awareness similar to memory' rather than due to memory itself.)

SATKHYATI is the Vishistadvaita theory of error. The Vishistadvaitins hold that all objects of cognition are real, and that it is inconceivable that there should be cognition without a real cognitum. According to them everything exists in everything else through the process of quintuplication (see Sri Shankara's 'Pancikaranam' for more details on quintuplication) and the snake is as real as the rope. Advaitins reject this theory because it does not explain why only a snake should be seen in the rope rather than a cow or an elephant (as everything exists in everything else).

SADASATKHYATI, the Samkhya-Yoga theory of error is based on viparyaya, or false knowledge of a thing that does not correspond to its real form. The snake though real elsewhere is unreal when it is comprehended in this rope. At the transcendental level all things are real and are not contradicted in respect of their very nature. (I am not sure if and how Advaita rejects this theory).

It is to be noted that in all these theories, the unreality of the object seen in the error is parasitic upon the reality of the object in the world. In the instance of error when the false object appears real, that appearance of reality is grounded in the real object, for otherwise the error itself cannot take place. Thus, in Nyaya, it is transported to the site of error from a real snake that exists elsewhere. In Mimamsa, it is transported from the memory of the real snake. In Vishistadvaita, it is real even in the locus of error. In Samkhya-Yoga, it is a viparyaya, a mixing up of the attributes that a real snake has with the attributes of the rope. It is only in the Buddhist theories that we come across the absolute unreality of the objects of error. We now proceed to examine the Buddhist theories.

## THEORIES BASED ON UNREALITY OF OBJECTS

ASATKHYATI is the error-theory of the Buddhist Madhyamikas wherein the non-existent snake appears on the non-existent rope. Thus according to them, both the snake and the rope are unreal. This theory is rejected by Advaita because such universal non-existence would be indistinguishable everywhere, and cannot cause perception of objects with distinguishable features. Says the Acharya:

"There is no distinction as regards the nature of non-existence, between the non-existence arising from the destruction of the seed and the rest, and the horn of a hare, both being equally unsubstantial. Had there been any distinction, only then would the assertion of such separate causality be meaningful as, 'This sprout comes out of the seed alone, and the curd out of the milk alone'. But when an indistinguishable non-existence is posited as the cause, the sprout and the rest may as well spring out of a hare's horn and the like. This is however, contradicted by experience. If, again, distinctive attributes be ascribed to non-existence on the analogy of the lotus having blueness etc., then on that very analogy of the lotus etc., non-existence will turn into existence by the very fact of possessing distinctive qualities. Moreover, non-existence can never be the source of anything, precisely because it is non-existent like the hare's horn. Were existence to arise out of non-existence, all the effects would be imbued with non-existence. But that goes against experience, for all things are perceived to exist as entities with their respective distinguishing features." (BSB, II,II,iv,26).

ATMAKHYATI is the Buddhist Vijnanavada theory of error. In Vijnanavada, the object of an error is real as the content of an inner reflection of the subject. Due to past impression, there is simultaneous flow of external 'this' and internal snake and the two get mixed up. This theory may be rejected because it subtracts the attribute of 'externality' from the snake and hence the snake, which is internal, should be seen as extremely proximate resulting in some such cognition as 'I am a snake'. For according to the Vijnanavadins, it is the cognition itself that appears in the likeness of the object. To which the Acharya counters:

"Not that anybody cognises a perception to be a pillar, a wall, etc., rather all people cognise a pillar, a wall, etc., as objects of perception. And it is for this reason that all people understand the Buddhists as really assuming the existence of an external thing even while they deny it by saying 'That which is the content of an internal awareness appears as though external'. For they use the phrase 'as though' in the clause 'as though external' just

because they too become aware of a cognition appearing externally in the same way as is well known to all people, and yet they want to deny any external object. Else why should they say 'as though external'? For nobody speaks thus: 'Vishnumitra appears like the son of a barren woman.'" (BSB,II,II,v,28).

The last sentence is significant - the world is not unreal like the son of a barren woman. It is important to distinguish the difference between the unreality of the son of a barren woman and the unreality of the snake in the rope. The world in Advaita is unreal like the snake in the rope, and the snake in the rope is grounded on its likeness to real snakes in the world. To say that the world is absolutely unreal is to adopt the doctrine of the Buddhists.

## CONDITIONS FOR THE OCCURRENCE OF ERROR

An error can take place only when there is a concealment of the true nature of the object. This concealment may be due to a defect of the sense organs, or it may be a defect in the environment. But apart from the condition of concealment, we find that there are two other necessary conditions in the theories of the Vedic darshanas without which the possibility of error (between objects) would be precluded. These are:

1. That there be a likeness between the real object and the unreal object, for example between the coil of rope and the coil of the snake, or the glitter of nacre and the glitter of silver. It is the likeness of the objects combined with the defect in the environment or sense organs that makes possible the error. It is not possible, for example, to mistake a rope for an elephant or cow.
2. That the appearance of the unreal object be based on the reality of the object itself. The object is revealed as unreal only in the locus of the error. It is because there are real snakes in the world that a rope can be mistaken for a snake. We do not, for example, mistake a person to be the son of a barren woman.

Advaita does not deviate from the traditional Vedic schools in so far as an error between objects is concerned. It considers that the object of erroneous cognition has a likeness to a really existing object. It also affirms the reality of the object in the world, but accepts the unreality of the object in the locus of error in accordance with the empirical sublating cognition that the 'the snake is false'. It is to be noted that the falseness of the snake in the rope does not exterminate snakes from the world!

## THE SUPERIMPOSITION BETWEEN SELF AND NON-SELF IS INEXPLICABLE

If one goes by the conditional factors that makes an empirical error possible, it becomes an impossibility for the non-Self to be superimposed on the Self because, the one being sentient and the other being insentient, there is no likeness between them. This is exactly what the Acharya says in the preamble - that the subject and object which "are by nature as contradictory as light and darkness, cannot logically have any identity, it follows that their attributes can have it still less. Accordingly, the superimposition of the object, referable through the concept 'you', and its attributes on the subject that is conscious by nature and is referable through the concept 'we' (should be impossible), and contrariwise the superimposition of the subject and its attributes on the object should be impossible." In other words, the superimposition between the Self and non-Self is inexplicable through empirical theories of error. Yet, this state of affairs is a natural (naisargika) continuation from a beginningless past. If the snake-rope or silver- nacre analogy is used to illustrate the superimposition between the Self and non-Self, it is merely to point out that one thing is seen as another. And it is this common feature that the Acharya points out after considering various theories of error: "From every point of view, however, there is no difference as regards the appearance of one thing as something else. And in accord with this, we find in common experience that the nacre appears as silver, and a single moon appears as two." (BSB,Pre).

## THE DISLodGEMENT OF MEANING

There is in the preamble what seems to be an almost passing reference to the possibility of superimposition between what is perceived and what is not perceived.

Question: "How, again, can there be any superimposition of any object or its attributes on the Self that is opposed to the non-Self and is never an object (of the senses and mind)? For everybody superimposes something else on what is perceived by him in front; and you assert that the Self is opposed to the non-Self and is not referable by the concept 'you'."

Vedantin: "The Self is not absolutely beyond comprehension, because it is apprehended as the content of the concept 'I'; and because the Self, opposed to the non-Self, is well known in the world as an immediately perceived (self-revealing) entity. Nor is there any rule that something has to be superimposed on something else that is directly perceived through the senses; for boys superimpose the ideas of surface and dirt on space (sky) that is not an object of sense- perception."

There is something subtle hidden in these lines. Why is it that it is only boys that are susceptible to this type of error? In the case of errors between objects, say the snake in the rope, the person subject to the error knows the meanings of both the snake and the rope, whereas in this case - what is it that the boy knows as the sky? An adult who knows what 'sky' means - as that which is expansive and pervasive through and through objects - can never superimpose ideas such as concavity and dirt onto the sky. It is only boys (children), who see the 'bowl' spread out above and take this bowl to be the 'sky', that ascribe concavity to the sky. In the case of the snake-rope error, one may say that two meanings, both of which are known, are confused one with another in the locus of the error, but not so in the case of the 'sky' that boys see when they attribute concavity to the it; they do not know the meaning of sky. There is a primal dislodgement of meaning here. And the superimposition of the non-Self on Self, being a superimposition of the perceived on the unperceived, is of this nature, for that is what the Acharya says. There is no reason that can be assigned as to why such a primal dislodgement of meaning should at all be there in Reality. It is inexplicable, anirvacaniya.

## CONCLUSION

What emerges from this examination is that the unreal is more perplexing than what it at first seems. What is unreal is also somehow the real. One of the great deliberations in the history of mankind on the topic of the 'unreal' is to be found in the Thaetetus and Sophist of Plato. These dialogues are inconclusive, but they are masterpieces of dialectical philosophy. I believe that the same kind of dialectical tension is found in the Sariraka Bhashya of Shankaracharya. To read the bhashya with the singular notion that the world is unreal would be a sad derailment of Advaita, for it would denude

Advaita of the element of mysticism that lies in its core.

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