

Chapter 12

Purva Mimamsa and Vedanta

Jaimini is said to be the author of the original *Mīmāṃsā* sutras dating back to around 400 B.C. Their central purpose was an inquiry into the nature of duty or *dharma*. In addition to this inquiry, we find elaborate discussions about sounds, words and meanings that are quite interesting in their own right. Unlike the *Nyāya* system where only four methods of knowledge are distinguished, the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* system lists six. In addition to direct perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), analogy (*upamāna*) and verbal testimony (*śabda*), it includes hypothesis (*arthāpatti*) and knowledge by negation (*abhāva*). The method of hypothesis is interesting even from a historical perspective since it is the basis of the later scientific method. A hypothesis is made on the ground that something already observed would have been impossible without that hypothesis. This is what is called the method of *arthāpatti*.

Concerning the nature of hypothesis and its role in the scientific method, the famous mathematician of the 19th century, Henri Poincaré writes, “Science is built up of facts, as a house is built of stones; but an accumulation of facts is no more a science than a heap of stones is a house. Most important of all, the man of science must exhibit foresight. ... It is that which enables us to predict, and to generalise. Without generalisation, prediction is impossible. ... Detached facts cannot therefore satisfy us, and that is why our science must be ordered, or better still, generalised. ... Thus, by generalisation, every fact observed enables us to predict a large number of others. ... Every generalisation is a hypothesis.”¹

¹H. Poincaré, *Science and Hypothesis*, pp. 141-150.

Let us note that the hypothesis cannot be arbitrary. It must be corroborated by experience. The relative certainty of the hypothesis is derived from the fact that the observed phenomenon cannot be explained otherwise. However, we cannot be sure that it cannot be explained otherwise, so we make only a relative hypothesis, or a “working hypothesis.” All scientific theories are working hypotheses. Their virtue lies in their power of explanation and power of prediction. These are the two guiding principles we use in the scientific method. Concerning this point, Vivekananda writes, “The first principle of reasoning is that the particular is explained by the general, the general by the more general, until we come to the universal. For instance, we have the idea of law. If something happens and we believe that it is the effect of such and such a law, we are satisfied; that is an explanation for us. ... Knowledge is more or less classification. There is something more. A second explanation of knowledge is that the explanation of a thing must come from inside and not from outside. There had been the belief that, when a man threw up a stone and it fell, some demon dragged it down. Many occurrences which are really natural phenomena are attributed by people to unnatural beings. That a ghost dragged down the stone was an explanation that was not in the thing itself, it was an explanation from outside; but the second explanation of gravitation is something in the nature of the stone; the explanation is coming from inside. This tendency you will find throughout modern thought; in one word, what is meant by science is that the explanations of things are in their own nature, and that no external beings or existences are required to explain what is going in the universe.”²

The other method of knowledge indicated by *abhāva* or negation in the Pūrva Mimāṃsā is equally interesting. Both what is seen and what is not seen must be taken together. If something is not seen, that too indicates knowledge. “The non-operation [or non-application] of the (five) means of cognition (described above) is ... what brings about the cognition that ‘it does not exist.’ ... That is, in a case where sense perception and the other means of cognition are not found to be operative towards bringing about the notion of the *existence* of a certain thing, we have the notion of the *non-existence* of that thing; and the means by which this notion is brought about is called *abhāva*.”³

The essential theme of the system was to define the notion of duty. In trying to do so, it tries to first understand the relationship between the word and its meaning. Consequently, it is led to hypothesise that “words are eternal,” similar to Plato’s theory of Forms or Ideas. By the Vedas, therefore, no books are meant, but rather the realm of pure idea or revelation. The system distinguishes between revelation (*śruti*) and social custom (*smṛiti*). The former is very much like universal law and the latter, a man-made law or convention. “*Śruti* is more

²S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 1, pp. 370-371.

³S. Radhakrishnan and C. Moore, A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, p. 488.

authoritative than *smṛiti*. When there is a conflict between Veda and *smṛiti*, the *smṛiti* should be disregarded.”⁴ “In plain words, ” Vivekananda writes, “we have first to learn the distinction between the essentials and the non-essentials in everything. The essentials are eternal, the non-essentials have value only for a certain time; and if after a time they are not replaced by something essential, they are positively dangerous.”⁵ Thus, one of the important contributions of this system of philosophy is its distinction between universal laws and social or man-made laws and that one should not confuse the two.

The Vedānta philosophy of Bādarāyana is also known as the Uttara Mimāṃsā system and is said to have been written down sometime between 500 and 200 B.C. The Vedānta Sūtras (also called Brahma Sūtras) that form the foundation of the philosophy systematize the teachings of the Upanishads. The 555 sūtras are often terse and consequently, over the centuries, many scholars and philosophers have written commentaries based on this work. In commenting upon the work, it can be said that the commentators founded new schools of philosophy. Most notable among these were Shankara (788 - 820 A.D.) and his school of non-dualism (*advaita*), Rāmānuja (11th century) and qualified non-dualism (*viśiṣṭa advaita*) and Madhva (1197-1276) with his school of dualism (*dvaita*). All three schools come under the heading of Vedānta.

The word *vedānta* can be split into two: *veda* and *anta* and literally means “end of the Vedas.” This is taken to mean the distilling of the philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads into its essential components. Shankara builds upon Gaudapāda’s commentary (*kārikā*) of the Māndūkya Upanishad, the shortest of the Upanishads dealing with the four states of consciousness. In his commentary of the Vedānta Sūtras, Shankara begins by asking if there is anything in our experience that we can be certain of. This is the question of the philosopher and we find echoes of the same question in the later writings of René Descartes and Bertrand Russell. “Our senses may deceive us; our memory may be an illusion. The forms of the world may be pure fancy. The objects of knowledge may be open to doubt, but the doubter himself cannot be doubted. ... It cannot be proved, because it is the basis of all proof. The self is self-established and is different from all else, physical and mental. As the subject it is not the object. ... It is undifferentiated consciousness, which remains unaffected even when the body is reduced to ashes and the mind perishes.”⁶ Re-iterating the Upanishadic teaching, Shankara explains the eternal Self is the *ātman* and the universal Self is *Brahman*. “The world is bound up by the categories of space, time and cause. These are not self-contained or self-consistent. They point to something unalterable and absolute ... *Brahman* is different from the space-time-cause world. ... The empirical world cannot exist by itself. It is wholly dependent on *Brahman* ... but *Brahman* depends on nothing. Ignorance affects

⁴Ibid., p. 496.

⁵S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 3, p. 174.

⁶S. Radhakrishnan and C. Moore, A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, p. 506.

our whole empirical being. It is another name for finitude. To remove ignorance is to realise the truth. ... While absolute truth is *Brahman*, empirical truth is not false.”⁷

Shankara concludes that the highest representation of *Brahman* through logical categories is *Isvarā* or *Saguna Brahman* (qualified Brahman) as described in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras. The *Nirguna Brahman* (or Brahman without qualities) transcends this and is the basis of the phenomenal world. Shankara’s *advaita* has often been misunderstood and dismissed as the theory of *māya* or illusion. The statement “this world is an illusion” is an oversimplification of Shankara’s view. Here is what he says precisely. Building on Gaudapāda’s *Kārika* and his description of the four states of consciousness, namely, deep sleep, dreaming, waking and transcendence (*turiya*), Shankara writes, “As one dreaming person is not affected by the illusory visions of his dream because they do not accompany the waking state ... so the one permanent witness of the three states ... is not touched by the mutually exclusive three states. For that the highest Self appears in those three states is a mere illusion, not more substantial than the snake for which the rope is mistaken in the twilight.”⁸ The existence of the rope is not dependent on the appearance of the snake but the appearance of the snake is dependent upon the rope. So also, according to Shankara, the world is dependent upon Brahman but Brahman is not dependent upon the world.

A classic example given as the purpose of philosophic thought is that of a thorn. If a thorn is stuck in one’s foot, we take another thorn and carefully remove it and then discard both thorns. We don’t keep one as a souvenir. Similarly, “this doctrine of the individual self having its Self in *Brahman* ... does away with the independent existence of the individual self, just as the idea of the rope does away with the idea of the snake (for which the rope has been mistaken).”⁹

In a masterly stroke of impeccable logic, Shankara indicates that all that exists is *Brahman*. Vivekananda explains it as follows. “Let us examine our perceptions. I see a blackboard. How does that knowledge come? What the German philosophers call “the thing-in-itself” of the blackboard is unknown. I can never know it. Let us call it *x*. The blackboard *x* acts on my mind, and the mind reacts. The mind is like a lake. Throw a stone in a lake and a reactionary wave comes toward the stone; this wave is not like the stone at all, it is a wave. The blackboard *x* is like a stone which strikes the mind and the mind throws up a wave towards it, and this wave is what we call the blackboard. I see you. You as reality are unknown and unknowable. You are *x* and you act upon my mind, and the mind throws a wave in the direction from which the impact comes,

⁷Ibid., p. 507.

⁸Ibid., p. 523.

⁹Ibid., p. 526.

and that wave is what I call Mr. or Mrs. So-and-so. There are two elements in the perception, one coming from outside and the other from inside, and the combination of these two, x +mind, is our external universe. All knowledge is by reaction. ... The real Self within me is also unknown and unknowable. Let us call it y . When I know myself as so-and-so, it is y + the mind. That y strikes a blow on the mind. So our whole world is x + mind (external), and y + mind (internal), x and y standing for the thing-in-itself behind the external and internal worlds respectively. ... Now we will take up our x and y and show they are one. ... x and y are both ... unknown and unknowable. All difference is due to time, space and causation. These are the constituent elements of the mind. No mentality is possible without them. You can never think without time, you can never imagine anything without space, and you can never have anything without causation. These are the forms of the mind. Take them away, and the mind itself does not exist. ... According to Vedanta, it is the mind, its forms, that have limited x and y apparently and made them appear as external and internal worlds. But x and y , being both beyond the mind, are without difference and hence one. We cannot attribute any quality to them, because qualities are born of the mind. That which is quality-less must be one; x is without qualities, it only takes qualities of the mind; so does y ; therefore these x and y are one.”¹⁰

When we try to decipher what we mean when we say ‘we know’ we see that it is more or less classification and arrangement. The mind is a network of associations and whatever we meet or perceive, we try to pigeonhole the perception and the process of pigeonholing is what gives rise to the feeling ‘I know.’ Whether it is chemistry, or physics, or mathematics or cellular biology, we take up the plethora of observations and try to arrange them. Knowledge arises from the arranging of facts, from the relationship between ideas. What we mean by a proof is a sequence of logical implications beginning with axioms that have been assumed without question. Explanation only means this. We relate it to what has been known before or what has been deduced before. We associate it with past impressions. When it comes to existential questions raised by philosophy (or religion for that matter), we find the mind is baffled by the very questions and it cannot answer them. In the sense we have outlined above, these questions are unanswerable. Vivekananda explains this state of affairs as follows. “If knowledge means finding the associations, then it must be that to know anything we have to see the whole series of its similars. ... Suppose you take a pebble; to find the association, you have to see the whole series of pebbles similar to it. But with our perception of the universe as a whole, we cannot do that, because in the pigeon-hole of our mind there is only one single record of the perception, we have no other perception of the same nature or class, we cannot compare it with any other. We cannot refer it to its associations. This bit of the universe, cut off by our consciousness, is a startling new thing, because we have not been able to find its associations. ... It is only when we find its

¹⁰S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 2, pp. 458-461.

associations that the universe will stand explained. Until we can do that, all the knocking of our heads against a wall will never explain the universe, because knowledge is the finding of similars, and this conscious plane only gives us one single perception of it.”¹¹

This does not mean we abandon reason. We must take reason as far as it can go. When that is done, Vedanta says, reason is transcended. But until then, we must rely upon reason. Shankara’s *advaita* philosophy is deep and profound. Its insistence on rational thought and reason degenerated over the centuries into linguistic wrangling. Thus, in the 11th century, Ramanuja derived a form of “qualified” *advaita* known as *visishtadvaita*. It can be thought of as a combination of *Sāṃkhyā*, Yoga and *advaita*. Ramanuja correctly emphasises that *saguna Brahman*, or Brahman with qualities, is the highest reading of Brahman we can aspire for. “A reality of oneness manifesting itself in a reality of numberless forms and powers of its being is what we confront everywhere,” writes Aurobindo.¹² Since plurality is what we experience, Ramanuja’s objection to Shankara is that we should not posit anything we cannot experience. The mind perceives through images and symbols. To ascribe qualities and to make definitions is the very nature of the mental process. Thus, the way to realize *Brahman* is through symbology combined with devotion. Since *Brahman* manifests through numberless forms, this is not our own invention. Thus, he writes,¹³ “Joining the mind with devotion to that which is not Brahman, taking it to be Brahman,” the mind reaches Brahman. In this connection, he stresses devotion as the means echoing Patanjali’s devotion to Isvara. Hence, *bhakti* or devotion is a dominant theme in Ramanuja’s philosophy.

At the time of Ramanuja, Shankara’s *advaita* was viewed as a philosophy asserting *Brahman* as a “quality-less substance.” Its subtle observations about ‘knowing’ and ‘knowledge’ were forgotten and the followers of Shankara’s school may have claimed that they had proved the existence of *Brahman*. Shankara never claimed that. Thus, from a historical perspective, Ramanuja’s objection, which is quite valid, is that there is no proof of a non-differentiated substance. Shankara would not have argued with that. According to Ramanuja, differentiation is the only thing perceived. Consciousness and *Brahman* are not identical, but rather consciousness is an attribute of *Brahman*. Since the mind can only understand symbols and images, there is no point in discussing the abstract. Therefore, Ramanuja gave his “qualified” view of Brahman of the Upanishads. In his writings and life, we see that he felt for the poor and downtrodden. It is clear that by the time of Ramanuja, the Vedantic knowledge may have become the prerogative of the elite. Thus, Ramanuja appears as one who simplifies the teachings and gives the multitude concrete examples for a more transparent understanding. On this historical episode, Vivekananda writes, “I do not know

¹¹S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 2, p. 448-449.

¹²S. Radhakrishnan and C. Moore, A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, p. 595.

¹³S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 3, p. 59.

why Shankara should be represented as rather exclusive; I do not find anything in his writings which is exclusive. ... This exclusiveness that has been attributed to Shankara's teachings is most possibly not due to his teachings, but to the incapacity of his disciples."¹⁴

For Ramanuja, *Brahman*, *ātman* and *jagat* (world) are different and eternal and at the same time inseparable. "Inseparability is not identity. *Brahman* is related to the other two as soul to body. ... The three together form an organic whole."¹⁵ Sri Ramakrishna, the teacher of Vivekananda, offers us the following explanation of Ramanuja's theory. "According to this theory, Brahman or the Absolute, is qualified by the universe and its living beings. These three - Brahman, the world, and living beings - together constitute One. Take the instance of a bel-fruit. A man wanted to know the weight of the fruit. He separated the shell, the flesh and the seeds. But can a man get the weight by weighing only the flesh? He must weigh flesh, shell and seeds together. At first it appears that the real thing in the fruit is the flesh, and not its seeds or shell. Then by reasoning you find that the shell, seeds, and flesh all belong to the fruit; the shell and seeds belong to the same thing that the flesh belongs to. Likewise, in spiritual discrimination one must first reason, following the method of 'not this, not this': Brahman is not the universe; Brahman is not the living beings; Brahman alone is real and all else is unreal. Then one realizes, as with the bel-fruit, that the Reality from which we derive the notion of Brahman is the very Reality that evolves the idea of living beings and the universe. The Nitya (Absolute) and the Lila (Manifestation) are the two aspects of one and the same Reality; therefore, according to Ramanuja, Brahman is qualified by the universe and the living beings. This is the theory of qualified non-dualism."¹⁶

The *dvaita* philosophy of Madhva of the 13th century builds upon Ramanuja. For Madhva, there is no interdependence between these three ideas: *Brahman*, *ātman* and *jagat*. They are simply independent and eternal. Thus, it is quite natural that a dualistic philosophy of "God and the world" emerges from such a view. From such a dualistic view, Madhva derives his philosophy and develops an elaborate theory of devotion. Indulging in abstract speculations concerning the Infinite, is not the way to reach the Infinite, according to Madhva. The whole emotional component of our psycho-physical being must become focussed on that one idea and this is the fundamental premise of *bhakti*. It can be said that all of the world's religious traditions have this basic structure and view. Commenting on *bhakti*, Vivekananda writes, "The one great advantage

¹⁴Ibid., p. 266.

¹⁵S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, p. 26.

¹⁶S. Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, pp. 733-734. The bel fruit referred to in this passage is related to the citrus and is about the size of an orange. It has a pale green, smooth, hard, woody shell. Inside the shell is a pale orange-coloured, floury pulp around numerous seeds, each seed encased in a clear, glutinous substance which is esteemed for its medicinal properties.

of Bhakti is that it is the easiest and the most natural way to reach the great divine end in view; its great disadvantage is that in its lower forms, it oftentimes degenerates into hideous fanaticism. ... All the weak and undeveloped minds in every religion or country have only one way of loving their own ideal, that is by hating every other ideal. Herein is the explanation of why the same man who is so lovingly attached to his own ideal ... becomes a howling fanatic as soon as he sees or hears anything of any other ideal. This kind of love is somewhat like the canine instinct of guarding the master's property from intrusion; only, the instinct of the dog is better than the reason of man, for the dog never mistakes its master for an enemy in whatever dress he may come before it. ... The same man who is kind, good, honest and loving to people of his own opinion, will not hesitate to do the vilest deeds when they are directed against persons beyond the pale of his own religious brotherhood."¹⁷ However, this danger, Vivekananda says, is in the early stages of *bhakti*. "When Bhakti has become ripe and has passed into that form which is called the *supreme* or *para-bhakti*, no more is there any fear of these hideous manifestations of fanaticism."¹⁸ Thus, if one is aware of this danger, *bhakti yoga* can be used to take the mind to a higher level of awareness.

It is interesting to note that all of these schools of Vedanta are based on the original Vedanta Sutras of Bādarāyana. In all cases, the Upanishadic passages are cited to substantiate their view. In every culture, we find this phenomenon, the tyranny of the printed word. Whether it is the non-dualistic view, the qualified non-dualistic view, or the dualistic view, each commentator interpreted the original sutras to suit their view. So which one is right? Can this even be answered?

After surveying the centuries of Indian philosophical thought, the 19th century philosopher Vivekananda writes, "It is foolish to attempt to prove that the whole of the Vedas is dualistic. It is equally foolish to attempt to prove [it] ... is non-dualistic. They are dualistic and non-dualistic both. We understand them better today in the light of newer ideas. These are but different conceptions leading to the final conclusion that both dualistic and monistic conceptions are necessary for the evolution of the mind."¹⁹ But there are times when the mind transcends its own limitations and perceives something that cannot be reasoned. Often this level is reached through the power of love by means of a secret and mysterious ritual, a "participation mystique." Aurobindo explains, "In reality, all experience is in its secret nature knowledge by identity; but its true character is hidden from us because we have separated ourselves from the rest of the world by exclusion, by the distinction of ourself as subject and everything else as object, and we are compelled to develop processes and organs by which we may again enter into communion with all that we have excluded. We have to

¹⁷S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 3, p. 32-33.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 281.

replace direct knowledge through conscious identity by an indirect knowledge which appears to be caused by physical contact and mental sympathy. This limitation is a fundamental creation of the ego.”²⁰

The processes that Aurobindo refers to can be described as the four yogas, as expanded and amplified by many of the contemporary thinkers such as Vivekananda, Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan. No single view can encompass the cosmos and the manifold experiences of the human psyche. It must be admitted that the mind is in evolution, and when its faculties of thinking, feeling, willing and restraining are refined, higher levels of awareness are experienced. Aurobindo amplifies this idea as follows. “None of them [these extensions of faculty], however, leads to the aim we have in view, the psychological experience of those truths that are “beyond perception by the sense but seizable by the perceptions of the reason,” *buddhigrāhyam atīndriyam* (Bhagavad Gita, 6.21). They give us only a larger field of phenomena and more effective means for the observation of phenomena. The truth of things always escapes beyond the sense. Yet is it a sound rule inherent in the very constitution of universal existence that where there are truths attainable by the reason, there must be somewhere in the organism possessed of that reason a means of arriving at or verifying them by experience. The one means we have left in our mentality is an extension of that form of knowledge by identity which gives the awareness of our own existence.”²¹

Thus, the Reality is both the One and the Many. It is both the noumenon and the phenomenon. Brahman expresses Itself in many ways and in many forms of consciousness. We may argue ad infinitum of whether it is One or the Many or neither. For the answers (if we can call them that) lie beyond the realm of reason, beyond the realm of sensory perception. Therefore, Vivekananda advises, “Books are infinite in number and time is short, therefore, the secret of knowledge is to take what is essential. ... Intellectual gymnastics are necessary at first. We must not go blindly into anything. ... [But] there are much higher things ... The whole of life is not for schoolboy fights and debating societies. ... Things of subtler planes have to be realised.”²²

The Vedanta philosophy begins with the premise that there is something deeper than what is perceived either by the senses or the mind. The way to discover this is through the mind. The “book” we must learn to read is our own mind. We must learn to manipulate its manifold abilities and faculties and refine them just as a scientist refines her deductive powers of reasoning or as an artist refines his intuitive feelings and gives them shape in his artistic creation. Life, according to Vedanta, is therefore a psychic journey and the means for this

²⁰S. Radhakrishnan and C. Moore, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, p. 580.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 581.

²²S. Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Vol. 1, p. 236 and 176.

journey is our own mind. We must become aware of our own infinite dimension not in an egotistical sense, but in a universal sense, because when the mind soars beyond the intellect and the ego, it attains oneness with the Self, the *ātman*.

Radhakrishnan writes, “Meditation is the way to self-discovery. By it we turn our mind homeward and establish contact with the creative centre. To know the truth we have to deepen ourselves and not merely widen the surface. Silence and quiet are necessary for the profound alteration of our being and they are not easy in our age. Discipline and restraint will help us to put our consciousness into relation with the Supreme. What is called *tapas* is a persistent endeavour to dwell in the divine and develop a transfigured life. It is the gathering up of all dispersed energies, the intellectual powers, the heart’s emotions, the vital desires, nay the very physical being itself, and concentrating them all on the supreme goal. The rapidity of the process depends on the intensity of the aspiration, the zeal of the mind.”²³

Thus, aspiration, the zeal to know, slowly leads to inspiration. By higher levels of awareness, no mystical experiences are indicated. It is to see and experience what we experience in daily life with an expanded view. Out of this process emerges the required evolution of mind. This is the essence of the Vedanta philosophy. It is a masterly synthesis of the philosophical writings of the centuries before reaching as far back as the Vedic period. Undoubtedly, the writing as it stands before us today, is also facing the future and will inspire the sages of the future to ponder, reflect and meditate on its profound observations.

²³S. Radhakrishnan and C. Moore, A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, p. 633.