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OMNIPOTENCE OF BRAHMAN

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Brahman is often described as the Omniscient and Omnipotent Lord (*sarvajñah sarvaśaktirīśvaraḥ*), who is the cause of birth, sustenance and dissolution of the world. There are two doubts with which a beginner's mind is beset. First of all, Brahman is according to *Vedānta*, the Absolute without any specific features, and at the same time It is said to be the 'cause' of the Universe. How is one to understand this paradoxical statement that one and the same entity is absolute as well as relative to the Universe? Secondly, how can the Absolute Brahman be *Īśvara*, the Lord, omniscient and omnipotent Ruler, when there is nothing second to It to know or to rule over?

This question has been raised and answered in the *Sūtra Bhāṣya* as follows:

Objection: since the unity of (*Brahmātman*) is absolute for one who maintains the doctrine of a changeless *Brahmātman*, there is neither a ruler nor the ruled, the proposition that *Īśvara* (the Ruler) is the cause (of the universe) becomes self-contradictory!

Reply: No, for the omniscience (of Brahman) is (only) relative to the differentiation of name and form which are the figment of ignorance" (*Brahma Sūtra Śaṅkara Bhāṣya* II.1.14).

We have already seen that the *advaitin* holds that Brahman is essentially consciousness itself, and It is said to be omniscient only in a secondary sense, because Its nature is consciousness that can throw light on all objects, and that there is nothing in ordinary life subtle, intercepted and distinct from Brahman, which is not within the range of that consciousness. We have now to see in what sense It is a Ruler and how It is omnipotent. Śaṅkara offers the following explanation of the foregoing brief citation:

Name and form, conjured up by avidyā (nescience) as if they were identical with the omniscient Īśvara (the Lord), which are undefinable as either Himself or other than Him and which are the seed of the phenomenal world of practical life, are in Śruti and Smṛti, spoken of as the Māyā, (deluding appearance), Śakti, (potency), and Prakṛti (nature) of the omniscient Īśvara. Īśvara is quite distinct from these two.

And this Īśvara (as associated with the conditioning Māyā) rules over the vijñānātman (knowing souls) called jīva, who are actually His very Self, only in the sphere of practical life... So then it is only relative to the limitation of ignorance that Īśvara (Ruler), 'omniscient' and 'omnipotent', while there is no room for such usage (of terms) as 'the relation of the ruler and the ruled', 'omniscience' etc. in the case of Ātman in transcendental state, who is of the nature divested of all conditioning associates at the dawn of Vidya (BSŚBh II.1.14).

This is only half of the story, for we are yet to learn how the impartible Brahman can be the 'material cause' of all this universe. How is the *śruti* to be reconciled to fact, when it says 'Reality becomes both (the empirical) real and unreal? (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, II.7.1) Śaṅkara himself writes:

For this reason, also Brahman is the material cause, for evolution of Brahman into the effect has been revealed in the Śruti, by treating (both Brahman and the universe) as one and the same (in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad II.3.1) which says 'Brahman became all this' (BSŚBh I.4.26).

Śaṅkara gets over this difficulty elsewhere by drawing our attention to the truth at the transcendental level.

This is no defect (in Vedānta), for a special aspect (of Brahman) conjured up by nescience is admitted (here). (To explain:) It is well known that a thing does not become really partible, merely because of a species of its aspect conjured up by ignorance. Surely, the moon does not become many, merely because of its appearing to



be many to one who is suffering from cataract? Brahman is spoken of as being subject to evolution and as something subject to such other empirical notions, only in its special aspect of differentiated and undifferentiated names and forms, undefinable as Itself or other than It (this aspect itself being) conjured up by nescience, whereas in Its own really real aspect, It is beyond all such language and continues to be without any evolution. The (so-called special) aspects conjured up by ignorance being merely a play of words, the impartibility of Brahman is (quite) unaffected. (BSSBh II.1.27).

THE FICTITIOUS DISTINCTIONS IN REALITY

Before taking up the details of the *Vedāntic* method, the reader will do well to remind himself of the distinction of the two different points of view recognized by *Vedānta* to which I have already referred in a previous article.

In first place, there is the common man's view in accordance with which the *Upaniṣads* speak of the first cause of the origin, sustentation and dissolution of the Universe; and in the second place, there is the transcendental or the real Śāstric view from which they abrogate that causality and all other specific features which they have ascribed to Brahman for purposes of teaching.

As for Brahman being the cause of the whole Universe, we have seen, that, by the term 'cause' Bādarāyaṇa as interpreted by Śaṅkara, means the substrate of appearances like the experiencing souls and objects experienced. The *Upaniṣads* make use of the empirical causal relation between the material cause and its effect such as clay and a pot etc., only as in illustration to show how the so-called effect, is really not different from its cause. The causality ascribed to Brahman is then cancelled by concluding that the universe of sentient and non-sentient things, is essentially identical with Brahman. Thus, Brahman is seen to be the only Reality that has ever existed.

The omniscience and omnipotence of Brahman as the Īśvara, the Lord of the Universe, who creates, sustains and finally dissolves into His own Self, are similarly ascribed to Brahman as a device for purpose of teaching. When the seeker has finally understood the teaching, when he has realized his own real nature as Brahman, he would be able to appreciate the negation of distinction of Īśvara and Īśitavya (the Ruler and the ruled). This has been explained by Śaṅkara in the following words:

Name and form conjured up by avidyā (nescience) as though they were identical with the omniscient Īśvara (the Ruler), which are neither identical with, nor distinct from Him and which are the seed of all the Universe, experienced by transmigratory soul, are called the Māyā, Śakti (potency) and Prakṛti (nature) of the omniscient Īśvara, in the Śrutis and Smṛtis. The omniscient Īśvara is distinct from them, for the Śruti says: "Ākāśa (the ether-like-Ātman), indeed, is well-known to be the differentiator of name and form". Thus (the Ātman) conforming to the conditioning associates of name and form, becomes Īśvara, just like ether conforming to a pot, or drinking bowl etc. And from the empirical stand-point, He rules over the Vijñānātman (selves conditioned by intellect) called Jīvas, who are verily His own self conforming to the aggregates of body and senses, made up of names and forms projected by avidyā. So, then the rulership, omniscience and omnipotence of Īśvara are only relative to conditioning associates of the nature of ignorance; but from the real point of view, no talk of the relation of the ruler and the ruled, omniscience etc., is possible in the case of Ātman, whose nature is freed from all limiting associates by enlightenment. (BSSBh II.1.14)

From this lengthy excerpt from *Sūtra Bhāṣya*, it is clear that the *Upaniṣads* alternately assume the distinction of the ruler and the ruled selves and negate that distinction according as they accommodate to the empirical view or propose to reveal the real nature of the One Ātman without second. And in order to serve this purpose of teaching, they presume the existence of the phenomenal world and say that Brahman is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world. When the enquirer has sufficiently grasped the true



nature of Brahman as distinct from this apparent world, they declare that the so-called ruler is intrinsically the Absolute Being, Consciousness and the Infinite one.

This, then, is the dialectic of the Vedāntic method of presenting the Absolute Reality – first tentatively ascribing some features which enables one to negate some other feature wrongly ascribed to It and subsequently to demonstrate that the assumed feature does not really belong to the Absolute. This process pushed to its finality, convinces the enquirer that Reality is altogether free from all conceivable specific features. A half verse quoted in the *Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* sums up the method thus:

That which is devoid of all features, is described by deliberate superimposition and subsequent negation (BhGŚBh XIII.13).