

# Advaita Vedanta -Epistemology

## Introduction

Shankara's epistemology, his followers in general accepted the point of view of the Mimamsa of Kumarila's school. Like Kumarila, they accepted six ways of knowing: perception, inference, verbal testimony, comparison, nonperception, and postulation. In general, cognitions are regarded as modifications of the inner sense in which the pure spirit is reflected or as the pure spirit limited by respective mental modifications. The truth of cognitions is regarded as intrinsic to them, and a knowable fact is accepted as true so long as it is not rejected as false. In perception a sort of identity is achieved between the form of the object and the form of the inner sense; in fact, the inner sense is said to assume the form of the object. In their theory of inference, the Nyaya five-membered syllogism is rejected in favor of a three-membered one. Furthermore, the sort of inference admitted by the Nyaya, in which the major term is universally present, is rejected because nothing save Brahman has this property according to the system.

The quintessence of Advaita philosophy is given out by Shankara in his famous line: *Brahma satyam jaganmithya jivobrahmaiva naparah* – Brahman is real, the world is unreal and the individual self is non-different from Brahman. Let us begin with the mechanism of knowing; which involves a knower (*pramata*), means of knowing (*pramana*) and object of knowledge (*prameya*) that give rise to valid knowledge (*prama*). The means of knowledge, according to Advaita, are six and they are perception (*pratyaksa*), inference (*anumana*), comparison (*upamana*), postulation (*arthapatti*), nonapprehension (*anupalabdhi*) and testimony (*shabda*). A *pramana* is defined as that which gives rise to the knowledge of an entity which is hitherto unknown or concealed by *avidya* and which is not sublated subsequently. In this sense, *shabda* alone is considered to be a *pramana* which gives rise to Brahman-knowledge and all other *pramana* deal with the material world. The other means of knowledge cannot reveal Brahman since Brahman is not an object of knowledge.

## Perception

According to Advaita, in the perception of an external object, the mind goes out through the sense organ, say the 'eyes' and reaches the place of the object, say a 'pot' and assumes the shape of the pot which modifies into the thought 'pot'. This modification is known as *vrtti*. The pervasion of *vrtti* removes the veil of ignorance (*vrttiviyapti*) and the pervasion of reflected consciousness illumines the object (*phalavyapti*), which is expressed as 'This is a pot'. The capacity of the mind to illumine an object is because of the reflection of Consciousness (Brahman) in the mind. The knowledge of experiences like happiness, sorrow etc. that occur in the mind without the

aid of sense organs is known by the 'witness consciousness.' There is a mental modification internally that is expressed as 'I am happy' etc. The knowledge of self or Brahman cannot be gained by perceptual cognition since Brahman can never be objectified. When we say, words reveal Brahman, *vrattivapyati* alone functions and not *phalavyapyati*, since Brahman is self-evident luminous being, hence the knowledge of Brahman is known as svarupajnana or knowledge of nature of self as opposed to *vrtiljnana* or empirical knowledge.

## **Inference**

Inference is the means of inferential knowledge. Inferential knowledge is produced by the knowledge of invariable concomitance (*vyapti*). The latent impression of the invariable concomitance is the intermediate operation (*vyapara*). The inferential knowledge that 'the hill has fire' arises when one sees the smoke (*hetu*) in a hill (*paksha*), which arouses the latent impression of the invariable concomitance 'where there is smoke there is fire', and by this application one gains the inferential knowledge that the hill has fire (*sadhya*). Brahman cannot be known by inference because of absence of *hetu* to determine Brahman. According to Advaita, the falsity of the world can be shown through inference by the following syllogism:

## **Scriptural Testimony**

The verbal testimony is defined as that 'sentence in which the relation among the meaning of words, that is the object of its intention, is not contradicted by any other means of valid knowledge'. According to Advaita, the purport of the scriptures is Attributless Brahman (*Nirguna Brahman*) which is known by scrutinizing the intention of scriptures based on six indicatory marks, they are, Introduction-Conclusion (*upakrama-upasamhara*), Repetition (*abhyasa*), Uniqueness (*apurvata*), Result (*phala*), Eulogy (*arthavada*) and Logical presentation (*upapatti*). A word can reveal its meaning in the primary sense and in cases where primary sense is unfitting, they are known by their secondary sense. Deriving the meaning of a word through its secondary implication is of three kinds, namely, Exclusive (*jahallakshana*), Inclusive (*ajahallakshana*) and Exclusive-Inclusive (*jahalajahallakshana*). The identity statements (*mahavakya*), according to Advaita, reveals the identity meaning by the application of exclusive-inclusive implication.

## **Knowledge and action**

Shankara repeatedly asserts that the Absolute can be realized through knowledge and knowledge alone; karma and *upāsana* are subsidiary. They may help us in urging us

to know Reality and they may prepare us for that knowledge by purifying our mind (*sattvashuddhi*), but ultimately it is knowledge alone which, by destroying ignorance, the root-cause of this world, can enable us to be one with the Absolute. The opposition of knowledge and action stands firm like a mountain. They are contradictory (*viparite*) and are poles apart. Those who talk of combining knowledge with action, says Shankara, have perhaps not read the *Brhadäranyaka* nor are they aware of the glaring contradiction repeatedly pointed out by the *Shruti* and the *Smrti*. Knowledge and action are opposed like light and darkness. Actions are prescribed for those who are still in ignorance and not for those who are enlightened. Knowledge only removes ignorance and then Reality shines forth by itself. A liberated sage, however, performs actions without any attachment and works for the uplift of humanity. Shankara's own life bears ample witness to this fact.

## Knowledge and liberation

Ultimate Reality (*päramärthikam vastu*) can neither be asserted nor denied by knowledge. Knowledge does nothing else except removing ignorance. *Shästra* only generates right knowledge (*jnäpakam*). It does nothing else (*na kâarakam*).

Knowledge of Brahman, which leads to eternal bliss, does not depend on the performance of any act, for Brahman is already an accomplished fact. Religious acts which lead to prosperity depend on human performance. Religious texts enjoin injunctions or prohibitions. Knowledge merely instructs. Knowledge of Brahman culminates in immediate experience and is already an accomplished fact. Action, whether secular or Vedic, can be done, miss-done or left undone. Injunctions, prohibitions, options, rules and exceptions depend on our thinking. But knowledge leaves no option to us for its being this or that or for its existence or non-existence. It is not in our hands to make, unmake, or change knowledge. Our thinking cannot make a pillar a man. Knowledge of Brahman,

- therefore, depends on Brahman itself. It is always of the same nature because it depends on the existent thing. True knowledge is produced by Pramānas and conforms to its objects. It can neither be produced by hundreds of injunctions nor can it be destroyed by hundreds of prohibitions. Knowledge is not mental activity, because it depends not on mind but on the existent fact. There is also no succession in knowledge. Once it dawns, it dawns forever and at once removes all ignorance and consequently all bondage. Liberation, therefore, means removal of ignorance by knowledge. That blessed person who has realized Reality is liberated here and now. The *Shruti* says: 'just as a slough cast off by a snake lies on an ant-hill, similarly does this body lie.' This is Jivanmuki. Final release (*Videhamukti*) is obtained after the death of the body. The *Shruti* says 'the

only delay for him is the death of the body'. Just as a potter's wheel goes on revolving for some time even after the push is withdrawn, similarly the body may continue to exist even after knowledge has dawned, though all attachment with the body is cut off. Like an arrow shot from the bow, the body continues to reap the fruits and it expires; but no new actions are accumulated.

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