
Epistemology of Advaita Vedanta

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Abstract: *This present research work is about Epistemology of Vedanta particularly about Advait Vedanta and how epistemology and metaphysics are interconnected. Epistemology is one of the branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, structure, types, sources, method and validity of knowledge. Every system of Indian philosophy has its own epistemology. Epistemology and metaphysics are inter-related. Metaphysics is one of the main branch of philosophy. Every Indian school has its own metaphysics. Metaphysics deals with questions regarding reality like what is reality? whether it is material or spiritual? what exists? is the world real or not? out of what substance this world is made? whether reality is one, two or many? Etc. What then is the epistemology of Vedanta? Epistemology of any school of Indian philosophy is based upon its metaphysical views regarding reality. Therefore it is important that first of all we must know the metaphysics of Vedanta specially Advait Vedanta of Sri Shankaracharya. Metaphysics tells us what exist and epistemology tells us how we can know that. In this way epistemology serves the role of instrument for knowing metaphysical realities. Metaphysics comes first then comes epistemology.*

Keywords: *Epistemology, Knowledge, Metaphysics, Reality, Vedanta, Advaita Vedanta.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Vedanta is one of the Six Orthodox schools of Indian Philosophy. Vedanta is also known as Uttar Mimamsa or Jnana Mimamsa. The subject matter of Vedanta is very philosophical in nature. There are five major schools of Vedanta in Indian Philosophy out of which this paper is related with Non-Dualistic Philosophy of Vedanta. Different Acharyas interpreted Prasthantrayi (Upanishad, Bhramasutra and Bhagwadgita) and given their views regarding Atman, Brahman and World and consequently establishes different schools of Vedanta. Shankaracharya is known as the systematic founder of Advaita or Non-dualistic school of Vedanta. This work is intended to present the Vedantic teachings from the point of view of



Advaita Vedanta of Sri Shankaracharya that is how he explains Atman, Brahman and Jagat and their inter-reaction by taking the help of Shabda Pramana or verbal testimony of various texts as well as by using his own Tarka or reasoning.

Vedanta literally means end, conclusion or highest culmination of Vedic thought. Upanishads are known as Vedanta. Vedanta is all about Jag (world/ Samsara), Jivan (life of man/ Atman) and Jagdish (God/ Brahman). We all are (specially philosophers, spiritualist or religionist) are in search of knowing the Reality that underlies the world. Philosophy is the study of Ultimate Reality. Vedanta is a kind of instrument through which we can know, see or realize Ultimate Reality.

The metaphysics of Vedanta is spiritualistic that means the nature of reality is spiritual and not material as scientists and Charvaka holds. The metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta is Non-dualistic that means there is no duality there is only one reality which is Brahman (Supreme Self) and Atman (Individual Soul) is not different from Brahman and this Jagat (World) is non-real. What actually is the function we call 'knowing'? It is simply one of the many functional modes of one Consciousness or Atma or Brahman. These functional modes are explained in Yoga philosophy as five Citta vrittis known as Pramana (Right Knowledge) Viparyaya (False Knowledge) Vikalpa (Imagination) Nidra (Sleep) and lastly Smriti (Memory). This Atma, in its turn, is the one Substance that assumes the form of everything, and this Atma alone is the theme Vedanta deals with. Vedānta is itself thus epistemology or a study of Consciousness in its broadest sense.

One questions may come in our mind that Where does any particular knowledge originate from? We have already seen that everything originates from the one cit or atman and hence the origin of any specific knowledge also has to be the same cit. There are four elements involved in any ordinary process of knowledge which includes Pramata (Subject or Knower), Prameya (Object or Known), Pramana (Instrument or Method) and Prama (Resultant Knowledge itself). Apart from these four conditions some other helping condition also needed like sufficient amount of light so that a person can know an object. In the ordinary case of sense perception Atma comes in contact with mind and mind comes in contact with sense organs and there is intercourse of sense organs with external objects.

In every event of knowing there is the coming together of two sides: the subject and object (jñata and jñeya). What are they essentially? The subject is cit become manifest in a subtle form (sākṣma-bhāna). In the case of an object, the same cit becomes manifest with a gross form (sthūla-bhāna). A question can come in our mind that how a same Atman becomes both so to understand this we can take the help of one example that a tree is an effect and a seed is its material cause but that same tree will be material cause if we take table as its effect. Metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta clearly mention that only this Atman or Brahman is existent and real. Sarvam khalvidam brahma which means all this is Brahman.

This realisation of the essential oneness of subject and object is what we usually experience as specific knowledge (viseṣa-jāna). Though really it is an event of our realising the non-dual atma or self, we remain oblivious of it, just because of avidya. Realizing the essential oneness of brahman and atman is the final goal Vedanta aims at, often referred to as Brahmatmaikyā. Ekam Evadvitīyam Brahma is one of the mahāvākya of Upanishad which means that brhman is one without a second. There is one absolute reality, without any secondary parts and no objects are believed to be truly independent. We we analyse properly



duality and multiplicity disappear. It can be best understood by few examples like cotton and cloth, ocean and weave, leaves and tree, man and his hand. The reality we are in search of, thus, is cit or consciousness. Sarvam hi saccidanandan neha na nasti kimcha na which means everything is indeed is sccidananda. Multiplicity has no existence at all here.

For the realization of this oneness Sri Shankaracarya suggested the Path of Knowledge. We can see that he gave so much importance to understand and realize the Ultimate Reality Brahman or Atman. From the empirical point of view (Vyavaharika Satta) this world exist and for practical purposes he accepted total altogether Six Pramanas of Indian philosophy namely Pratyaksha (Perception), Anumana (Inference), Shabda (Testimony), Upamana (Comparison) Arthapatti (Postulation) and Anuplabdhi (Non- Apprehension). All of them help in gaining knowledge of this world but Shabda pramana gives along with the help of Reasoning (Inference) gives us knowledge about Atman or Brahman. We should take the help, give preference and follow the sense perception in matters related to empirical world (Vyavaharika satta) and verbal or written testimony of Prasthantrayi and Self realized guru will be final authority regarding transcendental spiritual matters (Paramarthik satta). We can not ignore the value of knowledge in Vedanta philosophy because firstly the Veda is derived from 'vid' which means to know, secondly Brahmasutra is called Nyaya prasthana and nayaya means reasoning or argumentation and lastly Bhagwadgita suggest Path of Knowledge along with other ways. Together these three namely Upanishads, Brahmasutra and Bhagwadgita are called Prasthantrayi and all the five great acharyas (Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha and Nimbarka) of five different Vedanta schools expressed their views on these texts and established their separate schools.

Now, how to determine whether the knowledge we gain is right or wrong? Some valid means of knowledge, known as pramāṇas, are admitted by different schools of Indian thought. Perception (pratyakṣa), inference (anumana), comparison (upamana), presumption (arthapatti), non-apprehension (anupalabdhi), and verbal testimony (śruti, sabda or agama), are the six pramanas Vedanta recognises as valid.

The validity of all these pramaṇas is only in respect of the externally oriented knowledge. They never help you attain the self-knowledge Vedanta aims at. Knowledge about world through sense organs knowledge about transcendental realities scriptures. Being no object of any sense organ, the self is not knowable by perception. About something already perceived through sense-contact alone we can make some inference later. The self being a reality never perceived before with senses, it is not inferable either. For the same reason, upamana, arthapatti and anupalabdhi also do not help. The only indirectly helpful pramana is Sabda or verbal testimony, for it is the words of instruction the seeker hears or reads from an authority, a realised person. Such words, too, do not make the seeker enlightened straight away; he will have to ponder over them meditatively, no one knows how long, to get the hidden meanings of the words revealed. And this is possible through Shravana (Hearing the Truth), Manana (Contemplation on Truth) and Nidhidhyasan (Living and Breathing the Truth).

Vedanta emphasize the identity between atman and brahman. One who knows or realizes atman knows everything, because all this is brahman and atman is also brahman. Vedanta mentioned the brahman as the cause and source of all the world, it is that principle from which the originated. When the individual souls are merged into the ultimate reality they do not have the distinct knowledge of their identity that I am so and so. Different flower juices



loses their individuality when they mix and become honey. So individual souls like different flower juices lose their individuality when merged in universal soul.

The appearance of this world is taken as real by the ignorant, but a wise person can see God which is only real behind this illusory world. We can understand this in a better way through the sarpa rajju (snake and rope) example. In darkness we perceive rope as snake and experience fear but in reality there is only rope but when light comes we come to that we were perceiving rope as snake. In the same way rope is Brahman and snake is world and because of ignorance we perceive one Brahman as world. Appearance of snake is not possible without rope which is real in the same way existence of this world is dependent on one and only one real Brahman. Brahman is the substratum upon which the world is projected (viksepa) by concealing (avarana) of reality because of illusion producing ignorance (ajnana). Every such event is comparable to rubbing together two pieces of hard wood to produce fire for a fire-sacrifice. The rubbing results in the emanation of fire that can consume the very two pieces of wood. Likewise, the coming together of subject and object results in the shining forth of the one atma that consumes meanwhile both subject and object. We can understand this analogy with the help of another example of lighter and lamp. As we can use the lighter for lighting up the lamp but later on that fire of the lamp can burn both lighter and lamp and only fire remains at the end of the day as one reality without any duality or multiplicity. We can again take one example of utensils, water and sun to understand this in a better way. In the afternoon we put clean water in different utensils and look into them we will be seeing so many suns it is called anya but if we raise our head upward towards the sky we can directly see only one sun it is called sama.

A method of enquiry can be either externally-oriented or internally-oriented. We can call it internal & external perception. In the former case, the enquirer, the subject, looks for what is real in an object that exists externally. In the latter case, the enquirer, the subject, looks at oneself to know what one really is. The former method does not help us attain what is ultimately real, for the knowledge gained thus is always conditional and hence relative. The latter, on the other hand, is unconditional, hence absolutist, and therefore does help us attain the Real. Same kind of method is also suggested in Sufism zahiri aankhen band karna and baatini aankhen kholna meaning closing the external eyes and opening up the internal eyes for knowing the reality. For this reason, it is the method Vedanta always relies on. Because there is no external existing independent reality in this world and only Atman or Brahman is real and they are not physical or material things so we can not know it by external sense perception and therefore other five types of pramanas can not give us knowledge of atman. Reality is spiritual or conscious therefore we can realize it through internal perception. It would be better if we call it intuition and after Shravana, Manana and Nidhidhyasana steps we can realize that one reality that is not different from us.

2. CONCLUSION

The knowing function in which one perceives many realities is called anya, literally 'the other'; the knowing function in which Reality is perceived as one is called sama (the same). Vedanta accepted only one reality that is Atman or Brahman. Duality and manyness is due to Maya or Avidya. Realization of oneness and non-duality is possible through knowledge. In



Advita Vedanta school of Shankaracharya Jnana Marg (Path of Knowledge) is the only way to realize non-duality of Atman and Brahman. The ignorance of man can be removed by knowledge of Brahman or Atman. The path of knowledge (Jnana marga) consists in listening (Shravana), reflection (Manana), and meditation (Nidhidhyasana) on the part of Brahman seeker. Right knowledge means ability to perceive body and self as separate entities and the Brahman (Supreme Self) as the Individual self (Atman) within us. When the identity of Atman and Brahman realizes then duality and multiplicity ceases and liberation (Moksha) is possible. The Brahman knower becomes Brahman. Apparently, all worldly knowledge, all the externally-oriented objective knowledge, is of the former kind, Vyavaharika jnana or anya and the internally-oriented knowledge in which knowledge knows itself is of the latter kind Paramarthik jnana or sama.

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