On Exploration of Subjectivity in Advaita Vedanta

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Given that consciousness studies is in the forefront today and drawing the attention of contemporary philosophers, scientists and theologians alike, it is fruitful to recall that attempts to explore the theme of subjectivity know of a long history in the Upanisadic tradition. The intense preoccupation with the question of self (ātman) has earned the Upanisadic tradition the designation of *Ātmavāda*. In fact, all the main schools of philosophy belonging to the Upanisadic tradition have enquired into various aspects of this large theme; consequently a wide range of views emerged which have been historically held by various schools. Any investigator today who is concerned with this exigent philosophical topic will find the Vedantic literature in particular to be an immensely rich repository of ideas. The ancient and the classical Indian philosophers, as documents show, offered not only metaphysical, epistemological arguments in favour of their respective readings; but they insisted on the testimony of the linguistic usage as well. The records of these views along with their implications merit a close examination, especially by those who are making fresh attempts at theorizing about this intricate topic.

While dealing with the question of subjectivity, as is to be expected, the advocates of the diverse schools belonging to the Upanisadic tradition showed a remarkable philosophical engagement in exploring the theme of I-consciousness, which is an indubitable starting point for this intellectual adventure. Consequently, interesting polemical discussions ensued. It is noteworthy, in this connection, that the question regarding how to interpret I-consciousness and what that discloses about the nature of self is duly recognized to be a matter of capital importance also for Vedantic soteriology. The philosophical pursuit with regard to this network of ideas is indeed seen within the traditional frame of thinking to be indispensable as well for the enquiry into the ultimate reality (Brahma-jijñāsā).

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When one takes into consideration the larger context of Indian thought, one finds that not only the philosophers belonging to the Upanisadic but also to the Jaina and the Buddhist traditions interacted with each other with regard to these central issues. The challenge that seems to have remained intact all along for the theoreticians of rival camps consists in providing a consistent account of I-consciousness as a part of the exploration of subjectivity, leading to a bold affirmation or a firm denial of the idea of an abiding self. The records of this enormous expository as well as the polemical literature not only amply bear witness to the battle of ideas in which the Upanisadic, the Buddhist and the Jaina philosophers have engaged over the centuries, but also to the fact that these controversies have relelvance even today in the context of contemporary discussions on what the problem of consciousness is all about. Indeed, a comprehensive analysis of the readings obtained from the Indian sources is in itself a challenging project.[1] One could even say that it is a demanding task simply to obtain an over-view of the Vedantic discourse on this vast subject, by retracing accurately the steps that led to the subtle philosophical differences among the various schools of Vedanta—Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita and others.

It is pertinent to perceive that although "no one doubts whether I am or not, nor does anyone maintain the contrary of I am",[2] the exploration of subjectivity opens up a series of significant issues for debates. Among the Vedantins, vital questions like whether the 'I' is an irreducible metaphysical entity or not, how this 'I' is presented to consciousness and to whom, whether this involves the so-called problem of ego-split—the subject-ego (Jñātă-aham) and the object-ego (jñeya-aham)—what the word 'I' refers to, etc., have been topics for lengthy debates. Apart from these, there are other intricate topics for discussions such as the question whether ultimately consciousness is intentional or non-intentional in character.

Given that there is a colossal amount of material available from the Vedantic discourse, I will discuss in this paper only a few basic ideas from the classical Advaita Vedanta tradition and focus mainly on the analysis made by K. C. Bhattacharya, a remarkable Advaitic thinker of the twentieth century. In this process, my intention is to share a view that the philosophical stand of Advaita Vedanta cannot really be construed as

1. Cf. my monograph on this subject, to appear.

2. Extracted from Vacaspati Misra's comment on the Brahma-Sutra.

what the phenomenologists would describe as a specimen of a metaphysics from the 'natural standpoint'. It seems to me that a profound and a novel understanding regarding consciousness emerges in the renditions offered by the Advaitins where one encounters, as it were, a map of an intricate journey beginning from the claim that 'all living beings have I-sense' to the moment of the culminating salvatory experience, expressed in the great saying (mahāvākya) of the Upanisads: 'I am Brahman' (aham brahmāsmi).

Indeed, in the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta consciousness is gradually disclosed to be the absolute ground, whereas the world, and along with it all that is worldly, including the ego, is imposed (adhyastha), is false (mithyā). A phenomenological approach to the philosophical view projected in Advaita Vedanta needs to emphasize that 'mithyātva' (falsity) is a technical term which when used in the Advaita description of the object or the objective is not to be taken as an evaluation or as a judgement using the criterion of the 'natural attitude'. Similarly, although the word 'sat' (being) is used in connection with 'cit' (consciousness), the Advaita position must not be confused with any form of metaphysic of consciousness in any naïve sense, but should be understood in light of the fundamental Advaitic philosophical motivation seeking, in the long run, to lay bare the foundational consciousness as non-dual.

These ideas, it seems to me, are to be grasped in a philosophical terrain dealing with transcendental problems. Unlike in other systems, we find in the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta a metaphysics of consciousness which has abandoned, so to speak, the 'natural attitude'. Neither can Advaita philosophy of consciousness, notwithstanding its difference from the transcendental constitutive phenomenology à la Husserl, be classified as a species of descriptive psychology.[3] Indeed, Advaita Vedanta abandons, not unlike transcendental phenomenology, the traditional conception of consciousness in the specific sense that the absolute character of consciousness is disclosed not in relation to mundane realities of which the empirical ego is an example. This is also why the Advaita attitude, like the phenomenological, may be said to stand in contrast to all the natural attitudes presupposed by traditional

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3. Given that consciousness is a common subject-matter for both psychology and phenomenology, Gurwitsch—in his *Phenomenolgy and Theory of Science*, ed. L. Embree, Northwestern University Press, 1974, pp. 206—observed that in psychology, consciousness is accepted as one reality among others and is studied in its dependence on extra-conscious data.

ontologies. This mode of philosophization which leads to the recovery of Being-Concsiousness-Bliss (sadcidānanda) has of course crucial bearing on Advaita philosophy as well as soteriology.

Prior to presenting a brief recapitulation of K.C. Bhattacharya's analysis, it may be noted that the Upanisadic philosophers in general were keenly aware of the fact that the manner in which the meaning of the word 'I' is discerned in each case has important implications for the philosophical establishment of the Ātman or the self. Although the idea of an immutable self has decisive import for Vedantic soteriology, as has been observed earlier, it is important to take note of the essential steps that these philosophers take in order to legitimize Ātmavāda purely in cognitive terms. It is noteworthy that Ātmavāda is not sought to be established only by means of Sruti or the revealed scripture.[4] Indeed, a survey of the relevant discussions lay bare to the critical gaze the many aspects of this complex theme and how in the process the metaphysical, the phenomenological and the lingusitic concerns are eventually knitted together. While dealing with the core of Advaitic thinking on the topic of subjectivity, one notices its radical difference from the views proposed by the advocates of the Dvaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita Schools of Vedanta. The latter schools consider the 'I' as a metaphysical entity and conceive of the relation between the I and the flow of consciousness quite differently from what one finds in the expositions of the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. It is to be noted that the I is not posited as a metaphysical entity by the Advaitins. The notion of Adhyāsa[5] comes to play a crucial role in the Advaita account of the various levels of subjectivity. A detailed rendering of such an analysis can be found in the works of Madhusudana Saraswati—a notable Advaitin philosopher.[6] He

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4. Recall the debates between the Vaiśeṣika philosophers and the Cārvāka naturalists to whom revelation was not acceptable as a valid source of cognition. The Vaiśeṣika philosophers argued that apart from being supported by the Śruti, the idea of self is established also by the linguistic usage of the word 'I' (ahamitiśabdasya vyatirekānnāgamikam) and then delved into critical discussions regarding what constitutes the primary (mukhya) and secondary (gauṇa) meaning of the first person in singular number (asmat-śabda), as well as about what such usages disclose about the self (ātman).

5. Adhyāsa is a key technical term in the Advaita discourse, which is generally translated as 'superimposition'. However, this can hardly be said to be adequate and so I leave it untranslated.

6. Cf. *Advaitasiddhi* and *Siddhantabindu* (any edition).

gives a startling description of an empty principle of I-sense (ahamkāra), as a pre-condition for the possibility of mundane experience. This principle, conceived as *a priori*, is never encountered in its primordial simplicity in our empirical experience.The awareness of 'I' is always mixed up with other predicates and attributes. In his analysis, carried out with the help of the key notion of 'adhyāsa', Madhusudana elaborates the entire process of constitution of the psychological, the corporeal and the social dimensions of subjectivity. Finally, one is led to the disclosure that even the primordial 'adhyāsa' of 'ahamkāra' is a product, its constitution presupposes 'consciousness tinged with nescience' (ajñāna). A deeper appreciation of the Advaitic analysis calls for a more detailed acquaintance with these complex ideas and especially a technical understanding of the different forms of adhyasa which cannot be attempted here.

Let us now turn to the remarkable analysis made by K.C. Bhattacharya[7] in his essays entitled "The Subject as Freedom", "The Concept of Philosophy", and "The False and the Subjective".[8] These essays, among others, reflect his profound interest in the exploration of the structure of I-consciousness and show his skill in analysing the peculiarities of the word 'I'. Keenly aware of the objections that the adversaries of Advaita Vedanta had raised, Bhattacharya attempted a novel analysis of the word 'I' that gradually discloses some atypical features of the phenomenon of I-consciousness and in the process brings out the profound significance of the Advaitic idea of the 'self as the self of all' [Ātmā hi sarvasya ātmā].

The advocates of Advaita Vedanta hold unanimously the idea of the ontological reality of the non-dual Ātman—a position that they had to defend against their adversaries. The Advaitins are keenly sensitive to the various issues connected with the theme of subjectivity, especially since they had to demonstrate that the notion of plurality of selves along with the common-sense view that the I-sense is identical with the self (ātman) are eventually

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7. Professor K.C. Bhattacharya (1875–1949) was a convinced Advaitin of the twentieth century. His philosophical writings—in English—are considerable. Well-versed in the subtle technicalities of the expository and polemical moves that are elaborated in the Indian philosophical literature both for and against Advaitic thinking, he embarked on the arduous project of exploring subjectivity. In his writings, one comes across original thinking supporting the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta as well as a brilliant recapitulation of some of the familiar conceptual strategies adopted by his predecessors in the Sanskritic literature belonging to the Advaitic tradition.

8. See K.C. Bhattacharya, *Studies in Philosophy*, New Delhi, 1983.

'false' (Mithyā)/ illusory (Māyic)—technical notions that play a crucial role in the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. The analysis of the experience of falsity is especially pertinent for understanding subjectivity in various ways. Bhattacharya in his essay "The False and the Subjective" takes this question up and shows how intimately the consciousness of the false and that of the subjective are related. To be conscious of falsity, he maintains, implies that the content is speakable as a belief which is disbelieved. The consciousness of the false is a consciousness of the past belief which at present stands refuted. Even if a belief is reaffirmed, to be conscious of a belief involves a distinction between content and its intentional reference (fact). While reflecting on Bhattacharya's insights into the question of falsity and illusion, T.R.V. Murti in his paper entitled 'Illusion as Confusion of Subjective Functions' further elaborates the ideas. He argues against the realist's view that illusion could be explained in objective terms (without reference to the subjective). Murti maintains that "the transition from illusion to cancellation is not an objective change, a becoming in nature: it is something subjective". Moreover, he goes on to show that the implication of the essential 'reflective' nature of the cancelling consciousness is not that it is just another 'unitary subjective state' as the illusion is. The cancelling consciousness does not derive its 'corrective force' from the fact of being merely temporally posterior to the illusion, since cancellation "is disbelief or withdrawal of belief and not a new belief". These ideas, which he works out, constitute indeed an interesting attempt to elaborate on Bhattacharya's interpretations regarding the implications of illusion.

In brief, what is argued is that the awareness of subjectivity is implied in the awareness of falsity, when the content of consciousness is discerned as a belief as opposed to fact. The awareness of Subjectivity is then as 'other than the meaning-awareness'. In other words, it is different from consciousness of an object—"the object is what is meant". His account of the word 'I', as will be seen shortly, is very closely connected with the question as to how a speaker communicates to the hearer her own subjectivity by expressing herself as 'I'. This term, he says, has "a uniquely singular reference; but as understood, it is general in the sense the term unique is general".[9]

In order to get a quick look at the over-all analysis offered by Bhattacharya, it may be said that to the question whether the word 'I' has

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9. *Studies in Philosophy*, vol. II, ch. 1, para 4.

a 'meaning', his reply is in the negative. Note that Bhattacharya uses the idea of 'meaning' in a technical sense, which can be elaborated as follows. Speakability, according to him, is a large concept, and the speakable may or may not have a meaning. Granted that the speaker refers to herself as 'I' and to the object as 'this', both the subject and the object are to be regarded as speakable. However, the question of meaning is a different issue. By 'meaning' (translated from the Sanskrit word 'Artha'), what is meant is an episode in which the auditor and the speaker can utter the same word and thereby intend the same meaning i.e. refer to the same object. When, however, this is not the case the speakable cannot be said to have a meaning, although it may still be significantly speakable. Note that this picture of how the theoretic consciousness is functioning is vital for Bhattacharya's analysis of the word 'I' and eventually for his readings with regard to the phenomenon of I-consciousness.

In his deservingly famous essay entitled, "The Subject as Freedom", he analyses in details the peculiar features of the word 'I' by distinguishing it from the word 'this' and points out in the process its implications for making a careful distinction between the subject and the object. He writes: "The object is what is meant" (p. 19). In accordance with what has been observed earlier, the object is to be understood as that which can be designated/ referred to by a word, which can be employed by the hearer to convey exactly the same as intended by the speaker who utters it. For Bhattacharya the word 'this' stands 'as the symbol of the object or what is meant', since the word 'this' can be used by the hearer to mean the same object as it is intended by the speaker, even though it can be used to mean something else as well. The point to note here is that the word 'this' represents all those words where one can discern an identity of the general meaning, an applicability to the same thing. Bhattacharya develops the notion of subjectivity step by step by dissociating the awareness of the subject from that of the object as meant. He claims that there is no such similar 'meaning-awareness' in the case of the subject as expressed in the word 'I' as opposed to the word 'this'.

To use his own words: "The word 'I' as used by a speaker is not understood by the hearer to convey what he would himself convey by the use of it." If he uses the word, he would intend himself and not the speaker. In other words, the hearer understands the word 'I' in a manner which is not the same as he would in the case of the word 'this', which is through the meaning of the word. The word 'I', then, cannot be said to have a meaning

since it is evident that the word 'I' can never be used by the speaker and the hearer to intend the same which in the case of 'this' is possible. He brings out succinctly the peculiarity of the word 'I' by observing: "The 'I' is not unmeanable nor is it meant—meant even as unmeanable. It is not unmeanable in the sense that it presents no problem in meaning at all. . ." (p. 83).

Bhattacharya further points out that the word 'I' cannot be said to have a singular or a general reference. He elaborates the point as follows: "The term is, in fact, not singular in the sense that different people use it of the same thing and not general in the sense that it is understood by any of the different things at a time" (p. 83). It is equally interesting to note that the word 'I' is understood by the hearer even though no two persons use the word to refer to the same thing. The speaker is using the word to refer to herself, the hearer understands what is intended not because the word has a meaning but because it has, to use Bhattacharya's own vocabulary, 'a meaning-function', which in tune with the Advaitic trend he calls the 'I-function'. This 'meaning-function' of the word 'I' is a specific use of language which expresses the speaker in her "actual introspection but the understanding of the word by the hearer is indicative of a form of consciousness subtler than introspection". In other words the hearer understands the word 'I' uttered by the speaker not because the word has a singular reference. The hearer would use the same word if he were to refer it to himself. The point to note is that the function of the word is not the same for the speaker as it is for the hearer. This is what Bhattacharya describes as if it were the self-consciousness of the speaker that 'incarnates' in that word. The word, he insists, cannot be taken as merely having a symbolising function—"The word 'I' is at once the symbol and the symbolised", although as symbol it is "better known than what is symbolised by it" (p. 85).

This brings us to an important perception that speaking is essentially a social matter; even introspection can also be said to be 'implicitly social'. Bhattacharya insists that it is not through the meaning of the word that the speaker understands her self-consciousness: "The word only reveals it to another"—that is, it is a self-evidencing in a social context. In other words, the possibility of being intuited by the other self is open for the self-evidencing self who uses the word 'I'. Again, while expressing herself through the word 'I' and communicating to another self, the speaker is also aware of herself as a distinct self.

This remarkable analysis of the words 'I' and 'this' bring out other interesting features that distinguish the object-awareness from the subject-awareness. What is communicated in the case of 'this' is the object and not the communicating itself, whereas in the case of 'I' it is not the meaning that is communicated but it is the speaker as speaking, communicating. The self-consciousness of the speaker, as it were, to put it in Bhattacharya's words, is not merely "expressed but incarnated in the word 'I'."

It is not possible to go into the details of this exceedingly interesting study here. It is indeed with great ingenuity that Bhattacharya discloses before the reader how subjectivity at every step is "felt to be free or dissociated from the object" (p. 91). In another context, which forms the major part of his phenomenological analysis, he performs the same task by demonstrating how grades of subjectivity implies grades of objectivity, finally coming to the threshhold of what the Advaitins have described as the absolute and foundational character of the Ātman. He points out that the object can be conceived to be

> . . . illusory as the denial of reality is intelligible about what is meant, the negation of the meant being also actually or problematically meant. The unreality of the subject, however, as intended but not meant by the word I is meaningless. It is not only inconceivable like the opposite of an axiom; it is not even tried to be conceived. . . The word I expresses an unique and unanalysable content. . . (p. 92).

These perceptions about the word 'I' as contrasted with the word 'this' and of grades of subjectivity as opposed to the grades of objectivity lead Bhattacharya to observe that the so-called debates in metaphysics concerning the subject are all indicative of a notion of subject "viewed in some sense as object". He even goes on to make the bold assertion that "there is properly no metaphysic of the subject, if by metaphysics is understood an enquiry into the reality conceivable as meanable" (p. 93).

Now the question may be raised that if the knowable is meant, and if the subject, as Bhattacharya insists, must be treated as unmeanable, in what sense then is a philosophical enquiry into the subject possible? The idea of speakability, again, needs to be closely looked into, since "the subject is communicable by speech." The awareness of the subject prior to its expression in speech through the word 'I' is, Bhattacharya says, "somewhere midway between a mystic intuition and the consciousness of a meaning, being the believing content of a speakable content. . ." The peculiarity of

the spoken word is such that its negation cannot be said to be a meaning. To the extent, however, "that the subject is communicable by speech" it is to be considered as a legitimate theme for a philosophical discourse.

The charge that Bhattacharya's language is terse, sometimes difficult to penetrate, perhaps is not untrue; however, once one gets into his conceptual world, the clarity and depth of his thinking becomes evident. What must be noted is the remarkable skill with which Bhattacharya discloses before the reader how subjectivity at every step "felt to be free or dissociated from the object" (p. 91). Here the awareness of the subject always remains as that which cannot be meant.

Bhattacharya has carefully demonstrated how awareness of the body and awareness of others are all what can be described as object-awareness from which the subject-awareness is to be dissociated. An important idea in this connection is that in his investigation Bhattacharya unfolds the notion of subjectivity at various levels. He writes:

> The grades of subjectivity implies grades of objectivity, the terms being conceived in a relative sense. To spiritual subjectivity, the psychic is objective and so to psychic subjectivity, the bodily and to bodily subjectivity the extra-organic is objective.

In other words, the transcendental psychology that Bhattacharya seeks to reconstruct—to put it in his own words, "conceiving in general after Vedanta as conscious freedom or felt detachment from the object"—is an amazing phenomenological disclosure of what the Advaitins claim to be the absolute and foundational character of the Ātman.

Let me conclude this essay by observing that K.C. Bhattacharya's treatment of I-consciousness based on a careful analysis of the word 'I' and a phenomenlogical description of the different grades of subjectivity gradually disclosing its freedom bears a stamp of authenticity, philosophical rigour and depth which is hard to match. Bhattacharya is conscious of his project as being modelled after Vedanta, seen 'as a substitute of metaphysics'. I have also earlier suggested[10] that Advaita Vedanta cannot be classified as a specimen of descriptive psychology, nor can it be treated as what is

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10. Cf. my paper entitled "Analysis of I-consciousness in the Transcendental Phenomenology and Indian Philosophy", in *Phenomenology and Indian Philosophy*, edited by D.P. Chattopadhyaya, et al., New Delhi, 1992, pp. 133–140.

called 'metaphysics of the natural standpoint' by the phenomenologists. The Advaitic insistence on the idea of consciousness as the absolute ground and that of the world—thereby including the Ahamkāra as Adhyasta—is to be appreciated in the context of a discourse that exemplifies a definite departure from all traditional ontologies. Mithyātva or falsity in the context of Advaita is a notion that needs to be radically distinguished from the idea of falsity from the natural standpoint. Ahamkāra or the I-principle is considered to be the very first of all that is technically classified as 'Kāryadhyāsa'. Mokṣa or Freedom involves an annulment, so to speak, of the I-principle as well.

One has to follow him closely to grasp what he implies when he says that one is never introspectively aware of one's individuality in the similiar vain as one is in the process of succesively freeing oneself "as body from perceived object, as presentation from the body, as feeling from presentation and as introspective function from feeling. . . " (p. 171).

The concluding lines of his essay "The Subject as Freedom", containing keen and subtle observations, are truly striking. These are as follows:

> "I am not introspectively aware of my actual introspective individuality but I am aware in my introspection into feeling that the self from which the feeling is distinguished may not actually introspect and may not even possibly introspect, that individual as it is as introspecting. . . it may be free even from this distinctness, may be freedom itself that is de-individualised but not therefore indefinite—absolute freedom that is to be evident. . ."

In line with other great Advaitins, Bhattacharya strove to uncover that experiential datum, "where all words come to a standstill, which is unattainable by the mind"—as eloquently expressed in the Upanisads. Thus, it may be observed that K.C. Bhattacharya served the cause of Advaita Vedanta by keeping alive an intellectual tradition that steadily focuses on the philosophical relevance and intelligibility of encountering the self (Ātmasākṣātkāra) through a negation of the idea that the 'I' is ultimate and as independent of speaking.

In brief, what we have noted so far is a phenomenological investigation that has eventually a strong soteriological dimension to it. The significance of the postulation that the awareness of the subject is "other than the meaning awareness" has been ably demonstrated by Bhattacharya to be so. This re-affirms that the Advaita analysis is a radical departure from other traditional systems in its understanding of the foundational and absolute

character of consciousness. In the long run, the investigation into the question of subjectivity, although closely tied to the first person perspective, points to an experiential reality which, to employ Bhattacharya's term, gets 'de-individualized'. In other words, a negation of plurality of selves is implied. Cognitively, it is not possible to further uncover the Upanisadic claim—that the 'self is the self of all'. The function of discursive knowledge is at best to lay bare the structure of consciousness within the domain of duality where language is operative; the phenomenological investigation pushes the boundary and unravels the experiential reality. Here, "all words come to a stand-still."