

THE NOTION OF «I» IN THE DIFFERENT SCHOOLS  
OF VEDĀNTA: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL

A vast literature has steadily accumulated and is still growing on the theme of I-consciousness. It is a fascinating task to take note of the historical perspectives of the diverse views on this subject in an intercultural context. This demands, however, a full awareness of the contributions of Indian thought just as much as a careful survey of views on the I-consciousness in Western thought taking into account the ideas which have emerged in the recent past and those that are still emerging. That this issue has remained a major challenge to the contemporary mind becomes evident as one considers the phenomenological investigation, linguistic analysis and various psychoanalytical approaches to this question.

It is precisely this contemporary context that makes it relevant and significant to undertake a reassessment of the intellectual labour that has given rise to a remarkable variety of views on I-consciousness in Indian thought. A study of this material shows that its importance lies not merely in its antiquity but in the essential philosophical challenge that it can offer to a thinking mind. The depth and variation in the treatment of this issue in Indian thought becomes evident not only by comparing the major traditions as contrasting sources of philosophico-religious ideas but also by observing the views that developed within the fold of a single tradition. As a classical example within the framework of Brāhmanism, one could point to the great Vedāntic tradition. The subject matter of the present paper is precisely to focus on the

subtle differences in the analysis of the phenomenon of I-consciousness as found in the representative literature of some of the major schools of the Vedāntic tradition. These philosophical differences which stimulated controversies spanning centuries, reveal that I-consciousness is a key question for all Vedānta. The distinct and clear formulation of a view on the nature of I-consciousness is an integral part of the declared fundamental tenet (*mukhya-siddhānta*) of a Vedāntic school, be it Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita or Dvaita.

Prior to making direct references to these diverse positions, a few general observations may be made. The disputes concerning the question of I-consciousness, which is the primary focus of this paper, are to be appraised in a Vedāntic context where all the contending parties accept the ontological reality of the Ātman or the self and that Ātma-Vidyā or knowledge of the self alone can confer Mukti or salvation. The inevitable inquiry concerning I-consciousness thus becomes equally a soteriological demand.

Is the I a simple homogenous entity or is it essentially composite in character?

Is the I identical with the 'true' self, the Ātman or is it to be taken as merely empirical, metaphysically the not-self, being external (*bāhya*) to consciousness? A Vedāntic scheme therefore requires an unambivalent statement about the nature of I-consciousness, a phenomenon which no one doubts or denies. The Vedāntic tradition spared no effort towards a rigorous interpretation which could adequately account for this unique experience, accessible to and testified by all (*sarvānubhavasiddha*).

The issue of I-consciousness, like most philosophical problems, may be said to have three different aspect- the metaphysical, the epistemological and the linguistic. Vigorous controversies with regard to each of these aspects are documented in the philosophical literature of this great tradition. Omitting details, these three basic aspects of the problem can be described thus:

The metaphysical problem concerns the nature of personal identity self as identical, abiding entity enduring amidst changing physical and mental states, whether self and ego are to be distinguished.

The epistemological problem is the problem of self-

knowledge, ascription of various predicates to oneself.

The linguistic problem concerns the nature of the identical 'I', its meaning and reference.

Now to get directly into the conceptual systems of Vedānta, it may be noted that the metaphysical conviction concerning the Jiva which predominates the Dvaita and the Viśiṣṭādvaita schools in contrast to that of Advaita Vedānta has direct bearing on this idea that the I or aham is identified as the identical, abiding Ātman or the self. This does not, however, imply that their respective views about the Ātman are identical in all respects. The details of the Dvaita and the Viśiṣṭādvaita arguments will bring out why the philosophical demand for an explanation of I-consciousness leads to the positing of the I or aham as a metaphysical entity of primary importance. Their epistemological and linguistic analysis equally can be seen as lending support to this contention.

As opposed to this the school of Advaita Vedānta puts forward a set of ideas which shocks its opponents. An amazing shift of perspective is seen in the Advaita treatment of the issue. Radically different from the common sense view and the other Vedāntic theories as well, I-consciousness is here explained not with reference to any metaphysical entity called 'I' or *aham*, nor is the apprehended I identified as the self or Ātman. With the key concept of *adhyāsa* or superimposition, Advaita Vedānta develops a complex theory which carefully unravels the constitution of I-consciousness and in the process demonstrates that no ontological reality is to be ascribed to the 'I' a such.

This position that I-consciousness is due to '*ajñānaviśista-caitanye ahamkāradhyāsa*', to be elaborated shortly, is worked out in many Advaita texts. But special mention may be made of such works as Advaita-siddhi and Siddhāntabindu by Madhusudana Sarasvatī for the philosophical ingenuity with which the author attempts to validate this claim by answering the opponents.

The Advaita Vedānta school, as any one familiar with the literature knows, makes much use of the notion of superimposition or *adhyāsa*, conceived in terms of the ground or *adhiṣṭhāna* and the superimposed or *āropya*, as in the classical example where the illusory snake is analysed as a superimposition on the real rope. This idea is applied not only in the case of illusion in the domain of

the objective but also in that of the subjective as well. In other words, the pertinent point that Advaita seeks to make is that *aham-kāra* or the ego-principle is mistakenly assumed to be the Ātman or the self. The I-sense or *aham-bodha*, generated in and through the superimposition of a *jada* or non-conscious principle of *aham-kāra* on consciousness or *caitanya*. This is pointed out to be the primary of a series of other superimpositions which are to follow. All of these technically fall under a category called *Kāryādhyāsa* (*Kārya* i.e. effect). This category of superimposition as the name indicates, presupposes a more fundamental one where prior to the superimposition of the ego-principle, pure consciousness is conceived as tinged with spiritual ignorance (*ajñānaviśiṣṭacaitanya*), technically called *kāraṇādhyāsa*. This is the beginning-less (*anādi*) superimposition having a causal character, of which everything else is only a consequence.

It may be noted that among the most important differences that led to sharp controversies between the Advaita and other schools of Vedānta was the Advaita idea that I-consciousness is there not because of the presence of an 'I' as a metaphysical entity but that it is due to an *adhyāsa* or superimposition, a notion which is severely challenged by its opponents.

The most impressive examples of criticisms of the Advaita interpretation from the Dvaita standpoint is Vyāsātirtha's *Nyāyamṛta*. He insists that I-consciousness is not due to any superimposition and that the apprehended I cannot be reduced to the not-self by any means. The position that is taken here emphasizes that the 'I' is ever-abiding and never absent in mundane life as in the state of salvation. This is argued out with a logical skill while attempts are also made to point out the fallacies of the Advaita position.

Madhusadana Sarasvatī, on the other hand, made an all out effort to demonstrate that the I has the status of not-self (*ahamārtha-anātmatva-upapatti*, a section of Advaita-siddhi) and to answer the objections raised by the opponents of the Advaita Vedānta.

The Viśiṣṭādvaita school equally launched an attack on the Advaita interpretation of I-consciousness. This they did by pointing out that the notion of pure consciousness without a substrate i.e. the self is as unacceptable as the idea of consciousness which is not intentional i.e. which does not have an object.

Rāmānujācārya devotes considerable thought to this question in his commentary on the Brahma-sūtra. The knowledge-situation is analyzed with such simple examples as 'I know the jar' which demonstrates that consciousness relates itself to an object and is itself an attribute of an agent (*kartā*), here referred to as 'I'. He opposes the Advaita contention that the I is reducible to the status of not-self, or is external to consciousness. He maintains that the 'I' is never experienced to be so i.e. as an external entity (*bāhya padārtha*). On the contrary the very distinction between external and internal rests upon the inwardness (*pratyaktva*), a quality inseparably associated with I-consciousness alone. The 'I' is the self (*pratyagātmā*). He ridicules the Advaita effort to grant to the 'I' the status of the not-I, being comparable to the statement 'my mother is barren'.

The analysis of I-consciousness in the different schools of Vedānta becomes intensely interesting when it comes to the philosophical scrutiny of the state of deep sleep (*susupti*). The issue of identity of I with the self, (*aham* with *ātman*) is once again examined with regard to the state of deep sleep. Serious controversies arise centering the question whether the I-consciousness which prevails in the state of waking and dreaming can also be said to do so in the state of deep (i.e. dreamless) sleep.

The Dvaitins and the Viśiṣṭādvaitins maintain that in all the three states, waking, dreaming and sleeping, the I is invariably present. It pervades through all our experience as the permanent substratum, giving it unity. I is the self and does not need anything outside of itself for being self-luminous. It is not other to consciousness (*jaḍa*). I, the knower, is the self (*jñātā-ahamārtha evātmā*).

If consciousness did not have a substrate in the form of I, they argue, there would have been such a cognition as 'I am consciousness' (*anubhūtiraham*), which none of us have.

For Advaita however the state of deep sleep is conspicuous, where no I-consciousness can be traced. This shows, Advaita Vedānta emphasizes, that the I-sense is eliminable and cannot be identified with the Ātman, which is unsublatable in all three times; past, present or future (*trikālābādhya*). In other words, for Advaita, the state of deep sleep points out that the self transcends the I-

consciousness and reveals the latter as 'other' than the self (*atmā-nyah*).

In the soteriological context the controversies centering I-consciousness plays an important role. While all agree that for emancipation from bondage knowledge of the self is indispensable, the quest for self has yielded very different results. For the Advaitin, it is not only the body, the sense-organs, the mind are labelled as the not-self (*anātman*) so is the 'I' which is carefully disclosed as a superimposition.

To the Dvaita and the Viśiṣṭādvaita schools, on the contrary, the ultimate irreducible I is very much a soteriological demand. The absurdity of the loss of I in the salvatory scheme is emphasized. The cancellation of I to them is equivalent to the annihilation of the self. The 'I' is never interpreted by the opponents of the Advaita Vedānta as something which is constituted, as a result of superimposition or otherwise, or as that which dissolves so to speak in the state of deep sleep or salvation.

From all these considerations it is not difficult to state the linguistic problem concerning the word 'I'. It is clear that although everyone uses the word, there are serious differences regarding the meaning and the reference of the word. The Vedantins are fully aware of the problem as it appears in the framework of philosophy of language. The disputes over the appraisal of the word I amongst the Dvaitins, the Viśiṣṭādvaitins and the Advaitins are indeed illuminating and show their keen concern for a pertinent linguistic analysis. To put it briefly, here too they remain loyal to their original philosophical intuitions and attempt is made to explain the linguistic usage in consistency with these. The Advaitins do not accept, for instance, their opponents' contention that the term 'I' or *aham* has for its referent the self or *ātman* as such. But when it does as in *mahāvākya* 'I am Brahman', it is done only through *lakṣaṇa* as would also be the case when the word I refers only to the body or *deha* e.g. I am thin etc. The reference of the word I as such then is the *cid-acid-granthi*, the composite entity demonstrating an interplay of the conscious and the non-conscious, the apprehended I has dual component (*dvi-aṁsa*).

Leaving aside all other details, mention must be made of the careful analysis of the word 'I' by K.C. Bhattacharya in his work

'The Subject as Freedom'. Following the Advaitic tradition very closely, he shows in a unique manner that the word I stands apart from all other expressions. He points out that "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." The word 'I' is then different from the word 'this', which is also an indexical. Only a detailed study can do justice to such a complex theme.

In conclusion, however, it must be remembered that the Vedāntic involvement with the issue of I-consciousness on metaphysical, epistemological and linguistic levels, never loses sight of the fact that all these are integral to the spiritual knowledge (*adhyātma vidyā*) which is its final goal. The profound zeal with which the Vedāntic tradition seeks to disclose the nature of I-consciousness is due to the fact that no other issue is so close to what Vedānta considers to be the highest knowledge. To all Vedānta, without any exception, knowledge of the self is the highest knowledge.

*Atma-vidyā hi parā-vidyā.*

#### REFERENCES

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