Advaita Vedanta and Immanuel Kant: A study on T.M.P. Mahadevan's Philosophical Reflections

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The word 'darśana', in its popular use, misled people over ages to believe that it has no intellectual pursuit, and consequently the different traditions of Indian thought are mostly branded as 'Ādhyātmika' in nature. Two questions at this point may haunt any curious mind. The first one is about the equivalent use of the terms 'Ādhyātmika' and 'spiritual', and any attempt of accepting the said equivalence raises further serious question whether Indian Philosophy is concerned only with spiritual thinking as different from rational thinking. It has been found that while the term 'Ānvikṣiki' is in tune with the Nyaya, Vaiś eṣika, and Mīmāṁsā systems, the term "Ādhyātmika' suits more with Buddhism, Samkhya and Vedanta school of philosophy. Hence the question of rational thinking is more pertinently raised in the context of Vedanta philosophy. Interestingly here we find that reason plays a vital role in the philosophical thinking of the great Sankaracarya.

Now it is not proper to distinguish between Indian and Western tradition of thoughts as two kinds of philosophy, still nobody can rationally deny the basic difference between their approaches to intellectual thinking. Before Descartes, philosophy in the West did not show mark of consistent rational thinking, but till the time of Immanuel Kant, philosophers struggled much to fit their epistemological theories within the framework of traditional metaphysical presuppositions. It is in the later part of 18th century and the beginning of 19th century that certain radical changes took place in the West. The societies witnessed changed forms of monarchy as well as introduction of concepts like fraternity. It is at this stage that one can find a surprising similarity between the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta and that of Kant. On the Vedanta theory, Brahman is the reality which lies concealed under the garb of the phenomenal world. This false appearance is due to 'avidya'. Brahman, the one, appears as many, i.e. the world of finite selves and objects. The world is relative, Brahman is the only absolute. This theory, as it stands, points to some comparison with Kant. The world of space and time is merely appearance, the thing-in-itself is what underlies the phenomenal world, and it is itself unknown and unknowable.

There are some genuine points of disagreement in this comparison. Kant did never refer to the concepts of relative-absolute in his discussion of phenomenal and noumenal, neither did Advaita Vedanta posit Brahman as unknown and unknowable. What minimum affinity can be traced in them is this. Vedantic view on the one hand is that nothing is really new in the external world, which is the consequence of their rejection of satkāryavāda and Kantian view is that all

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novelties belong to appearances only. Both the traditions project change as seeming change, which is the same as unreal transformation. But it still remains as a rather superficial comparison which a deeper study of both the traditions does not allow. Yet one cannot help looking deeper for the similarity between the two systems.

One should not be allured to extend this line of similarity between the two systems beyond a certain limit, because their philosophical thinking originated from two distinct perspectives. In this paper however, I shall make an attempt to focus on the issue of epistemology where both the lines of thinking share some points of similarity. My discussion is based upon the study of Vedanta as distinctly understood and marvellously analysed by the great scholar Professor T.M.P. Mahadevan. I propose to show the similarity between Vedanta philosophy and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant on three aspects:

- 1) Status of epistemology,
- 2) Role of reason,
- 3) Foundational condition of empirical knowledge.

Before discussing the points of similarity let me state, in brief, the epistemological theories of Advaita Vedanta and Immanuel Kant.

I

Before entering into the details of Vedanta epistemology, it is necessary to remember certain basic presuppositions of Vedanta. Buddhi is a modification of the first evolute of Prakrti, jnana or consciousness is the nature of the self, and knowledge is a modification (vrtti) of buddhi which reflects consciousness. An act of cognition involves three items - the subject who knows or the cognizer, the object cognized and the means of cognition.

The method of acquiring knowledge is this. There are external objects. There is a mental state called 'antahkaranavrtti' which assumes the form of the object whenever consciousness objectifies the object. Mahadevan refers to this mental state as psychosis i which is a transformation of the internal organ. This psychosis is pramana which arises from the cognizer, i.e. from the reflection of intelligence (cidābhāsa). So it is the psychosis that connects the cognizer with the object cognized. It is the same internal organ residing in the body that goes out through the channels of the senses, and then manifests the object after pervading it. The internal organ is recognized in three levels. Egoity is the name of the part of the internal organ which is defined by the body, cognitive psychosis is the name of the part which connects egoity with the object, and fitness for manifestation (abhivyakti-yogyatā) is the name of the part which pervades and manifests the object. The intelligence also has three levels of identification. The aspect of intelligence defined by egoity is the cognizer (pramātā), The means of cognition (pramāa) is the aspect defined by the cognitive psychosis, and the object (pramiti) is that aspect defined by fitness for manifestation present in the object. The intelligence has no parts, but in the context of empirical knowledge it is the work

of nescience that presents the intelligence appearing as having parts. Establishment of this complex process needs lots of argumentation, but for my discussion I shall refer to one or two pertinent objections.

Firstly, it may be held that intelligence is the nature of the cognizer, i.e. the jiva, so it should manifest objects without any intervention of psychoses. The answer given in **Vivaraṇa-prameya-saṁgraha**ⁱⁱ is this: Brahman-intelligence is the material cause of all things and hence it manifests them. But the jiva-intelligence cannot be their material cause since it has nescience for its adjunct. The example given in the book is this. The omnipresent generality of cowness is in conjunction only with the cows and not with horses, similarly the omnipresent jiva-intelligence has natural conjunction with the internal organ and not with the objects. Psychoses are therefore needed to bring about the conjunction of the jiva with the objects.

Secondly, according to the Advaitins, the internal organ is instrumental to the apprehension of anything associated with it. Now, Brahman being the material cause of all things including internal organ, there should be the constant cognition of Brahman. The answer is that the mere presence of internal organ cannot help to manifest objects. In order to have the cognition of an object the psychosis of the internal organ must take on the form of the object. As there is no psychosis that assumes the form of the Brahman, there is no possibility of constant apprehension of the Brahman. Without the psychosis there cannot be constant cognition of the mind even, though it is present in the internal organ itself.

This antahkaranavrtti or psychosis is manifested by the self-shining witness-consciousness (sākṣicaitanya). Antahkaran is not consciousness, it belongs to the world of objects revealed by consciousness. Consciousness in itself is only self-shining and is intrinsically non-intentional. When consciousness is reflected in the modified mental state then it seems to be consciousness of the object, but in reality it is not. So consciousness only appears to be intentional. As J.N. Mohanty points out, "intentionality belongs to vrtti, whereas 'self-manifestation' belongs to consciousness, and their 'being together' causes the appearance of cognitions being both." iii Vedanta does not approve of any unconscious mental state, since all the inner states are directly revealed to the witnessing consciousness. Vrttijnāna or awareness of the object therefore is at the surface level, while behind this awareness, there is the witnessing consciousness directly revealing the surface awareness.

Now the interesting point to note is that, this second-level awareness of knowing an object is intimately connected with awareness of ignorance of that object prior to knowing it. This awareness is distinct from knowledge as a cognitive act. Knowledge as an appropriate mental modification (vrtti) dispels ignorance, but awareness does not. This awareness, according to Advaita Vedanta is the witness-awareness (sākṣicaitanya) which is the foundation of all knowing and not-knowing.

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According to Kant knowledge is judgmental. In case of empirical knowledge ke speaks of two levels of operation of our mind. On one level there is a kind of functioning of mind which consists in receiving sensations. There is no element of universality at this level. On another level mind has a mode of functioning which consists in organizing the raw materials of sensations into objectively valid judgements. At this stage we have the elements of universality and necessity so far as the form of the judgement is concerned. Such descriptions of sensibility and understanding are found in Kant's **Critique of Pure Reason** (A 51): "If the receptivity of our mind, its power of receiving representations in so far as it is in any way affected, is to be entitled sensibility, then the mind's power of producing representations from itself, the spontaneity of knowledge, should be called the understanding." Kant has used the german word 'Verstand' for understanding which is translated as 'intellect' by Hannah Arendt. While sensibility is the faculty of receiving sensations, understanding is the faculty of thinking. To think is to judge.

The distinction between sensibility and understanding is not logical, it is transcendental in the sense that their difference lies in their very origin in human mind. No knowledge can arise without experience, but experience alone can not provide justification for it. There are two different senses of the term 'experience'. In one sense, 'experience' means having sensations/representations produced in us by the objects. In another sense, 'experience' is the knowledge of objects after the works of comparing, uniting/separating are carried on them by understanding. There is even a third sense of the term 'experience' which is the scientific sense. So 'experience' means

- a) Having simply sensations,
- b) Having empirical knowledge of objects,
- c) Having ordered systematic interconnected knowledge of nature.

Kant has generally used it in the second sense.

Intuition is the name of what is given to us by sensibility. It is that through which a knower is in an immediate relation to the object. Two things are to be remembered here. Firstly object of intuition must be a singular object, and secondly, intuition is a representation which depends immediately on the presence of the object. Intuition is independent of any function of thought (A 90-91). Intuitions may be empirical, pure or intellectual. Colour is an example of empirical intuition. Sensations do not have objects. They are subjective modifications of human mind. But an intuition which is made possible through sensation is entitled empirical intuition. An empirical intuition has an object. But the status of the object at this stage shows that it is not yet conceptually determined.

Space and time are examples of pure intuition which are invariable companions of any received sensations so to speak. In other words, in case of empirical

knowledge, sensations are the modifications of knower's mind. These pure subjective states are in space and time. Sensations are ordered in time. They are in space also because, according to Kant, what corresponds to reality in one's experience is sensation. Thus sensation is connected with the sense of reality. We can say that there are two kinds of senses. Outer sense is the way we perceive all objects in space. Inner sense is the way we perceive our mental states. Space is thus the form of outer sense and time the inner sense. Kant however also says that time is the form of all senses. The explanation is this. Not only the mental states, even the things we perceive in outer space are also perceived to be in time. There are two ways of experiencing time. Primary experience of time is to experience the succession of one's own mental states. Secondarily or derivatively we experience time in perceiving a moving car. Perceiving the movements of a car implies perceiving each move succeeding the other move in time.

Some thinkers are in favour of intellectual intuition where we do not need any external object to work on the knower. If one closes the eye, concentrates and thinks about something then one can have an immediate awareness of the object of thought. Kant denies the possibility of such intuition. He was never in favour of any form of extreme idealism that considers the whole world to be a construction of human mind. Human mind is such that, under some mode of knowing, it passively receives something, and it proves that the passively received element is not the construction of human mind.

While sensibility is the faculty of intuiting, understanding is the faculty of thinking. There are some basic ways of synthesizing which are found by analysing the forms of judgement. They exhibit the apriori structure of the understanding. The pure or apriori concepts of the understanding are called 'categories'. Categories according to which understanding synthesizes representations are a priori conditions of knowledge. Categories therefore relate to what are presented in intuitions, i.e. objects which are presented but which are not yet determined. There are twelve categories of the understanding. The justification for their employment in synthesizing what are presented is called by Kant

'transcendental deduction'. 'Deduction' means justification and 'transcendental' means apriori conditions of all experience.

There are two points to note in knowledge-context.

- 1. Kant defines an object of knowledge as "that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united" (B, 137). vi So synthesizing is the work of understanding.
- 2. The manifold and the act of synthesis entails an idea of connection which is the representation of the synthetical unity of the manifold.

What is implied is that the event of the manifold being synthesized and becoming an object of knowledge presupposes that perceiving and thinking are united in one subject. Hence self-consciousness of the one subject is inevitably accompanying all the representations. The linguistic expression of this same consciousness accompanying perceiving and thinking is 'I think'. It speaks of a relation between the subject and the manifold of intuition which is called 'pure apperception'. It is distinguished from empirical apperception, i. e. the empirical awareness of a given psychical state as mine. The possibility of an identical 'I think' is a permanent condition of experience. It presupposes a transcendental unity of self-consciousness which is not an object of knowledge, but which is the necessary condition of all objects of knowledge.

It does not mean however that there is any prior consciousness of a permanent self-identical ego. The knower becomes conscious of the object ordered and synthesized as his object of knowledge only with the acts directed towards the given. The totality of possible objects of experience forms one Nature only in relation to the unity of consciousness in general. It is the apriori synthesis that gives laws to Nature.

The particular knower conscious of his own existence as determined in time is the empirical ego which is however perceived introspectively only in its successive states. But all determination in time in respect of succession presupposes the existence of something permanent. This is the transcendental ego which is not determined in time, and hence is not given as object of self-consciousness. It is only thought as the condition of the transcendental unity of apperception.

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Let me now come to the points of similarity.

1) Status of Epistemology

Advaita Vedanta is one unique combination of spirituality and rationality. Scholars over the ages are of the opinion that India produces "messengers of spirit" whenever there is any crisis of destabilising forces affecting Indian culture. The combating of the negative forces is made. In the language of T.M.P. Mahadevan, by "not kings and emperors, nor distinguished statesmen, valiant warriors or merchants, but by 'messengers of spirit' who appealed to the fundamental unity of all in the basic reality which is spiritual and a comprehensiveness of outlook which knows no narrow distinctions." This shows that Mahadevan was very vocal about the main essence of Advaita philosophy, i.e. the fundamental unity of all in the basic reality. It is his unique reflection on Advaita that shows that Advaita is neither identified as monism as opposed to pluralism, nor as idealism as opposed to realism. Advaitic experience, according to him is an "open vision of what is real".

But the interesting thing to note is that in his book **The Philosophy of Advaita** T.M.P. Mahadevan makes a comment which shows a striking similarity between the approaches of Advaita Vedanta and Kant. To quote him, "...before entering into the details of the central doctrine of Advaita, viz., the non-difference of the

jiva from Brahman, it is necessary to examine the mechanism of knowledge." Mahadevan refers to Max Muller's comment that the first question that bothers Hindu systems of philosophy is, How do we know? It is the primacy of epistemic question that made Max Muller to think about the thinkers of the East as superior to most philosophers of the West. It is to be marked that knowledge here includes ordinary empirical knowledge though, according to Advaita Vedanta knowledge proper is the knowledge of Brahman. Mahadevan has shown that Vedanta of Sankara gives a special importance to the question how knowledge is known. There is a watertight distinction between bisaya and bisayi and this distinction is different from the distinction between prameya and pramana which is the source of knowing prameya.

It is the same Kantian approach which is evident in his famous Copernican Revolution in the field of epistemology. Kant raises the chief question in Transcendental Aesthetic as: How are synthetic apriori judgements possible in mathematics? Descartes tried to place philosophy on the same level of mathematics in order to make sure certainty of knowledge. Kant made a similar attempt to save philosophy from dogmatism on the one hand and scepticism on the other. Both of them justifiably gave priority to epistemology in their philosophical thinking.

2) Role of Reason

The second point of familiarity is found in the use of reason as a human faculty. Sankara believes in rational argument which does not compete with experience. He views logic as that which observes experience. Mahadevan referred xii to Gaudapāda who has shown in Māndukyakārikā how reason has been used to understand Advaita philosophy. Reasoning or hetutah explains the illusoriness of the world of duality in the 2nd prakaranņa of this book, the non-illusoriness of the non-duality is established on rational grounds (yuktitah) in the 3rd prakaraṇa, and in the 4th prakaraṇa several modes of argumentation (upapattibhih) shows that the pluralistic views are mutually contradictory. Incidentally one note on the meaning on reason and experience may not be irrelevant here. Commenting on the Sanskrit synonym of the terms 'experience' and 'reason' J.N. Mohanty says, "The term 'experience' – with some loss of meaning – may be understood as 'pratyaksa' etc., but the word 'reason' with all its principal epistemological and metaphysical associations has no Sanskrit synonym. Buddhi may translate into 'intellect'."

The Kantian analysis also favours reason to be the chief constituent of empirical knowledge. Kant views reason as a power of the mind and this reason is the source of universal and necessary principles. Pure reason is reason unmixed with empirical element. While maintaining that empirical knowledge is a product of both reason and experience, he distinguishes between understanding or intellect (reason in broader sense) which is responsible for science on the one hand, and reason (in narrower sense) as a faculty that supplies the principles of a priori

knowledge. Kant was the first one to undertake a survey of how much pure reason can contribute to human knowledge. The **Critique of Pure Reason** is the critique of the way human mind works from its own resources independent of experience. The great revolution he brought in the field of epistemology consists in bringing subjectivity to the central position in knowledge-context, and more importantly in undertaking a survey of pure reason by pure reason itself. Eventually this analysis of pure reason by pure reason itself reminds us of Vedantic experience which is neither mental nor sensual in nature. As P. Srirama Murti points out, any contemplation upon the Sankara's interpretation of the Mahavakyas leads to a vision of the reality, i. e. the Self by a cognitive process of the Self itself.xiv

3) Foundational Condition of Empirical Knowledge

The third area of similarity is the kernel of both the theories. It has two levels. But before entering into the discussion let me recapitulate the main tenets of the Advaita theory of epistemology which are as follows:

- a) Consciousness which is the Self is eternal. It implies that cit is not the same as any specific cognition.
- b) There is no unknown mental state.
- c) Contents of consciousness are not contents in consciousness.
- d) In deep dreamless sleep, the witnessing consciousness remains awake and reveals the state of sleep. Sleep cannot but be direct experience.
- e) The self or pure consciousness is not the ego which is one function of the antahkarana or inner sense.
- f) The modifications of antahkarana are like mental images of objects. So two cognitions can arise simultaneously in the antahkarana which is like a 'spread-out plastic matter'. Awareness of outer objects are due to antahkaranavrttis.
- g) Awareness of the vrttis themselves cannot require further vrttis.
- h) The finite selves (jivas) are mere appearances. There is only one real consciousness which is universal and it is the foundation of the empirical world.

According to Śaṅkara the phenomenal world is mere appearance. But he defends the theory of empirical realism. All things are objects of witness-consciousness (sākṣicaitanya) either as known or as unknown. Known objects which are manifested by appropriate cognitive state logically have had unknown existence. According to the Vedantin it is the positive ignorance (bhābarupa avidyā) which conceals a not-yet known object and is responsible for its unknown existence. Hence so far as knowledge situation is concerned, 'I know' accompanies all my represtations. Let us take some examples of immediate experience:

- 1) I am ignorant and do not know myself.
- 2) I am happy.
- 3) This is silver (illusory cognition).

The first two cases clearly shows the presence of 'I know'. The advaitins admit that the mediator between the object and the enlightening principle of consciousness is the mental mode or psychosis (vrtti) and so nothing can be cognised without being covered by this vrttijňāna. (3) however does not have such reference. But this illusory perception has at its basis the ignorance about the nature of shell, and if it is to be manifested, then it definitely involves reference to 'I'. When ignorance disappears, the illusory projection of silver also disappears. Now ignorance involves reference to 'I' because the expression 'I do not know' accompanies all experience of ignorance. For example,

- i) I am ignorant, and do not know the nature of myself and others,
- ii) I do not know the thing you speak of, etc.

This analysis is similar to the theory of transcendental apperception as analysed by Kant, and in the opinion of some thinkers the Advaita theory in this respect 'transcends' Kantian view in accepting that 'I do not know' accompanies all experience of ignorance.

So the link among knowledge, ignorance, illusion, doubt etc. is 'I'. The substratum of such mental states is the 'I' which is the 'jiva' in Advaita. This 'I', in one sense represents 'jivahood', and in another sense it represents 'saksihood'. Now coming to Kant, we can analogically refer to two senses of 'I'. One is the phenomenal self, and the other is the apperceptive subject which is not noumenal in nature. Phenomenal self can correspond to 'jivahood', while apperceptive subject may relate to 'sāksihood'. We have already seen the comparison between Kant's synthetic unity of apperception and the 'sākṣicaitanya' of Advaita. What remains to be shown is the comparison between phenomenal self and 'jivahood'.

That phenomenal self corresponds to 'jivahood' can be shown in the following way. In his discussion of categories Kant has shown that the categories are, in as much as the apriori 'synthesis' is prior to analyticity, directly considered as forms of 'thinking', not of Self. This categorical thinking constitutes 'avidya', and hence, avidya is never eliminated, but rather belongs to the structure of knowing. Rather avidya itself is the structure of knowledge. Knowledge does not destroy avidya, but, through reflection, brings out its structure. Reflective knowledge is not free from the categorical structure, but shows it. Kantian thinking stops here. Advaita goes a step further. There at one level categorical thinking is transcended, but it is also included in Absolute knowledge. This is Advaitin's 'mukti' which goes beyond Kant's position, it reveals, i.e. objectifies the objective categorical structure. To know avidya is to transcend it and to be free from it.

IV

Many scholars reject the idea of referring to Indian and Western thought by the cliché distinction between intuition and intellect. As we have seen that in Advaita theory, self and matter are contradictory to each other like light and

darkness. But they uniquely believe that the impossible unity of these two contradictory realities is still an actual fact. As Sibajiban Bhattacharya puts it "The whole of Advaita philosophy is an attempt to explain rationally how the impossible can yet be actual".xv This attempt involves rationality and it marks how Vedanta makes a perfect blend of intuition and intellect — intellect in a broader sense that involves reason.

But it is also to be noted that there is a difference of perspective between the Indian and Western line of thinking. As J.N. Mohanty remarks, "while in Indian thought the concept of subject as the neutral disinterested knower is given primacy, the concept of person as an active agent is important in Western thought".xvi It is evident in Kant's important insight that unity of apperception is the fundamental condition of human experience. There is no commitment to the ontological reality of substantial subject, but it no doubt establishes the importance of the subject.

I shall end my discussion by making one comment. The similarity between the Advaita philosophy and that of Kant has a definite limitation, since their ontological commitments are different. It is a fact that every philosophical tradition – whether Indian or Western – develops and benefits from a continuous dialogue with its opponents. There is nothing called a system's sole way through which it develops. Every philosophy has a temporal history also. When we compare Advaita Vedanta and philosophy of Kant, we have to remember that the first form of thinking was developed in India over at least one thousand years, and the second one is the thought that arose out of the life and work of one individual in the 18th century Germany. Both involve systematic philosophizing, and considered philosophical thinking as wrapped by rational thinking. At times I feel tempted to say that both the traditions share even a deeper ontological commitment. The commitment is that, for both of them "nothing really happens". Once one understands the logical theories, epistemology, ontologies and semantic theories of these two trains of thought, then only it is possible to see their areas of affinity.

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