



The Vedānta and Western Tradition

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and
lands, they are not original with me.

Walt Whitman

I

There have been teachers such as Orpheus, Hermes, Buddha, Lao-tzu and Christ, the historicity of whose human existence is doubtful, and to whom there may be accorded the higher dignity of a mythical reality. Śaṅkara, like Plotinus, Augustine, or Eckhart, was certainly a man among men, though we know comparatively little about his life. He was of south Indian Brahman birth, flourished in the first half of the ninth century A.D., and founded a monastic order which still survives. He became a *śaṃnyāsīn*, or "truly poor man," at the age of eight, as the disciple of a certain Govinda and of Govinda's own teacher Gauḍapāda, the author of a treatise on the Upaniṣads in which their essential doctrine of the non-duality of the divine Being was set forth. Śaṅkara journeyed to Benares and wrote the famous commentary on the *Brahma Sūtra* there in his twelfth year; the commentaries on the Upaniṣads and *Bhagavad Gītā* were written later. Most of the great sage's life was spent wandering about India, teaching and taking part in controversies. He is understood to have died between the ages of thirty and forty. Such wanderings and disputations as his have always been characteristically Indian institutions; in his days, as now, Sanskrit was the lingua franca of learned men, just as for centuries Latin was the lingua franca of Western countries, and free public debate was so generally recognized that halls erected for the accommodation of peripatetic teachers and disputants were at almost every court.

The traditional metaphysics with which the name of Śaṅkara is con-

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nected is known either as the Vedānta, a term which occurs in the Upaniṣads and means the "Vedas' ends," both as "latter part" and as "ultimate significance"; or as Ātmavidyā, the doctrine of the knowledge of the true "self" or "spiritual essence"; or as Advaita, "Nonduality," a term which, while it denies duality, makes no affirmations about the nature of unity and must not be taken to imply anything like our monisms or pantheisms. A gnosis (*jñāna*) is taught in this metaphysics.

Śaṅkara was not in any sense the founder, discoverer, or promulgator of a new religion or philosophy; his great work as an expositor consisted in a demonstration of the unity and consistency of Vedic doctrine and in an explanation of its apparent contradictions by a correlation of different formulations with the points of view implied in them. In particular, and exactly as in European Scholasticism, he distinguished between the two complementary approaches to God, which are those of the affirmative and negative theology. In the way of affirmation, or relative knowledge, qualities are predicated in the Supreme Identity by way of excellence, while in the way of negation all qualities are abstracted. The famous "No, no" of the Upaniṣads, which forms the basis of Śaṅkara's method, as it did of the Buddha's, depends upon a recognition of the truth—expressed by Dante among many others—that there are things which are beyond the reach of discursive thought and which cannot be understood except by denying things of them.

Śaṅkara's style is one of great originality and power as well as subtlety. I shall cite from his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā* a passage that has the further advantage of introducing us at once to the central problem of the Vedānta—that of the discrimination of what is really, and not merely according to our way of thinking, "myself." "How is it," Śaṅkara says, "that there are professors who like ordinary men maintain that 'I am so-and-so' and 'This is mine'? Listen: it is because their so-called learning consists in thinking of the body as their 'self.'" In the Commentary on the *Brahma Sūtra* he enunciates in only four Sanskrit words what has remained in Indian metaphysics from first to last the consistent doctrine of the immanent Spirit within you as the only knower, agent, and transmigrant.

The metaphysical literature underlying Śaṅkara's expositions consists essentially of the Four Vedas together with the Brāhmaṇas and their Upaniṣads, all regarded as revealed, eternal, datable (as to their recession, in any case) before 500 B.C., together with the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Brahma Sūtra* (datable before the beginning of the Christian era). Of these books,

the Vedas are liturgical, the Brāhmaṇas are explanatory of the ritual, and the Upaniṣads are devoted to the Brahma-doctrine or *Theologia Mystica*, which is taken for granted in the liturgy and ritual. The *Brahma Sūtra* is a greatly condensed compendium of Upaniṣad doctrine, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* is an exposition adapted to the understanding of those whose primary business has to do with the active rather than the contemplative life.

For many reasons, which I shall try to explain, it will be far more difficult to expound the Vedānta than it would be to expound the personal views of a modern "thinker," or even such a thinker as Plato or Aristotle. Neither the modern English vernacular nor modern philosophical or psychological jargon provides us with an adequate vocabulary, nor does modern education provide us with the ideological background which would be essential for easy communication. I shall have to make use of a purely symbolic, abstract, and technical language, as if I were speaking in terms of higher mathematics; you may recall that Emile Mâle speaks of Christian symbolism as a "calculus." There is this advantage: the matter to be communicated and the symbols to be employed are no more peculiarly Indian than peculiarly Greek or Islamic, Egyptian or Christian.

Metaphysics, in general, resorts to visual symbols (crosses and circles, for example) and above all to the symbolism of light and of the sun—than which, as Dante says, "no object of sense in the whole world is more worthy to be made a type of God." But I shall also have to use such technical terms as essence and substance, potentiality and act, spiration and despiration, exemplary likeness, aeviternity, form and accident. Metempsychosis must be distinguished from transmigration and both from "reincarnation." We shall have to distinguish soul from spirit. Before we can know when, if ever, it is proper to render a given Sanskrit word by our word "soul" (*anima, psyche*), we must have known in what manifold senses the word "soul" has been employed in the European tradition; what kind of souls can be "saved"; what kind of soul Christ requires us to "hate" if we would be his disciples; what kind of soul Eckhart refers to when he says that the soul must "put itself to death." We must know what Philo means by the "soul of the soul"; and we must ask how we can think of animals as "soulless," notwithstanding that the word "animal" means quite literally "ensouled." We must distinguish essence from existence. And I may have to coin such a word as "nowever" to express the full and original meanings of such words as "suddenly," "immediately" and "presently."

The sacred literature of India is available to most of us only in translations made by scholars trained in linguistics rather than in metaphysics; and it has been expounded and explained—or as I should rather say, explained away—mainly by scholars provided with the assumptions of the naturalist and anthropologist, scholars whose intellectual capacities have been so much inhibited by their own powers of observation that they can no longer distinguish the reality from the appearance, the Supernal Sun of metaphysics from the physical sun of their own experience. Apart from these, Indian literature has either been studied and explained by Christian propagandists whose main concern has been to demonstrate the falsity and absurdity of the doctrines involved, or by theosophists by whom the doctrines have been caricatured with the best intentions and perhaps even worse results.

The educated man of today is, moreover, completely out of touch with those European modes of thought and those intellectual aspects of the Christian doctrine which are nearest those of the Vedic traditions. A knowledge of modern Christianity will be of little use because the fundamental sentimentality of our times has diminished what was once an intellectual doctrine to a mere morality that can hardly be distinguished from a pragmatic humanism. A European can hardly be said to be adequately prepared for the study of the Vedānta unless he has acquired some knowledge and understanding of at least Plato, Philo, Hermes, Plotinus, the Gospels (especially John), Dionysius, and finally Eckhart who, with the possible exception of Dante, can be regarded from an Indian point of view as the greatest of all Europeans.

The Vedānta is not a "philosophy" in the current sense of the word, but only as the word is used in the phrase *Philosophia Perennis*, and only if we have in mind the Hermetic "philosophy" or that "Wisdom" by whom Boethius was consoled. Modern philosophies are closed systems, employing the method of dialectics, and taking for granted that opposites are mutually exclusive. In modern philosophy things are either so or not so; in eternal philosophy this depends upon our point of view. Metaphysics is not a system, but a consistent doctrine; it is not merely concerned with conditioned and quantitative experience, but with universal possibility. It therefore considers possibilities that may be neither possibilities of manifestation nor in any sense formal, as well as ensembles of possibility that can be realized in a given world. The ultimate reality of metaphysics is a Supreme Identity in which the opposition of all contraries, even of being and not-being, is resolved; its "worlds" and "gods"

are levels of reference and symbolic entities which are neither places nor individuals but states of being realizable within you.

Philosophers have personal theories about the nature of the world; our "philosophical discipline" is primarily a study of the history of these opinions and of their historical connections. We encourage the budding philosopher to have opinions of his own on the chance that they may represent an improvement on previous theories. We do not envisage, as does the *Philosophia Perennis*, the possibility of knowing the Truth once and for all; still less do we set before us as our goal to become this truth.

The metaphysical "philosophy" is called "perennial" because of its eternity, universality, and immutability; it is Augustine's "Wisdom uncreate, the same now as it ever was and ever will be"; the religion which, as he also says, only came to be called "Christianity" after the coming of Christ. What was revealed in the beginning contains implicitly the whole truth; and so long as the tradition is transmitted without deviation, so long, in other words, as the chain of teachers and disciples remains unbroken, neither inconsistency nor error is possible. On the other hand, an understanding of the doctrine must be perpetually renewed; it is not a matter of words. That the doctrine has no history by no means excludes the possibility, or even the necessity, for a perpetual explication of its formulae, an adaptation of the rites originally practiced, and an application of its principles to the arts and sciences. The more humanity declines from its first self-sufficiency, the more the necessity for such an application arises. Of these explications and adaptations a history is possible. Thus a distinction is drawn between what was "heard" at the outset and what has been "remembered."

A deviation or heresy is only possible when the essential teaching has been in some respect misunderstood or perverted. To say, for example, that "I am a pantheist" is merely to confess that "I am not a metaphysician," just as to say that "two and two make five" would be to confess "I am not a mathematician." Within the tradition itself there cannot be any contradictory or mutually exclusive theories or dogmas. For example, what are called the "six systems of Indian philosophy" (a phrase in which only the words "six" and "Indian" are justified) are not mutually contradictory and exclusive theories. The so-called "systems" are no more or less orthodox than mathematics, chemistry, and botany which, though separate disciplines more or less scientific amongst themselves, are not anything but branches of one "science." India, indeed, makes use of the term "branches" to denote what the Indologist misunderstands to be "sects." It

is precisely because there are no "sects" within the fold of Brahmanical orthodoxy that an intolerance in the European sense has been virtually unknown in Indian history—and for the same reason, it is just as easy for me to think in terms of the Hermetic philosophy as in terms of Vedānta. There must be "branches" because nothing can be known except in the mode of the knower; however strongly we may realize that all roads lead to one Sun, it is equally evident that each man must choose that road which starts from the point at which he finds himself at the moment of setting out. For the same reasons, Hinduism has never been a missionary faith. It may be true that the metaphysical tradition has been better and more fully preserved in India than in Europe. If so, it only means that the Christian can learn from the Vedānta how to understand his own "way" better.

The philosopher expects to prove his points. For the metaphysician it suffices to show that a supposedly false doctrine involves a contradiction of first principles. For example, a philosopher who argues for an immortality of the soul endeavors to discover proofs of the survival of personality; for the metaphysician it suffices to remember that "the first beginning must be the same as the last end"—from which it follows that a soul, understood to have been created in time, cannot but end in time. The metaphysician can no more be convinced by any so-called "proof of the survival of personality" than a physicist could be convinced of the possibility of a perpetual motion machine by any so-called proof. Furthermore, metaphysics deals for the most part with matters which cannot be publicly proved, but can only be demonstrated, i.e., made intelligible by analogy, and which even when verified in personal experience can only be stated in terms of symbol and myth. At the same time, faith is made relatively easy by the infallible logic of the texts themselves—which is their beauty and their attractive power. Let us remember the Christian definition of faith: "assent to a credible proposition." One must believe in order to understand, and understand in order to believe. These are not successive, however, but simultaneous acts of the mind. In other words, there can be no knowledge of anything to which the will refuses its consent, or love of anything that has not been known.

Metaphysics differs still further from philosophy in having a purely practical purpose. It is no more a pursuit of truth for truth's sake than are the related arts of art for art's sake, or related conduct the pursuit of morality for the sake of morality. There is indeed a quest, but the seeker already knows, so far as this can be stated in words, what it is that

he is in search of; the quest is achieved only when he himself has become the object of his search. Neither verbal knowledge nor a merely formal assent nor impeccable conduct is of any more than indispensable dispositive value—means to an end.

Taken in their materiality, as "literature," the texts and symbols are inevitably misunderstood by those who are not themselves in quest. Without exception, the metaphysical terms and symbols are the technical terms of the chase. They are never literary ornaments, and as Malinowski has so well said in another connection, "Technical language, in matters of practical pursuit, acquires its meaning only through personal participation in this type of pursuit." That is why, the Indian feels, the Vedantic texts have been only verbally and grammatically and never really understood by European scholars, whose methods of study are avowedly objective and noncommittal. The Vedānta can be known only to the extent that it has been lived. The Indian, therefore, cannot trust a teacher whose doctrine is not directly reflected in his very being. Here is something very far removed from the modern European concept of scholarship.

We must add, for the sake of those who entertain romantic notions of the "mysterious East," that the Vedānta has nothing to do with magic or with the exercise of occult powers. It is true that the efficacy of magical procedure and the actuality of occult powers are taken for granted in India. But the magic is regarded as an applied science of the basest kind; and while occult powers, such as that of operation "at a distance," are incidentally acquired in the course of contemplative practice, the use of them—unless under the most exceptional circumstances—is regarded as a dangerous deviation from the path.

Nor is the Vedānta a kind of psychology or Yoga a sort of therapeutics except quite accidentally. Physical and moral health are prerequisites to spiritual progress. A psychological analysis is employed only to break down our fond belief in the unity and immateriality of the "soul," and with a view to a better distinguishing of the spirit from what is not the spirit but only a temporary psycho-physical manifestation of one of the most limited of its modalities. Whoever, like Jung, insists upon translating the essentials of Indian or Chinese metaphysics into a psychology is merely distorting the meaning of the texts. Modern psychology has, from an Indian point of view, about the same values that attach to spiritualism and magic and other "superstitions." Finally, I must point out that the metaphysics, the Vedānta, is not a form of mysticism, except in the sense that with Dionysius we can speak of a Theologia Mystica. What is

ordinarily meant by "mysticism" involves a passive receptivity—"we must be able to let things happen in the psyche" is Jung's way of putting it (and in this statement he proclaims himself a "mystic"). But metaphysics repudiates the psyche altogether. The words of Christ, that "No man can be my disciple who hateth not his own soul," have been voiced again and again by every Indian guru; and so far from involving passivity, contemplative practice involves an activity that is commonly compared to the blazing of a fire at a temperature so high as to show neither flickering nor smoke. The pilgrim is called a "toiler," and the characteristic refrain of the pilgrim song is "keep on going, keep on going." The "Way" of the Vedantist is above all an activity.

II

The Vedānta takes for granted an omniscience independent of any source of knowledge external to itself, and a beatitude independent of any external source of pleasure. In saying "That art thou," the Vedānta affirms that man is possessed of, and is himself, "that one thing which when it is known, all things are known" and "for the sake of which alone all things are dear." It affirms that man is unaware of this hidden treasure within himself because he has inherited an ignorance that inheres in the very nature of the psycho-physical vehicle which he mistakenly identifies with himself. The purpose of all teaching is to dissipate this ignorance; when the darkness has been pierced nothing remains but the Gnosis of the Light. The technique of education is, therefore, always formally destructive and iconoclastic; it is not the conveyance of information but the education of a latent knowledge.

The "great dictum" of the Upaniṣads is, "That art thou." "That" is here, of course, Ātman or Spirit, Sanctus Spiritus, Greek *pneuma*, Arabic *rūh*, Hebrew *ruah*, Egyptian *Amon*, Chinese *ch'i*; Ātman is spiritual essence, impartite whether transcendent or immanent; and however many and various the directions to which it may extend or from which it may withdraw, it is unmoved mover in both intransitive and transitive senses. It lends itself to all modalities of being but never itself becomes anyone or anything. That than which all else is a vexation--That art thou. "That," in other words, is the Brahman, or God in the general sense of Logos or Being, considered as the universal source of all Being—expanding, manifesting and productive, font of all things, all of which are "in" him as

the finite in the infinite, though not a "part" of him, since the infinite has no parts.

For the most part, I shall use the word Ātman hereafter. While this Ātman, as that which blows and enlightens, is primarily "Spirit," because it is this divine Eros that is the quickening essence in all things and thus their real being, the word Ātman is also used reflexively to mean "self"—either "oneself" in whatever sense, however gross, the notion may be entertained, or with reference to the spiritual self or person (which is the only knowing subject and essence of all things, and must be distinguished from the affected and contingent "I" that is a compound of the body and of all that we mean by "soul" when we speak of a "psychology"). Two very different "selves" are thus involved, and it has been the custom of translators, accordingly, to render Ātman as "self," printed either with a small or with a capital s according to the context. The same distinction is drawn, for example, by St. Bernard between what is my "property" (*proprium*) and what is my very being (*esse*). An alternative Indian formulation distinguishes the "knower of the field"—viz. the Spirit as the only knowing subject in all things and the same in all—from the "field," or body-and-soul as defined above (taken together with the pastures of the senses and embracing therefore all things that can be considered objectively). The Ātman or Brahman itself cannot be thus considered: "How couldst thou know the knower of knowing?"—or in other words, how can the first cause of all things be one of them?

The Ātman is impartite, but it is apparently divided and identified into variety by the differing forms of its vehicles, mouse or man, just as space within a jar is apparently signate and distinguishable from space without it. In this sense it can be said that "he is one as he is in himself but many as he is in his children," and that "participating himself, he fills these worlds." But this is only in the sense that light fills space while it remains itself without discontinuity; the distinction of things from one another thus depending not on differences in the light but on differences in reflecting power. When the jar is shattered, when the vessel of life is unmade, we realize that what was apparently delimited had no boundaries and that "life" was a meaning not to be confused with "living." To say that the Ātman is thus at once participated and impartite, "undivided amongst divided things," without local position and at the same time everywhere, is another way of stating what we are more familiar with as the doctrine of Total Presence.

