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Varieties of Argument in Indian Thought

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Introduction

Since the publication of Zimmer's, *Philosophies of India* (1967) some fifty years ago, it is generally acknowledged that Indian philosophy is more diverse than the distinction between "Hinduism" and "Buddhism" would have us believe. Nevertheless, this simplistic distinction is still quite helpful. Under the term "Hinduism", for example, we now recognize six so-called orthodox systems, where "orthodox" is defined as acceptance of the Vedic texts as authoritative. Buddhism would then be understood to be one of the major representatives of the unorthodox systems. But eventually this division of philosophical labours breaks down when you start to consider that there are already three distinct schools of Vedanta alone on the orthodox side and, as Conze has pointed out (1973, 31-33) within two hundred years of the Buddha's death, there were some 18 distinct schools of Buddhist thought (*Hiniyana*) without even taking into account the subsequent transition through the Perfection of Wisdom literature (*Prajnaparamita* from 100 BCE to 100 CE) into what can only be broadly construed as *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* of later Buddhism, each having its own diverse and varied set of schools. Hence, the history of Indian philosophy, understood in the plural as Zimmer would have it, is at least as rich and as diverse as its Western counterpart and therefore we should anticipate as much variety in the kinds of arguments utilized in Indian thought as we find in the West.

Initially, I had planned to discuss as many different kinds of arguments from across the entire Indian tradition as I could fit in. I then decided to split the difference, as it were, and to do just the orthodox systems this time around and to reserve the unorthodox systems for another occasion. Then I discovered as I was developing the arguments separately and atomically that, for the most part, the arguments that interested me dovetailed and formed one rather sizable, but nevertheless quite comprehensible, argument primarily for the existence and essence of the "self" as a kind of transcendental ego or, as I would prefer to call it, a "transpersonal person". This sustained argument arises in the Upanishadic texts from 800-500 BCE and moves inevitably to its culmination in the first few pages of Sankara's commentary on Badarayana's *Brahma-Sutras* from around 800 CE making it one 1600-1300 year long argument.

The Loaded Question Argument

The Kena Upanishad begins with a loaded question: "By whom impelled soars forth the mind projected" (Radhakrishnan 1967, 42)? Or, in other translations that might be clearer to us, "Who sends the mind to wander afar" (Mascaro 1965, 51)? or "By whose will directed does the mind proceed to its object" (Nikhilananda 1963, 99)? In other words, for whom or for what (*kena*) is there seeing? Most schools of Indian thought accept, as given, that human beings are not passive in perception. Rather, the senses are actively going out to the objects ("The Self-existent pierced the openings [of the senses] outward" Radhakrishnan 1967, 47) and the mind

actively goes out along these senses to the objects where it assumes a modification (*vritti*) which represents them. The mind then comes back along the senses where the mental modification is viewed. But by whom or by what is this mental modification viewed? The Kena answer is by “the Eye of the eye” (*caksusas caksur*) (Nikhilananda 1963, 99). And for whom is there hearing? The Kena answer is by “the Ear of the ear” (*srotrasya srotram*). While seeing and hearing require their respective sense organs (eyes and ears), it is not for the sense organs per se that there is seeing and hearing. It must therefore be for someone or for something else. The equivalent question in the west would be what are the necessary conditions for knowing an object? Both traditions give the same answer: a subject or a knower. The knowing subject is the metaphorical Eye behind the sense of sight (the eye); the knowing subject is the metaphorical Ear which resides between our ears as it were. But what exactly is this knowing subject and how do we come to know it?

The Heuristic paradox

It is not that easy, it seems. If knowledge is defined as knowledge of an object by a subject, how do we ever get to know the subject as subject without converting the subject into an object just in the process of coming to knowing it? The Kena Upanishad asks us to consider the following paradox: “I do not think I know It well; nor do I think I do not know it. He among us who knows the meaning of ‘Neither do I not know, nor do I know’ – knows Brahman [reality]. He by whom Brahman is not known, knows it; he by whom it is known, knows it not. It is not known by those who know it; it is known by those who do not know it” (Kena II, 2-3 in Nikhilananda 1963). The Sanskrit text uses two different words for knowing: “*vijnana*” and “*matam*” They are often referred to as “higher” and “lower” knowledge respectively: “There are two knowledges to be known – as the knowers of Brahman are wont to say: a higher (*para*) and also a lower (*apara*)” (Raadhakrishnan 1967, 51). *Vijnanic* knowledge or higher knowledge is an immediate intuitive awareness of one’s own self, of consciousness, *atman*. *Matanic* knowledge or lower knowledge is simply knowledge of objects. The necessary condition for knowledge of objects, however, is being aware or conscious. Thus, utilizing a transcendental form of argument, the Upanishads seem to be saying that higher knowledge (*vijnana*) precedes lower knowledge (*matam*) and makes it possible. But at this stage of the sustained argument, we are still thinking in terms of conscious subjects as knowers and the objects which they know. It does not stay this way for long.

The Sacred Syllable “AUM”

The Mandukya Upanishad (Radhakrishnan 1967, 55-56), in a quasi-phenomenological way, describes the state of deep dreamless sleep *vis-à-vis* the waking and dreaming experiences. Both waking and dreaming experiences are characterized by a subject-object dichotomy sensitive to what appears to be the principle of intentionality. In other words, whether awake or dreaming, the subject is always conscious of an object. The waking state of consciousness is described as “outwardly cognitive...enjoying the gross [physical or material], the Common-to-all-men [public] (Radhakrishnan 1967, 55). The dreaming state of consciousness, on the other hand, is described as “inwardly cognitive...enjoying the exquisite [immaterial, non-physical], the Brilliant [the dream object is illuminated by its own light]. The Upanishad therefore distinguishes experientially between being awake and dreaming not in terms of the subjective

experience (which appear to be exactly the same) but rather in terms of the respective objects. When you are awake, objects experienced are physical, spatial, publicly available and illuminated by some external source such as the sun or moon. When you are dreaming, objects experienced are non-physical, non-spatial, private, and are self-illuminated. It is only the differences which exist in the two kinds of objects which enable us to differentiate between these two mental states. However, things change rather drastically in the state of deep, dreamless sleep. The text says that in deep, dreamless sleep, there is no desire. “If one asleep desires no desire whatsoever, sees no dream whatsoever, that is deep sleep” (Radhakrishnan 1967, 56). This claim seems to be trivially true until we realize that there is no desire because there is no illumination, hence objects cannot be differentiated one from another (“just a cognition mass” [no differentiation] Radhakrishnan 1967, 56), and if there are no objects to be experienced, there can be no subjects either. Yet the text describes this state as blissful (*ananda*) albeit temporally blissful and blissful by default. The subject and the object at this level of analysis are reciprocally defined, i.e., the subject is a subject only for some object and vice versa. But the subject disappears along with the objects. Yet this is blissful because someone or something is aware of it who is not (obviously) what we formerly called the knowing subject since that subject vanished along with all the objects. What we seem to be left with is simply an awareness in general or consciousness which is not aware of anything, including, it seems, itself. All that remains is pure consciousness, *atman*.

The Chariot Analogy

Like Plato, in the *Phaedrus* (246a-247c), who uses the analogy of the chariot in order to deconstruct the soul or psyche into its three constituents: appetite, spirit, and reason, the Katha Upanishad uses the analogy of the chariot in order to deconstruct the person or jiva (the social-functioning, individual human being) into its constituent psycho-physical faculties.

Know thou the self (atman) as riding on a chariot,
 The body as the chariot.
 Know thou the intellect (buddhi, reason) as the chariot driver,
 And the mind (manas) as the reins.
 The senses, they say, are the horses;
 The objects of sense, what they range over.
 The self (atman) combined with the senses and mind
 Wise men call “the enjoyer” (Radhakrishnan 1967, 46 v 3-4).

On the one hand, there is consciousness (the self or atman) as the Lord of the chariot who passively watches what is happening in the world (*saksin*, the witness); on the other hand, there is the intellect (*buddhi* or reason, the organ which is ultimately responsible for enlightenment), the ego (*ahamkara*, the “I am” organ), the mind (*manas*, the everyday mind which is subservient to the ego), the five senses and the objects of sense. They are active but one and all, including intellect, ego, and mind, unconscious.

The last part of this sustained argument, and certainly one of the most thoughtful analyses within the yogic tradition, stems from Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta, Brahma-Sutra I,1,1 that is, a non-dualist interpretation of the Vedic tradition. His reductive argument concerning the existence

and essence of the self can be divided into five distinct steps, with each step peeling away another layer of the existential onion which constitutes the human being (*jiva*).

Step one:

...we said that superimposition means the cognition of something as some other thing. Thus in accordance as one's wife, children, or other relatives are hale and hearty with all their limbs intact, or as they suffer from the loss of those limbs, or think, "I myself am hale and hearty" or "I myself am injured"; thus one superimposes external characteristics on the Self. (Gambhirananda 1972).

In ordinary language, the text is saying that we have a natural tendency to superimpose qualities which actually belong to things out there in the external world, things which are ontologically quite distinct from us, on to ourselves. So, if my car has a flat tire or if my wife got up on the wrong side of the bed, then I may say of myself that "I am miserable". Yet the text also says, we would be mistaken to think that this really describes "me" in any way. We assume, albeit incorrectly, that the "me" in this case is what falls under the unique category of the person, "Ric Brown".

The "I am not my body" Argument.

Steps two and three:

Similarly one superimposes the characteristics of the body when one has such ideas as "I am fat", "I am thin", "I am fair", "I stay", "I go", or "I scale". So also one superimposes the attributes of the senses and organs when one thinks, "I am dumb", "I have lost one eye", "I am a eunuch", "I am deaf", or "I am blind" (Gambhirananda 1972, Brahma-Sutra I,1,1).

Here Sankara is claiming that we superimpose characteristics of our bodies on to our "real" self. The principle used by Advaita seems to be the same in each case: if something can be made an object for consciousness, then it cannot be identified with consciousness. It cannot be in consciousness as Sartre (1983) would say. We are asked to draw a distinction between the conscious subject and his/her body on the grounds that anything which can be made an object of awareness must ipso facto be something which is both logically, and ontologically, independent of consciousness and therefore independent of "me". This "I" or "me", however, can no longer be understood in any common-sense way since, whatever it is, it is thought to be both separate and distinct from its own body.

The "I am not the empirical ego" Argument.

Step four:

Similarly one superimposes the attributes of the internal organ, such as desire, will, doubt, perseverance, etc. (Gambhirananda 1972, Brahma-Sutra I,1,1).

Descartes would have us stop at "I" am something separate and distinct from body. But what is separate and distinct from the body, for Descartes, is the mind. Descartes considered the mind and thinking to be inseparable ("But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is a thing that thinks? That is to say, a thing that doubts, perceives, affirms, denies, wills, does not will, that imagines also, and which feels" (Descartes 1998, 24. Meditations, II). The mind, being

inseparable from its own essence, must think. The Advaitans not only divorce the mind from consciousness, but they also divorce the mind from its own content or perhaps in a more sophisticated fashion, they distinguish between an empirical and transcendental ego in a manner quite reminiscent of Kant. Sankara is claiming that the empirical or psychological ego, that is, the content of consciousness, is separate and distinct from that which is logically superior to it, namely, pure consciousness. To be aware (transcendental consciousness) precedes being aware of something (empirical consciousness). Even though they could not be more unlike one another, Kant uses the term "subjective" to cover two radically distinct kinds of subjectivity, viz., "subjectivity" as transcendental conditions, and "subjectivity" as the psychological subject and its states. However, it is only by differentiating these two notions that the Critique itself becomes feasible and Kant's transcendental turn removes him from the charge of phenomenalism.¹

The "Transcendental Ego" Argument.

Step five:

In the same way, one first superimposes the internal organ, possessed of the idea of ego, on the Self, the witness of all the manifestations of that organ; then by the opposite process, one superimposes on the internal organ, etc. that Self which is opposed to the non-Self and which is the witness of everything. Thus occurs this superimposition that has neither beginning nor end but flows on eternally, that appears as the manifested universe and its apprehension, that conjures up agentship and enjoyership, and that is perceived by all persons (Gambhirananda 1972, Brahma-Sutra I.1.1).

So what is left over having peeled away the layers of the existential onion that once existed as a flesh and blood, consciously active, individual person? Answer: pure consciousness, a kind of transpersonal person, and something which, at first blush, seems to be the Indian equivalent of the transcendental ego.

"Transpersonal" person.

The sustained argument of the Vedantic tradition is essentially a proof for what I have called a "transpersonal person". It concluded with the claim that what we normally understand to be the person, namely, you and me, is somehow *metaphysically* short of the mark. Indeed, the individual person (*jiva*) not only can be, but should be, transcended to a higher level.

In Cartesian fashion, Advaita Vedanta (and Samkhya) argues that the existence of the self is self-evident. No one, it claims, can doubt the existence of his or her own self. On the positive side, everyone is said naturally and indubitably to know that he or she exists. Sankara argues:

The Self is not absolutely beyond apprehension, because It is apprehended as the content of the concept 'I'; and because the Self, opposed to the non-Self, is well known in the world as an immediately perceived (i.e., self-revealing) entity (Gambhirananda 1972, Brahma-Sutra I.1.1).

¹ I thank my colleague, Dr. George J. Nathan, for first bringing this vitally important ambiguity, and the distinction it glosses, to my attention.

One of Vaisesika's arguments parallels the Advaitan analysis of ordinary language: "The proof of the existence of the self is not solely from revelation, because of the non-application of the word 'I' (to other designates or objects)". (Radhakrishnan 1967, 392. Vaisesika Sutra III.2.9). However, Vaisesika adds a further demonstration. We know that we exist, they argue, because someone, namely, the self, must be working the pulleys which make our eyelids go up and down not to mention other physiological and psychological activities:

The ascending life breath, the descending life breath, the closing of the eyelids, the opening of the eyelids, the movement of the mind, and the affections of the other senses, and also pleasure, pain, desire, aversion, and volition are marks (of the existence) of the self (Radhakrishnan 1967, 392. Vaisesika Sutra III.2.4).

However, ordinary language analysis has also been used in the Indian context to argue that the self or *atman* is nothing but the body. The Carvakan materialists, the black sheep of the Indian philosophical flock, state that "The soul is but the body characterized by the attributes signified in the expressions, 'I am stout', 'I am youthful', 'I am grown up', 'I am old', etc. It is not something other than that [body]" (Radhakrishnan 1967, 235).

While the thought of any individual person actually denying his or her own existence is deemed to be logically inconsistent because "...this Self cannot be denied by anyone..." (Gambhirananda 1972Brahma-Sutra I.1.4), it is only self-evident *that* the self exists. It is, however, far from self-evident just *what* this self really is.

Advaita, like Descartes, has taken as its first step, the proof (some might prefer to call it a demonstration or a performance) *that* the self exists. As a second step, like Descartes, it must arrive at some conclusion about *what* the self is, that is, its essential nature, what pertains to it and is inseparable from it, to borrow Descartes' terminology. The Advaitans proceeded by juxtaposing the concept of 'Self' with the concept of the 'non-Self' in order to demonstrate, not only against the Carvakan extremists who have tried to reduce "me" (the self or *atman*) to my body, but also against what we would understand as simply a common-sense understanding of ourselves.

We begin not doubting the existence of "my self" understanding that term in the common-sense way, namely, as "me". However, we are inevitably lead to the conclusion that the real self is precisely not "me" at all. In other words, the ordinary, everyday common-sense person (you and me) is not the ontological bottom-line. The yogic tradition assumes that the common-sense person is the human being who is under the mistaken impression that he or she is a united actively-conscious entity. At best, our common-sense understanding of our selves serves only as the starting point for what seems to be a full scale ontological reduction, a reduction which literally reduces the person to pure consciousness and thereby, euphemistically, transcends the person entirely.

In the first edition of *Logical Investigations* (1900), Husserl (1970, Volume II, 549) rejected the claim that there was any evidence for the existence of what Kant called the "transcendental ego". He said, "I must frankly confess, however, that I am quite unable to find this ego, this primitive necessary centre of relations. The only thing I can take note of, and therefore perceive, are the empirical ego and its empirical relations to its own experiences, or to such external objects as are receiving special attention at the moment, while much remains, whether 'without' or 'within', which has no such relation to the ego".. However, in the second edition of the same text (1913), Husserl, in a footnote no less, changes his mind. "I have since managed to find it

[the ego], i.e., have learnt not to be led astray from a pure grasp of the given through corrupt forms of ego-metaphysic". From *Ideas* (1913) onward, Husserl (1967, 212) paralleling the Vedantic tradition, was of the opinion that "The realm of transcendental consciousness had proved, as a result of phenomenological reduction, to be, in a certain definite sense, a realm of "absolute" Being".

Kant's Transcendental Subjectivity and Advaita Vedanta.

Kant distinguishes the transcendental ego from the empirical or psychological ego and its states because it is the transcendental ego alone that, albeit as an activity or spontaneity, grounds not only space and time but the categories as well (Kant, 1965. A 401) and therefore serves as the ground for all objectivity (A 106). For this reason, Kant calls the transcendental ego the "highest point" [*der höchste Punkt*] upon which the whole of his transcendental philosophy rests (B 134N). However, the transcendental ego is not a concept (B 404), not an intuition (A 382) and not a representation (B 132) although he does refer to the "I think" as a "...merely intellectual representation of the spontaneity of a thinking subject" (B 278.). However, according to Kant, the "I think", that is, the transcendental unity of apperception, is a logical, and not a psychological, subject (A 350, 355). It is strictly formal and a priori in nature. In other words, the "I think", which must be able to accompany all of our representations, intuitions as well as concepts (B 132), is "...the mere form of consciousness, which can accompany the two kinds of representations..." (A 382).

However, as a strictly formal element in knowledge, the transcendental ego must not be confused with something personal. In this sense, Kant says that there cannot be a plurality of transcendental egos, just as Sankara claims there cannot be more than one self, atman (non-dualism) though assuredly, for both, there is a veritable plethora of personal or psychological subjects. Kant claims that there is only one transcendental subject because, as a logical subject, it has exactly the same status for all consciousness of objects. As Kant says, it "...cannot be resolved into a plurality of subjects, and consequently signifies a logically simple subject..." (B 407). As the form of consciousness in general, the "I think" of the transcendental unity of apperception is one and the same in all consciousness (B 132). The transcendental unity of apperception is a logically necessary unity and numerical identity of consciousness. It is a necessary logical requirement for the possibility of experience and therefore for the possibility of knowing empirical objects.

We are conscious a priori of the complete identity of the self in respect of all representations which can ever belong to our knowledge, as being a necessary condition for the possibility of all representations (A 116).

Like Sankara, Kant also distinguishes between the self as knower (viz., the transcendental unity of apperception which is a necessary condition for knowledge) and the self as known (viz., empirical subjectivity) (See B 155). The transcendental ego is the self as knower, as the "vehicle of all concepts" (B 379), and therefore, it is not itself something which is observable or could ever be made an object of empirical knowledge. In fact, Kant makes explicit reference to a "perpetual circle" which is generated by trying to know the transcendental ego: we cannot know the transcendental ego as an object of thought because, as the very subject which is necessary for thinking, it is presupposed by all knowledge (Vide B 404. Cf. B 422). This is the argument of the Kena Upanishad.

The transcendental ego must also be distinguished from "...the inner and sensible intuition of our mind (as object of consciousness) which is represented as being determined by the succession of different states in time..." (B 520). The empirical ego is simply the "object of inner sense" (B 400) and as such represents the shifting content or material of our sensations and thoughts. The transcendental ego, on the other hand, is only formal and not material. As Kant says, it is

...a bare consciousness which accompanies all concepts. Through this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts = X (B 404).

However, empirical consciousness or empirical apperception cannot give us this identity of consciousness for, although it accompanies different representations which we have, it is "...in itself diverse" (B 133). Empirical apperception means that I am conscious of perceiving (intuiting or conceiving) something. Pure apperception, on the other hand, is to be conscious of consciousness in general. "Any judgement is therefore a consciousness of consciousness". The continuing, self-identical subject is a necessary condition for empirical knowledge because without such synthetic unity of consciousness, i.e., without the synthesizing of the manifold of intuition in one and the same consciousness, there could be no experience of objects.

The abiding and unchanging 'I' (pure apperception) forms the correlate of all our representations insofar as it is to be at all possible that we should become conscious of them (A 123).

Empirical consciousness is simply our inner sense (A 107). The subjective unity of consciousness or empirical consciousness (B 140) is simply "...a *determination of inner sense* -- through which the manifold of intuition for such [objective] combination is empirically given" (B 139). Empirical consciousness is therefore equivalent to our personal, individual, psychological egos which amounts to nothing more than our own individual and personal psychological states -- states which are constantly changing.

Consciousness of self according to the determinations of our state in inner perception is merely empirical, and always changing. No fixed and abiding self can present itself in this flux of inner appearances. Such consciousness is usually named inner sense, or empirical apperception (A 107).

Since time alone is the a priori form for inner sense, "...everything that is in inner sense, is in constant flux" (B 291). In other words, as a determination of inner sense, everything found in empirical consciousness is in flux. "For space alone is determined as permanent, while time, and therefore everything that is in inner sense, is in constant flux" (B 291). Thus no fixed and abiding self ("perfectly identical and simple") can be found, as Hume demonstrated, simply by looking within empirical consciousness.

Empirical consciousness, i.e., the inner and sensible intuition of our mind, is an appearance (in the transcendental sense). Sankara would call it "*maya*" which, though often translated as "illusion" is, in fact, simply appearance. We only know ourselves through our psychological states, that is, we only know ourselves from what it is that presents itself to us. Only the psychological states of the empirical ego are immediately given. The transcendental subject, on the other hand, though the most necessary element in the *Critique*, is an unknown being (B 520). We cannot know ourselves as we are as things in themselves because we know psychological

states temporally and Kant has demonstrated that time can never be a feature of things in themselves. We therefore know ourselves only as we are qua appearances.

Critical Reflection

Is it possible that the Upanishads and the entire Vedantic tradition have made two fundamental errors? First, they appear to have turned the logical distinction between the epistemological subject and its intentional object into an ontological distinction. Secondly, they have used some form of the principle of intentionality to distinguish pure consciousness, both logically as well as ontologically, from the individual who is conscious resulting in a completely disembodied, impersonal consciousness which can be described only as pure being. Pure consciousness without flesh.

Strictly speaking, the Vedantic tradition seems to be guilty of chronic ontologizing, the result of an illegitimate shift from isolating and describing, albeit very accurately, the subject *qua* epistemological *concept* to an understanding of this very same subject *qua* metaphysical *entity*. This is a shift from the subject which can never be objectified by thought (Kena Upanishad) to a reification of that subject as some ontologically “entity” which is quite separate and distinct not only from objects in the external world but also from its own body but also from the content of its own consciousness, that is, from its own mind or empirical ego. As a consequence, the Upanishads and Vedanta have ontologized certain aspects of the individual from terms which are appropriate only within a phenomenological description or an epistemological analysis. Since knowing and acting cannot ontologically be divorced from the individual, it would seem that we ought to be obliged to acknowledge the *jiva* or socially functioning individual not only as the starting point but perhaps also as the legitimate bottom-line of any investigation. In other words, while it is both logically possible and even phenomenological fruitful to consider certain aspects of ourselves in isolation from one another, converting these descriptive aspects into ontological parts simply perverts the concept of “person”. Recognition of a “transcendental ego” as a necessary feature of an adequate phenomenology of consciousness is deserving of merit. However, as Kant demonstrated, it is not licence to generate an ontological entity.

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