

A NOTE TOWARDS THE DISCUSSION OF ŚANKARA'S THEORY OF ERROR

Introduction

This paper does not present philosophical results; it attempts to find a direction. It is presented in the hope of finding out how far, if at all, it succeeds in finding a direction.

In the first part of this paper, I bring up some methodological considerations. They concern the concern of philosophy with reality, experience and language. Broadly, I try to argue that any philosophy is concerned, if not explicitly, implicitly, with all the three. Whatever the explicit concern of any philosopher or School of Philosophy, the considerations brought up by them have a logical and/or conceptual force. And yet a significant distinction can be made between those who are concerned with the philosophy of language or linguistic philosophy and those who are not, on the ground of what is done with the conceptual considerations. If they are used to mark off distinctions in forms (of reality, experience or discourse), then one is doing linguistic philosophy. If they are used to subsume different forms under one or more forms, then one is not doing linguistic philosophy, or philosophy of language.

In the light of these remarks, in the second section I consider the discussion of some issues (these issues, though they do not directly belong to Śankara, are adequate to indicate a direction). My conclusion is that the discussion of these issues is not an exercise in linguistic philosophy in the sense in which linguistic philosophy is significantly different from other philosophies.

In the last section, I repeat my remarks in the introduction and add a few more in the light of what I have said in the first two sections.

I

Some methodological considerations

As I said in the introduction, I want to begin with methodological considerations. These methodological considerations can be brought out by considering the sketch of a philosophical argu-

ment. In giving the briefest possible sketch of the argument, I hope I have taken some care to avoid gross confusion.

Take the following sceptical argument in the discussion of the problem of physical objects :

- (i) What we know are only our own sensations.
- (ii) Sensations do not preclude the possibility of (a) our not knowing that there is 'p' (physical object) or (b) there being no 'p'.
- (iii) Therefore: (a) we do not know that there are physical objects; not only that, we cannot know that there are physical objects; (b) there may or may not be 'p'.

It is possible to understand this argument, sometimes by itself, sometimes in the context of a larger discussion in a number of ways :

1. The argument may be interpreted to consider whether there really are physical objects, and to answer the question negatively or agnostically. But it could also be part of a larger discussion which denies the subjectivist or the sceptical approach, and asserts a transcendental approach to the existence of the physical objects.

2. The argument may also be interpreted to consider the nature and validity of possible human experience. As such it asserts that we have experience only of sensations and not of physical objects. But then it could be part of a larger discussion which denies the subjectivist or the sceptical approach to the knowledge of physical objects and accepts either direct experience or some other mode of knowing the physical object.

3. The argument may be interpreted to be rooted in the 'same' forms of expressions, being used to express very different situations or realities e.g., 'seeing' being used to express the experience of physical objects as also the experience of hallucinations or illusions. But if this understanding can be used to sort out the different forms of experience, reality or language, it could also be part of a larger argument to claim that all discourse is inadequate to express reality and/or experience.

If I am right in thinking that all these interpretations are plausible, then it would appear that one could consider any philosophy, whatever its explicit claims, from any one or more of these

angles. And it would not be possible to sharply distinguish one kind of approach from another. One might call any philosophy, philosophy of reality, philosophy of language or philosophy of experience. One way of distinguishing between them will be with reference to the claim each one makes. Another will be with reference to the association of one with one particular kind of approach rather than with another, e.g., the philosophy of language in one of its contemporary understandings is associated more with the sorting out of the forms of discourse rather than with systematising them. It is this approach which is opposed to what is called the metaphysical approach. In so far as the view that language is inadequate to express reality is also called philosophy of language, it would be fundamentally different from the specific understanding of linguistic philosophy as distinguished from metaphysical philosophy.

Let me try to make the same point more concretely. Suppose in considering the problem of physical objects and dreams, one sees that there are difficulties in assimilating the two forms of experience or reality. In this situation, one may do one of two things: (i) one may give up the attempt to assimilate or subsume, and recognize the different forms as different; or (ii) one may recognize one of the two forms as fundamental and try to understand the other form in terms of the first. Until one adopts one or the other of these two approaches, the work of the two different schools of philosophy may more or less be the same. The difference is brought about by the kind of use one makes of the conceptual considerations. It is the difference in use that makes for the differences in philosophical schools.

II

An issue in the philosophy of perception :

A point I want to take up for discussion is the comparison between two types of illusion and the sort of conclusions drawn from such a comparison. In one illusion, one sees a yellow conch where, in fact, there is a white conch seen through an unnoticed yellow glass. In the other illusion, one sees a block of ice, when in fact, there is only a crystal.

(i) In the former, both conch and yellow are (seen) in the field of vision; but in the latter the block of ice is not in the field of vision.

(a) The terminology here is ambiguous. It is not clear whether 'being in the field of vision' is merely a physical/physiological concept, or it is also a psychological concept. Only in so far as it is a physical/physiological concept, can we clearly say that the distinction that is made between the two kinds of illusion holds. If it is a psychological concept also, then it would be wrong to say that the white conch and the yellow glass are seen. But the white conch and the yellow glass along with the laws of physics and psychology provide an explanation for my seeing of a yellow conch. Such a kind of explanation is not available in the case of my seeing a block of ice when, in fact, there is only a crystal.

(b) But it must be noted that the possibility of such an explanation in the case of 'seeing a yellow conch' does not enable us to distinguish between 'seeing' which is not illusory, and 'seeing' which is illusory, because a similar kind of explanation is available in the case of the 'seeing' that is not illusory. When I see a white conch which is there, it is possible to explain my seeing with reference to the conch and the physio-psychological laws.

(c) It might be said that the ground for the distinction between the illusory and the non-illusory is given by the fact that when our seeing of the yellow conch is explained, though we continue to see as if there were a yellow conch, we do not think that there is a yellow conch. No such change takes place when we explain our seeing of a white conch which is there.

(d) The argument we have given in (c), could be met in different ways :

(I) This kind of difference does not give ground for the distinction we want. A particular perception is sublated, because it is conditional. But not only such perceptions, but all others are conditional and in the last analysis, open to sublation. I have not been able to give sufficient thought to this argument to determine its value.

(II) The account given in (c) does not succeed in making the distinction, because what we want to know is the ground or validity of our designating the object as illusory or non-illusory on the ground of sublation.

Comments :

(1) It is very important to note the difference between these two ways of meeting the account in (c). The first way extends the possibility of sublating to normal seeing and thereby makes the distinction between illusory and non-illusory not so fundamental—only practical. From a different point of view, both are illusory and/or uncertain. The second way rejects the account in (c), because it wants a distinction between the two which will not be open to such extension, and will therefore be fundamental. This way, therefore, is interested in sorting out the different forms, and not subsuming a plurality under one or more forms, on the basis of the similarities between them.

(2) On account of the formulation of distinction given in (1), a strong attempt is made to explain the illusion in which one sees a block of ice when, in fact, there is only a crystal, in terms similar to those in which the illusion in which one sees a yellow conch is explained.

It might be said that the object has been experienced and is elsewhere. But to provide a physical existence in the manner of the illusion of the yellow conch is not satisfactory. The problem is regarding the relevance of such past experience to the present experience in which one sees the block of ice.

It is no more satisfactory to replace the experienced physical object by a memory image or an ideal construction, because a memory image has reference to the past, and an ideal construction to the future, or to no time whereas in our experience the block of ice is here and now. The erroneous object there, is a unique presentation.

Comments :

It is interesting to note that in so far as we have here a distinction, forms of reality are being sorted out. It is also important that it is not at all clear whether the distinction between the erroneous object and the memory image is drawn on grounds of introspection or on grounds of the use that one can make of them. One could make use of this situation to mark out other forms and their distinctions; but one would also look for similarities between the two illusions. And this is exactly what has been attempted to be done. I shall refer to it under (3).

(3) Another way in which the comparison between the two illusions is drawn is as follows :

In the 'yellow conch' illusion, when the error is discovered neither the subject nor the predicate is negated. Only a relation which was overlooked is now noticed. In the 'crystal ice' illusion though the predicate in, 'This is ice' is contradicted, the subject 'this' is not contradicted. It is retained in 'This is a crystal.' In this reference to the objective basis, both the illusions are alike.

Comments :

(a) It must be noted once again that this manner of bringing the two illusions together is not satisfactory, because this reference to 'this,' the uncharacterised basis is there in the case of normal and true perceptions also.

(b) One obvious ground for this insistence on an objective basis, in the context of the Advaita doctrine, is to show that there must necessarily be a ground for the changing reality.

(c) Is there anything which enables us to designate illusions and reality on the ground that one is sublated and the other is not? What makes the one experience of the real, and the other, an illusory experience? I do not know, but perhaps it is possible to say that the normal experience is the logically prior and the illusory, the logically posterior. It is the latter that has to be explained, in terms of the former, and not vice versa. This would be at least one sort of consideration which will give us a fundamental distinction between the real and the illusory.

(4) The last issue that I shall discuss is about the distinction between lack of apprehension and misapprehension. This distinction is used to differentiate between the two illusions. It is said that the 'yellow conch' illusion suffers from lack of apprehension and not misapprehension, whereas in the case of the crystal-ice illusion, we have misapprehension.

This distinction between the two kinds of illusion is based on the idea that in the yellow conch illusion one sees the white conch minus its color, and the yellow glass minus the glass. As we said earlier, it is not tenable in this case to speak of one's seeing the conch and the yellow.

Further, if lack of apprehension is recognized as lack of apprehension, there is no error; and if it is not recognized as lack of apprehension, (as it should not be if it is to characterise an error) then it is a misapprehension and not merely lack of apprehension.

When one can significantly draw a distinction between lack of apprehension and misapprehension, it does not describe the difference between two kinds of illusions; and when one uses these terms rightly to describe the distinction between the two illusions, the distinction between lack of apprehension and misapprehension is not significant.

III

Some concluding remarks :

As I said in the introduction, the paper is only an attempt at finding a direction. One way to find a direction is to pursue a distinction of the sort we have taken and to see if we can make something of it. May be this will enable us to recognize some distinctions which are philosophically significant and which are specifically noticed in Indian Philosophy.

I hope I have not been altogether unintelligible or incoherent.

—K. J. Shah.

