

SANKARA AND LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS *

That Sankara advocates linguistic analysis of a sort as a means of illumination will be evident from the following passage in his commentary on the Brahma Sutras. "The comprehension of Brahman", says Sankara, "is effected by the ascertainment, consequent on discussion, of the sense of the Vedanta statements, not either by inference or by any other means of valid knowledge".¹ This might easily be construed as an emphasis in Sankara on linguistic analysis as a means of philosophical enlightenment called Brahmā-vagati which is the same as liberation in Advaita Vedanta.² And, ofcourse, vākyārtha vicāraṇā or consideration of the meaning of statements has a significant role to play in the entire scheme of Sankara. But it should be borne in mind that vākyārtthāvicārāṇā in the present context means a consideration of the Vedantic statements. According to Sankara it is not merely the understanding of the explicit meaning of any sentence that gives us enlightenment. Vākyārthā here implies māhāvākyārthā, the meaning of statements such as 'That thou art', and vicāraṇā can be construed as analysis or a critical study where we take into consideration not only the explicit meaning (vācyārthā) but also the implicit significance (Lakṣyārthā) of the statement.

Moreover, it should be borne in mind that for Sankara all the statements of Vedantic literature are not of the same status. Whenever there is any talk of creation or of Brahmaparināma with all its ramifications, their actual purport, according to Sankara, lies in something quite different from what they explicitly signify, viz. the realisation of non-duality or 'Advaita'. Passages speaking of parināma are signi-

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ficant according to him only in so far as they make us realize the identity of Brahman and Ātman which alone makes us free. This, ofcourse, they cannot achieve by themselves but through the help of other statements such as Tattvamasi or 'That thou art'. The latter statements, therefore, have a privileged status in Sankara Vedanta so far as Brahmāvagati is concerned. These are regarded as akhandārthakavākyas to be contrasted with samsargāvagāhivākyas. Though relational in form they simply point to an identity of meaning of the expressions used (anyonyatādātmya) When we get rid of the multiple forms created by avidyā or ignorance through an analysis of the meaning of the mahāvākyas like Tattvamasi we realise the Advaita or non-duality, the unity of all existence.

Here a significant point needs to be considered. Is it a fact that in Sankara Vedanta a mere understanding of the meaning of statements through analysis is supposed to constitute illumination? Is it our ignorance regarding different linguistic forms alone which causes misery according to Sankara? So that once clarification in this regard is achieved is there nothing else left to be known? Is Avidyā a mere linguistic error or confusion? There is some such implication to be found in the writings of some recent day thinkers³ for whom linguistic analysis is the be-all and end-all in Sankara's philosophy. Adhyāsa or avidyā for them is nothing but linguistic confusion and consequently Brahmajñāna is reduced to nothing but a linguistic illumination through linguistic analysis. To my mind it appears that such interpretations of Sankara Vedanta with all their ingenuity and insight miserably suffer from what I would regard as the fallacy of reductionism. The author of this paper, though not so very radical in his approach to linguistic analysis in Sankara did, at one time, talk of the linguistic error and even of the 'linguistic bondage'⁴ in Sankara, which alone, according to him, needs eradication and, to that extent, was guilty of

committing the same fallacy of reductionism. Analysis, it should be admitted, does play a very significant, rather in certain context the central, role in achieving illumination. But every thing in Sankara Vedanta, I submit, cannot be reduced to linguistic analysis.

A word here regarding the recent-day interpretations of Sruti as logical analysis of meanings and Sabda as linguistic analysis.⁵ Sruti or Sabda, I submit cannot be interpreted as mere linguistic analysis, for in such contexts Sankara refers to different passages belonging to the entire body of Vedanta literature and also grades them for his purpose. So some of the passages which are regarded as Sabda or Sruti are regarded as either not being conducive to illumination or possessing only figurative or secondary significance, as for example the passages speaking of creation. Moreover, Sankara in his commentary on Brahma Sutras 4.1.3. refers to a passage from Brhadāranyaka, viz., "Veda Avedah" and explicitly speaks of the abhāva of Sruti when true knowledge (prabodha) dawns. All this will be inconsistent with the interpretation of Sruti as mere logical analysis of language. Are we supposed to understand that logical analysis of linguistic forms ceases to function after enlightenment? So the entire body of Vedanta literature was under consideration of Sankaracarya when he was speaking of Sruti or Sabda as a pramāṇa. When he was talking of Vāk्यārthavicāraṇa or the analysis of the meaning of a sentence, in his commentary on 1st chapter, 1st pada, 2nd Sutra, he was referring to an analysis of the meaning of the Vedanta passages found in the body of Vedanta literature which has come down to us as Sruti or Sabda. And the entire context of his remark is not to be lost sight of in this connection. The idea was to refute the Mimamsakas who interpreted the entire Sruti as a body of injunctions (Vidhi) and prohibitions (niṣedha). Sankara wanted to point out that the Vedantic literature

refers to an existing reality called Brahman and that the passages like 'tattvamasi' are meant to refer to this existing reality, not to any injunctions or prohibitions. So Brahman can be realized only by concentrating on such passages from Vedanta literature. That the whole of Vedanta literature is meant to highlight this existing reality which is non-dual, being identified with the very self of the enquirer, is evident from his commentary on 'Tattu samanvayāt' (1.1.4). Certainly, one cannot say that illumination, according to Sankara, would follow from an analysis by itself of the meaning of any referring expression or any identity statement vis-a-vis descriptive or prescriptive statements. Even an analysis of secular statements like 'thou art the tenth' (Dasamastvamasi) or 'This is that Devadatta' (Soyam Devadattah) can lead to illumination provided they are considered along with 'Tattvamasi' etc. found in the context of Vedantic literature, which alone are regarded as mahāvākyas.

Avidyā or adhyāsa, according to Sankara, is 'atasmin tadbuddhih' i.e., to have the idea of something in something else. In the present context it would signify the idea of the self being confused with the idea of the object and that of the object being confused with the self. For Sankara the lokavyavahāra i.e., the normal transaction which is based on adhyāsa is expressed in language through such expressions as 'I am this', aham idam and 'this is mine', mama idam etc. The issue, therefore, is ontological, not merely linguistic. It is the all pervasive and deep-rooted ignorance of the non-dual reality in Sankara Vedanta which is at the basis of our ordinary transactions expressed in the form of linguistic expression such as 'I am this' and 'This is mine'. The entire confusion expressed in the form of our ordinary language is based on a deep-rooted ignorance which is regarded as beginningless (anādi), endless (ananta), and natural (naisargika). Confusion such as

a man considering himself hale and hearty or the contrary so long as his wife and children etc., are hale and hearty or otherwise, or a man taking himself to be stout, lean, fair, mute, deaf or blind etc. are all expressions of a deep-rooted ignorance or avidyā in Sankara Vedanta. Not only this, the entire transactions of man as an agent or an enjoyer are based on this ignorance. It is true that ordinary language reflects this ignorance but this is only in case of those who take ordinary language to be revealing the nature of ultimate reality, that is to say so far as ordinary language is taken to be something more than vyāvahārika. A philosophically enlightened person may use the same language knowing fully well that this is of mere practical value and all the while he is not misled by the distinctions expressed in the form of ordinary language. Language, therefore, does not necessarily create the illusion of which Sankara speaks, nor is it a fact that the confusion here is merely verbal. Ignorance consists in seeing distinctions where in reality there are none. Distinctionless non-dual reality has an ontic status in Advaita Vedanta and hence the error originating from distinctions should therefore be an ontological one, expressed in the form of our behaviour, normal transactions and in ordinary language. In this context it would be worthwhile to remember that Vidyā, in Sankara, is 'vastusvarūpāvadhāraṇa' or the ascertainment of the nature of Reality, not mere linguistic illumination.

Analysis is a means to eradicate this error. But unless the Advaita is realised through such analysis, mere linguistic clarification is not enough. It is, therefore, essential to make a distinction between mere understanding of the linguistic forms through analysis on the one hand and the eradication of ignorance and consequent realisation of Advaita which is effected through analysis on the other. What exactly is the difference between the understanding

of different forms of language and the understanding that eradicates avidyā through analysis? This will be clear from the word 'adhyāvasana' which is used by Sankara immediately following the words vākyārtha vicāranā. Vacaspati Misra has very rightly explained adhyavasāna as savāsānā avidyadvāyochheda i.e., the eradication of two types of ignorance along with their tendencies. Ignorance manifests in our ordinary language and in our normal transactions not only when we regard a person as ignorant in the ordinary sense (Tūlā vidyā) but also when he has the deep-rooted ignorance (Mūlā vidyā). Both these kinds of ignorance are reflected in ordinary language and need to be eradicated through analysis. Then only there will be Brahmāvagati, which ofcourse is Puruṣārtha. If this point is lost sight of, as it has been in case of those who regard linguistic illumination to be the be all and the end-all in Sankara Vedanta, how is one going to explain Sankara's condemnation in Vivekacūdamani of a Vidvān, who is learned in Vedanta, or is Vedanta nayanta darsi as Sankara would call him? When Sankara speaks of vidusah sarva pravṛtṭyasambandhah in his commentary on Brahma Sūtras, 1.1.4. the same word vidvān has been used also to refer to Brahmajñāni whose ignorance has been removed. To my mind it is very important to draw a distinction between these two types of 'vidvān' as envisaged in Sankara's literature.

The point which I want to make is that mere understanding of the logic of language, in the sense of clarifying the distinctions between subject and predicate or distinguishing between various types of discourses like prescriptive, descriptive, or referring, is not the same as Brahmajñāni. Knowledge of these distinctions is necessary but it is not sufficient. Sankara explicitly points out that even if one is intelligent, scholarly, and full of insight into the most subtle meanings of the śāstras, still on being enveloped by tamas he regards the unreal to be the

reality.⁶ Here again the implication is that knowledge of subtle distinctions of meaning is not enough. Moreover, one fails to understand how on the radically linguistic version of Advaita Vedanta one would explain Sankara's statement that the knower of the six systems of Philosophy including Vedanta is not fit for liberation whereas one who is free from the bondage of attachment towards objects alone is fit for liberation⁷.

Sankara's conception of reality is derived from the criterion of unchangeability. Whatever is permanently of one and the same nature is real and knowledge about it is regarded as right knowledge.⁸ Sankara's point is that there cannot be any controversy concerning right knowledge. For example, there cannot be any difference of opinion regarding the fire being hot. And the knowledge of fire being hot, therefore, is right knowledge (Samyakjñāna). Taking this clue from our ordinary conception, he builds an ontology of Brahman, the ultimate reality which never changes. And Brahmajñāna is the realisation of such unchanging reality. All those distinctions that we see being subject to change can only be regarded as fabrications of avidyā or ignorance. When ignorance vanishes through analysis what remains is the unchanging, non-dual reality. Analysis is a method by which ignorance can be removed and Brahmajñāna arrived at provided it is accompanied by all other paraphernalia such as sāma, dāma, titikṣā, uprati etc, along with nididhyāsana or constant concentration on the truth which of course is not a mere linguistic one. On the other hand, it should also be borne in mind that nididhyāsana is not concentration on some ontological entity called Brahman, because that would imply a distinction between subject and object which is not acceptable in the context of Brahmajñāna. That is why it is properly understood as Brahmānubhava or Brahmāvagati as distinguished from knowledge in ordinary discourse.

This would be the comprehension or realisation of truth as Sankara would conceive it, whether one agrees with Sankara or not. In this way alone we can have a proper understanding of Sankara's philosophy as a comprehensive system, which was lost sight of in the maze of piecemeal linguistic analysis done by the recent interpreters. The impression that is given by such interpreters is that Sankara was concerned only with an analysis of a sort and that too the linguistic analysis of various statements. They even go to the extent of asserting that the Advaitin was talking of various structures of language and that his aim was to reveal the depth structure which is the eternal structure in contrast with the surface structure. Brahma Satyam Jagatmithya, these well-known expressions ascribed to Sankara are interpreted to mean that the logical subject is eternal and incorrigible whereas the logical predicate is corrigible. Moreover, the well-known criterion of Reality put forward by Sankara in Gita Bhasya, viz., yad viṣayā buddhiḥ na vyadhicarati tat sat is taken to refer to an idea, not to the Reality, the interpretation given being, "that idea in our discourse which is not capable of change is the eternal or Sat".⁹ But in fact Sankara here is speaking of the criterion of Reality (yad viṣaya buddhiḥ), not of mere idea in our discourse, nor is there any justification for reducing the distinction between Brahman and Jagat to a distinction of the logical subject and the logical predicate. Certainly Brahman of Sankara was not meant to be identified with a mere logical subject. Logical subject has only a specific and restricted use in its tradition. My point is that there is a peculiar ontic reference in Sankara which cannot be eliminated, and this ontic reference cannot be adequately brought out by pointing out the role of logical subject in language. Such exclusive talks of logical subject-predicate distinctions in Advaita would not only involve the fallacy of reductionism but it would also amount to a sort of philosophical anachronism. No

doubt Sankara does advocate illumination through analysis, but here analysis is to be taken as the analysis of akhandārthaka vākyas in so far as it is conducive to the eradication of avidyā resulting in illumination with regard to the nature of ultimate reality,, not a mere linguistic illumination. Ignorance or Avidyā is pervasive and deep-rooted and as language reflects this ignorance, analysis of language becomes necessary for eradication of ignorance. But what is important is that ignorance about the nature of reality be eradicated and illumination regarding the nature of the same be obtained--not illumination about linguistic form alone--which would constitute moksa or liberation according to Sankara.

Department of Philosophy,
Utkal University,
Bhubaneswar.

G. C. NAYAK

REFERENCES

1. Cf. "Vākyārtha Vicārañādhyāvasānanirvrttā hi Brahmāvagatihnānumānādi pramāṇāntaranirvrtta" 1.1.2.
2. Cf. "Brahmāvagatirhi puruṣārthah".
3. Cf. G. Misra, Analytical Studies in Indian Philosophical problems (Bhubaneswar, 1971) and The Advaita Conception of Philosophy: Its Method, Scope and Limits.
4. Cf. G.C.Nayak, Lecturers delivered at Poona University in 1972 published in Indian Philosophical Quarterly, Vol.I No.I, also in Essays in Analytical Philosophy (Santosh Publication, Cuttack, 1978), Chapter 4.
5. Cf. Misra, Op.cit.

6. Cf. Vivekacudamani, "Prajñāvēnāpi panditopi Caturōpastyantasūksmārthadrk, Vyālidhastamasā na vetti vahudhā Sambodhitopi sphutam".
7. Cf. Ibid., "Visayāśā mohapāśādyo vimuktah sudustyaajāt, Saeva kalpate muktyai nānyah Satsāstravedyapi".
8. Cf. Sankara's Commentary on Brahma Sutras, 2.1.4., "Ekarupena avasthitah yorthah sa paramartha".
9. Cf. G. Misra, The Advaita Conception of Philosophy: Its Method, Scope and Limits, P.18.