

IS “TATTVAM ASI” THE SAME TYPE OF IDENTITY STATEMENT AS “THE MORNING STAR IS THE EVENING STAR”?

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“*Tattvam Asi*” is the well-known statement from one of the oldest Upanisads which has been the subject of interminable controversy of the Indian philosophical tradition where the question is raised as to how exactly it is to be understood or interpreted. It has at least two thousand years of history behind the diverse attempts at determining what it means. The statement, “the morning star is the evening star”, on the other hand, does not have such a long history behind it as it was first formulated by Frege in the nineteenth century to bring to the attention of the philosophical world in the West a distinction which has since become famous and has led to a great deal of philosophical discussion. There has been, as far as I know, no controversy regarding its interpretation, or any discussion concerning what exactly it means. Yet, both the statements share a common problematic as they point to two seemingly different entities which are regarded as totally different from each other and yet which are really identical in a fundamental sense that is not known to those who see them as different. In fact, normally the question of denying their difference does not arise as the difference is rooted in a foundational experience which normally does not permit the raising of any doubt about it.

The assertion of identity, therefore, derives from a more powerful, deeper and fundamental source negating the certitude of the experience on which the assertion of difference was earlier based. But what can be the possible grounds for preferring the asserted identity over the earlier assertion of the difference which was also based on seemingly substantive grounds? Why should the assertion of identity overrule the assertion of difference, or be regarded as now fundamental and truer is the essential question in both the contexts.

There are two different questions involved in any consideration of these two statements deriving from two very different traditions of philosophizing in

the two major traditions of the world. The first relates to the problem as to what an identity statement exactly means. The second relates to the question as to why the identity statements even if true, be regarded as more fundamental or "truer" than the statement asserting the difference between the two. And though the discussion until now, both in the Indian and the Western tradition, has been confined to the assertion of an identity statement in respect to entities which were earlier considered to be different, there is no need to do so, as there is, at the same time, the problem of coming to know that two things which were considered to be identical are really different, thereby annulling the identity which was asserted earlier. The objection may be raised that the very statement that the two entities were regarded as identical points to the fact that there was some difference between the two, as otherwise they would not have been regarded as "two". However, the objection assumes that a "true" identity statement cannot in principle be made about any entities which are even numerically different. This would, of course, imply that no difference whatsoever could ever be permitted in the context of the assertion of a "real" identity. But then even the assertion of identity in the case of such statement as "*Tattvam Asi*" or "the morning star is the evening star", will be deceptive as there will be some difference between the two arising from the fact they they were considered to be different. In fact, the difference between the "morning star" and the "evening star" does not disappear when it comes to be known that both the expressions refer to an identical objects, that is, the planet "Venus". The distinction between "sense and reference" is itself based on this difference, as it is held that while the senses of the two expressions are different, their referent is the same. However, even when the identity of the referent is known, the difference in the senses does not disappear.

Traditionally in order to avoid this difficulty, it was usually held that proper names have no connotation and that they derive their meaning only from the object that they name. On the other hand, it was held that common nouns have only connotation but no denotation, and that was supposed to be the reason for the view that the existence of what they connoted was still to be established as one did not know whether the properties connoted by those words actually applied or belonged to some entity. But such a view, though widely prevalent, goes counter to the fact that most proper names have a "meaning" attached to them which one can easily read off from the name itself. One can, for example,

easily tell whether the name belongs to a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian and not only this, but also whether one is a German, Russian, Chinese or Japanese. One may, of course, be sometimes mistaken in this, but then one can always be mistaken about anything. The point is that one can, in most cases, tell correctly the properties which belong to the person whose name it is supposed to be. Moreover, as the same name belongs to many different persons and sometimes even to pet animals, to consider such proper names as purely denotative seems obviously mistaken. It is perhaps only in an ideal language that each existent object in the world will have its own name which would be applied to no one else and which would designate no other properties which would belong to the person or object whose "name" it is. The numerical identification of objects tries to do just this as in such a language the object is given to no one else. But even in such a language after one has become acquainted with the object to which the number has been assigned, one begins to associate the number itself with the peculiar specification of the object to which the number was assigned. From that point onwards, the numerical designation ceases to be purely denotative as is known to everyone who has tried to give numbers to individuals and called them by that name.

In fact, the problem of identity arises in the context of proper names also. The same child who is known by his or her pet name has also a formal name at school and other children in the school know him or her by that name. In such a situation, if a friend comes home for a visit and hears the child called by her pet name, he would normally think that it was someone else who was being addressed. So it becomes a learning experience to find that her friend whom she called "Sidhant" at school is known as "Tin Tin" at home. Thus, for her, "Tin Tin" is "Sidhant" would be as much a piece of information as "the morning star is the evening star" was for Frege or "*Tattvam Asi*" was for "Śvetaketu". In fact, the same situation would obtain if in place of two proper names which apply to the same object, we would have a definite description for one of the proper names, say for example, that "Sidhant" is the one who stood first in his class or who had obtained the highest score in the cricket match which his school team had played against another school. The definite description can be made as precise as one wants so that it may apply only to the object which bears that name.

A definite description functions as uniquely denotative, even though it

connotes specific properties, for it connotes them in such a way that they apply only to one individual in the world. But it is not necessary that an object may have only one definite description, which applies to it alone. In fact it may have more than one definite description which uniquely designates it, and then there can be a significant identity statement asserting that the object designated by one definite description is the same as the one designated by the other definite description. The statement "the morning star is the evening star" may thus be constructed as a statement of identity between two definite descriptions which were not known to apply to the same object earlier .

The theory of proper names and definite descriptions has gone through a complicated discussion, but the niceties and the subtleties introduced by it are irrelevant to the point that we are making in the context of the analysis and understanding of what an identity statement involves and means. In the statement "the morning star is the evening star", both the "morning star" and the "evening star" are objects of perception, the only difference between them being that one is observed in the morning while the other is observed in the evening. The identical object to which these two expressions refer is supposed to be the planet "Venus". The identity asserted, therefore, can only be on some other ground which would most probably be theoretical one as even if we admit that the planet Venus is observable through other means, the identity of the perceptual object with the one that is perceived as the morning star and the evening star will most probably be on theoretical considerations.

In the Upaniṣadic statement, on the other hand, the "Brahman" which is one term in the identity statement cannot normally be taken to be an object of perception or introspective experience, while the "ātman" which is the other term in the identity statement may be regarded as the object of introspective experience. In case this is accepted, one term of the identity statement deriving from the Upaniṣads would have to be held to be theoretical in nature. While the other term is considered to refer to something that is experienced. However, it may also be held that the self, which is introspectively known can never be regarded as the *ātman*. for the *ātman* is that which can never be the object of experience, whether introspective or perceptual. This, of course, has been the usual contention at least among the Advaitins; however, in case this is accepted, the *ātman* would also have to be treated as a theoretical postulate introduced to understand the unity of experience underlying the changing mental states which

alone are the objects of introspective experience. The theoretical necessity of postulating the unity of the world or all that is "object" in the concept of Brahman, is matched by the theoretical necessity of postulating the *ātman* to account for the unity of all that is experienced by the self. The identity statement, according to this interpretation, asserts the identity between two theoretically postulated entities for understanding experience in its objective and subjective aspects, and thus will be radically different from the statement of identity between the morning star and the evening star.

In the second statement, the two entities whose identity is being asserted are already objects of perceptual experience and hence after the realization that the two objects which were seen at different times are really the same, nothing further need be done except the annulment of the mistaken notion that they were different. As against this, the identity statement concerning the *ātman* and the Brahman results in the demand for the experiential realization of that identity, for the two are still experienced as different. In fact, the two are not experienced at all as they are the result of a theoretical insight, and hence demand experiential realization of the identity between them. Neither the *ātman* nor the Brahman are directly experienced, and hence require a special spiritual praxis for their existential realization in experience. There has, therefore, to be a two-fold *sādhana*, one for the actual realization in one's experience of the *ātman* and the other for the realization of the Brahman. There seems, however, to be a radical difference between the two as the *ātman* refers to the unity of the self which in some sense is already included in all experience. But while the *ātman* has the unity which is a part of all experience, that which is experienced as object is obviously not experienced in the same way. The difference would become clearer if instead of the *ātman* and the Brahman, we talk of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. The *Puruṣa* as the witness consciousness is an essential element of all conscious experience, and though in the Śāṅkhyan framework it cannot be regarded as the unity underlying all experience or as even unifying it in any sense whatsoever, it still is present in all experience. *Prakṛti* on the other hand, is only the postulated unity of all that is "object", including not only mental and physical processes but also the functioning of intellect and reason, along with even the sense of egoity or "I-ness". But it is never directly experienced as the witness - consciousness is.

In the Śāṅkhyan framework what is attempted to be realised is only the

Puruṣa as bereft of all identification with the “object” in any sense whatsoever, and not the *prakṛti*. The Sāṃkhyan paradigm thus starts with the assertion that the experienced identity of the self with the “object” at any level is mistaken for the two are radically different from each other. Here, we start with an experienced identity which on theoretical grounds is supposed to be mistaken and hence what is asserted as the difference between that which is experienced as identity. The self naturally identifies itself with “I-ness”, reason and other mental processes. It also identifies itself with the body and its various organs, particularly in the processes of knowing, feeling and willing. I open my eyes and see; I feel pain and say that I am in pain; I will to lift my hand and I do so. Thus the act of identification is existential and experiences all the time. It is only some theoretical considerations which lead one to the conclusion that such an identification is mistaken and that “I” cannot be the one who knows, feels, wills or reasons. The demand in this case then, is to realize that one is not what one usually considers oneself to be and therefore one has to successively de-identify oneself from all that is “object” to one’s consciousness, that is the body, the mind, the intellect, the sense of “I-ness”, or anything else which may appear as object to one’s consciousness and with which one identifies almost naturally.

The theoretical considerations which lead one to the realization of oneself as “*Puruṣa*” should therefore be different from the theoretical considerations which lead one to postulate oneself as “*Ātman*” and attempt to realize or actualize it in one’s lived experience, if one is to maintain a distinction between the “*Puruṣa*” of Sāṃkhya and the “*Ātman*” of Vedānta. But somehow the Vedāntins, including the Advaitins, have failed to make this distinction, even though they have interpreted the Upaniṣadic statements such as “*Tattvam Asi*”, “*Aham Brahmāsmi*”, “*Sarvam Khalvidam Brahman*” differently. Not only this as we had pointed out long ago in an article entitled “*Adhyāsa -- a non--Advaitic beginning in Sāṃkhya Vedānta*”, Sāṃkhya himself starts his well-known “*Bhāṣya* on the *Brahmasūtras* with a *Sāṃkhya adhyāsa* and not with an Advaitic *adhyāsa* as one would have expected him to do. The difference between the two emanates from what one considers to be mistaken, the difference or the identity. In Sāṃkhya, as everyone knows, the fundamental mistake consists of *identifying* the self with anything else. While in Advaita Vedānta, it consists of thinking oneself to be *different* from anything else. The

fundamental assertion therefore in the former is of radical difference where, because of ignorance, identity is experienced. In the latter, on the other hand, what is asserted is identity where, because of ignorance, one experiences distinction and difference. In both cases, however, the mistake is actually experienced and when, on theoretical grounds, it is realized that the mistake is a real mistake, the demand is for such a transformation of experience that the mistake is existentially annulled and that which was considered to be real on theoretical grounds is actually experienced existentially in place of what was experienced earlier. Thus, neither in Sāṃkhya nor in Advaita Vedānta is the mere theoretical realization of what is regarded as true sufficient, as from their perspective the theoretical apprehension of reality is never sufficient in itself since it only provides a ground to actually strive for an existential realization in one's experience. There is little point in knowing that the way one experiences reality in one's consciousness is fundamentally mistaken without trying to change that way of experiencing so that one begins to live a life in which one's consciousness undergoes such a transformation that one experiences reality in a different way. The usual correlation of theoretically argued philosophical positions in Sāṃkhya and Advāita Vedānta with techniques of spiritual praxis are supposed to result in this transformation of what was theoretically grasped into an actual lived experience that can be made intelligible in some way.

The paradigmatic example of a mistaken apprehension given in the tradition confirms this, for the snake which was seen and which aroused fear in one completely disappears when one realizes that it was not a snake but a rope. In the rope/snake example, which is usually given by the Advaitins in this connection, when the snake appears, the rope is completely absent and when one realizes that one was mistaken, what appears is only the rope and not the snake. But though the example is usually given and entails the complete disappearance of the snake after one has realized that it was really a rope, the question is raised as to what happens to the multiple differentiated reality of the world after one has realized that the *ātman* is not different from anything else. The problem of *jīvana-mukti* or the achievement of complete liberation even while one is alive raises this problem in a tangential way.

The Advaitin starts from the postulate of the unity of everything and the Sāṃkhya starts from the fact that anything which is an object to consciousness cannot have consciousness as its property. This appears, paradoxically, to share

the same view of “*adhyāsa*”, which is regarded as the foundational mistake in both the systems. It is, of course true that the Advaitin also asserts the primacy of consciousness especially in its witness aspect and focusses attention upon the fact that it alone remains constant while all that appears to it as object is variable. It does not emphasize the identification aspect of the consciousness with that which appears as “object” to it. It seems to be more interested in the constancy and invariability of consciousness vis a vis all that appears to it; but it gives no ground for holding that what is inconstant or variable is unreal. Not only this, it does not appear to make a distinction between the variability within an object and the variation that arises from the succession of one object by another in consciousness. In fact, it does not even distinguish between the change and variation in objects of consciousness which are due to consciousness itself and those which are due to changes in the objects of consciousness themselves. Normally it ascribes change in consciousness either to objects or to *samskāras* left by past experience, or even by *anādi vāsanā* for which no explanation is given.

The close affinity between the Sāṃkhya and the Advaitic analysis arises perhaps from the fact that the advaitin has not taken seriously his own insight deriving from the Upaniṣadic statement “*Sarvam khalvidam Brahman*” and has concentrated more on such statements as “*Tat Tvam Asi*” or “*Aham Brahmāsmi*”, which dominates Advaitic thinking, and not that of the Brahman. Had it done so, the advaitin would have tried to discover how he reached the concept of Brahman in the first place. If our attention shifts from the *ātman* to the Brahman, then we would see that it arises from our search for the unity underlying the multiplicity of the world and as we ourselves are a part of the world, it, that is, the Brahman, would also be one’s innermost reality, just as it is of everything else. But then one need not postulate *ātman* as a distinct element is one’s thought. It is the *ātman*-centric thought of the Advaitins that has created all the problems which could have easily been avoided if they had taken the Brahman-centric thought of the Upaniṣadic tradition more seriously. But then the identity statement would have been that the Brahman which underlies the multiplicity of the world and provides it with both unity and reality does the same for me and hence the reality in me is identical with it.

The Advaitin, on the other hand, seems to have started with the *ātman* as the underlying reality of all our conscious experience providing the both unity

and reality, and as this cannot be something unconscious, it gives it the essential quality of consciousness or even considers it as identical with consciousness. There seems, however, no necessity for attributing consciousness to the reality that provides unity to the whole world as the *Jaḍa Prakṛti*, or inanimate matter, can also be considered to provide it adequately as the Sāṃkhyans thought. But the Sāṃkhyans had to postulate a separate principle for understanding consciousness, unlike the thoroughgoing materialists such as the Cārvākas who regarded consciousness as one of the emergent properties of matter. Ultimately, then the dispute between the materialistic identification of everything with matter or energy and the spiritualist's identification of everything with the ātman or the Brahman consists in the fact that the latter is supposed to be intrinsically, inalienably and substantively conscious. But then the problem arises as to how to understand the inert matter that surrounds us everywhere; if it is essentially unconscious, it cannot be derived from a principle the essential reality of which consists of being conscious. Sri Aurobindo is perhaps the only thinker who has taken this problem seriously and argued that the denials of both the spiritualists and the materialists are one-sided as matter could not be so "material" if it could give rise to consciousness. However, he has not argued that the spirit could not be so "spiritual" if there was such a thing as matter in the world. Instead of taking this line which was implicit in his own argument, he has tried to explain matter in terms of the realization of one of the possibilities, inherent in consciousness itself, that is, of forgetfulness of seemingly putting everything aside and for the moment losing oneself almost completely in the given content of itself. Matter, therefore, for him is a seeming forgetfulness of consciousness where the latter appears to be completely concealed behind the mask of unconsciousness.

The worlds between matter and self-conscious mind have not been the subject of much attention in either Sāṃkhya or Advaitic thought. But there is the large world of life as in the plants or of consciousness in the animal world which also demands unity and reality of its own. Similarly, there is also the problem of the reality of these worlds to the world of matter and to the world of human beings who create cultures and civilizations and live primarily in a world consisting of symbols and meanings devised by themselves. The theory of evolution tries to realite these worlds, but fails to account for the radical discontinuities between them. Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, has taken into

account the principle of life independently of the world of mind but does not seem to have paid attention to the radical distinction between the world of plants and the world of animals nor does he discuss the distinctive autonomy of these realms and the significance of each in terms of its own reality.

However, the problem of an identification statement with respect to each of these realms and to all the realms together poses the same problem, that is, whether the identity asserted denies the differences within the realm or between the realms and if it does so, what does this denial actually mean. The assertion of the identity, however, always entails the fact that the asserted identity is more fundamental and "real" than the apparent difference which seems to be "real" in the first place, but on reflection, is not found to be so. The status of the "apparent" difference may, however, be a matter of dispute, as some may regard it to be only secondary in character, while others may consider it to be totally illusory or delusory or even the result of a delusion which is rooted in the psychology of the perceiver. The psychological foundations of the delusion may be side to lie not in the mind of the individual person but rather in what constitutes the psyche of humanity as a whole, thus giving the delusion the character of a shared, "objective" appearance which is common to all human beings. The difference between the illusion of which we talked about earlier and this delusion lies in the fact that while the former illusion is normally a result of the structure of the physical senses that all human beings have, the delusion occurs because of the common psychic propensities which all human beings possess just because they are human. Also, just as there can be a difference between a psychic delusion belonging to one single individual or a group of individuals and those that belong to all human kind as such, the illusions may also be the result of the specific physical structure of an individual human being or group of human beings and those which result from the fact that one shares the common biological structure with all human beings by virtue of the fact that they are human beings. The appearance, then, may result from many different causes, but its essential character lies in the fact that it is shown to be "unreal" by critical reflection which uncovers the ground of the "appearance" and reveals why that which "appears" to be so ought not to be regarded as real. But, as we have already pointed out, the "appearance" may not only be of differences, but also of identity, as the critical reflection has no special bias towards either identity or difference. In either case, one is presented with the problem as to how one is

to conceive of that which the critical reflection has shown to be mistaken, and what exactly happens to this mistake when it is realized to be a "mistake". The problem relates to the issue as to whether after the mistake is realized as a "mistake", it disappears or continues to persist in one's consciousness even though it is realized to be a mistake. In the former case, the realization dissolves the experience of what was taken to be a mistake, while in the latter case, the correction operates only at a theoretical level and has only a marginal influence on the "appearing" illusion or delusion, as the case may be.

Besides this important difference, there is another which does not seem to have been noticed until now, particularly in the context of the distinction between the Sāṃkhyan and the Advaitic examples of what constitutes the foundational ignorance of which we are required to get rid of. In the Advaitic perspective, as we had noted earlier, it is the experience of difference which is regarded as illusory, while in the Sāṃkhya analysis it is the identity which is regarded as the basic mistake. But what is this "identity" which is regarded as the foundational mistake in the Sāṃkhyan perspective? The identity, obviously, if it is to be meaningful, has to be between things which are different in some sense. When, for example, one regards oneself as "identical" with the body or the mind, or the *buddhi*, or the sense of "I-ness", or egoity, one is identifying oneself with something which one also regards as different in some way or other. The realization that the identity is in some sense mistaken is merely to become aware that the underlying difference which was being presupposed by the experience of identity is more fundamentally real than one had taken it to be. The de-identification achieved through the Sāṃkhyan process of realization does not, or ought not to, result in the non-awareness of that from which one realizes oneself to be utterly and absolutely different. Is it possibly the same in the Advaitin realization which may be regarded as the opposite pole of the Sāṃkhyan realization? In other words, does the Advaitic analysis imply that the appearance of "difference" somehow presupposes or implies an identity between those that are experienced to be different, and that the difference merely consists in the awareness that the "identity" which was presupposed was more fundamental and real than the difference which one had accepted to be the primary reality?

This of course, is not the Advaitic position as it is usually presented, though if the ideal of *jivana-mukti* or liberation within life is accepted, then it would follow that it is only the interpretation that we have given above which

will be in accord with the ideal. In fact even the usual interpretation of Sāṃkhya is done in such a way that in the state of complete de-identification or *kaivalya* one is not supposed to be aware of anything at all. But as we have argued elsewhere, if this were to be accepted as the true Sāṃkhyan position, then there would remain nothing to distinguish it from the Advaitic position as it is usually understood. On the other hand, if the ideal of *jīvana-mukti* is accepted for Sāṃkhya also, as is usually done for Advaita Vedānta, then the only difference between them would consist in the fact that while for the former the experience of the difference of the self from everything else will be a primary fact of self-consciousness; in the case of the latter, it will be the experience of identity and not the difference.

However, in the cases of both Sāṃkhya and Vedānta, the problem of identity and difference is primarily related to the experiencing consciousness and not to the objects of which the consciousness is aware. The Fregean example of the "the morning star is the evening star" relates to two objects of consciousness which are really identical but are supposed to be different. One will, therefore, have to distinguish between those problems of identity which arise in respect to objects of consciousness and others which arises from the relation of the experiencing consciousness to any object whatsoever. Nevertheless, as the objects themselves may be of a different order, the problem with regard to them may also occur at different levels. The identity, for example of five plus three and four plus four or six plus two is an identity of a different kind than the one between "the morning star" and "the evening star". Similarly, the identity between two theories in science which were earlier supposed to be different is a matter of a very different order as here the assertion of identity only means that whatever can be derived from one can also be derived from the other and what cannot be derived from the one cannot also be derived from the other. The basic difference in all such cases where the identity asserted belongs to two different objects of consciousness, whether at the perceptual or the non-perceptual level, is that one generally ignores the ontological status of the illusory apprehension and the problem of what happens to it when the illusion gets corrected. On the other hand, as consciousness itself can become an "object" in introspective apprehension or self-consciousness, the problem of an illusory apprehension of identity or difference with respect to it begins to have "existential" consciousness for self-consciousness. This, to a certain extent,

occurs also in all those cases where the primary reference is not to physical objects but to psychic states themselves or to meanings which are apprehended or feelings and emotions as generally happen in cases of aesthetic apprehensions.

The problem of the assertion of identity in the context of an illusory difference that was previously apprehended as real, has to be differentiated depending upon the types of objects between which identity is being asserted. Not only this, one has also to distinguish the levels at which the identity is being asserted; unless this is done, one will have the mistaken impression that the problem of the assertion of an alleged "real" identity in the face of an apprehended difference would be seen as of only one type. This would necessarily lead to avoidable controversies regarding what an alleged statement of "real" identity means, as has been the case until now. The western discussion on the subject has generally been confined to statements asserting identity between statements which primarily belong to a cognitive discourse, and where the "referents" are usually clearly identifiable physical objects. This seems to be the basic ground of the distinction between "sense" and "reference" which Frege indicated in his well-known paper on the subject. The Indian discussion, on the other hand, appears to have confined itself primarily to epistemological issues at the psychological or experiential level, little caring about the identity issue in respect to physical objects which Frege points out in his famous example. The issue then, has been discussed in the two traditions in limited contexts and it is time that it is widened to cover not only these two diverse traditions of philosophizing but that it should go beyond them.

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