THE REAL AND THE CONSTRUCTED : ŚAṆKARA AND HUSSERL

RAMAKANT SINARI

It is after Kant that we learnt to take seriously the proposition that our consciousness of the world is shaped by the structure of our consciousness itself. Kant's attempt was to show that the world we cognize as *real* conforms to the *stuff* our consciousness is ontologically made of, i.e., to the constitutive principles of our very faculty of knowing.

When, for the first time in the history of epistemology, Kant used Copernicus' norm to explain how our knowledge of the world is determined by our reason and by the categories a *priori* in our rational subjectivity he left for subsequent philosophers the task of defining the boundaries of man's existence vis-à-vis the world. Kant tried to prove that the organizing norms of our reason condition the way we know whatever we know, that the phenomenal or real world we experience is tied to the scheme inherent in our subjective, synthesizing consciousness. The problem (which in fact arose with Plato's theory of knowledge) regarding the connection between the "Form" or "Idea" and the object, the conceptual and the perceptual, the thing *known* and the thing "out there," was given by Kant a new status by placing the subjectivity of the knower at the centre of the process of knowing.

The naive approach of the empiricists to the question of knowledge was evident, for Kant, from the fact that they look upon the world (the real, spatio-temporally existent world, i.e., the world of natural sciences) as the unquestionable referend of all true propositions. The empiricists, the commonsense realists, materialists and phenomenalists equate the world to the "sensed," the "perceived," the source of the sense-data or the sense-

contents, the objectively and independently given. The general position of these thinkers, since the days of G. E. Moore and Russell, for example, has been that everything is real that commonsense *sees* as real, that physical objects like hills, rivers, clouds, books exist independently of the mind which perceives them, that space and time and qualities and quantities are *really* there in the world outside us. It is only a few realists, influenced largely by thinkers such as Franz Brentano and Meinong, who were concerned about the origin of universal entities like number, the "thinghood" of things and the "roundness" of round objects. However, without diluting their realism they only echoed some sort of platonic standpoint that these entities could belong to a realm not identical with the realm of physical objects.

But the thrust of Kant's inquiry was more radical. He could not remain content with the empiricist postulation that the material world is independent of the human mind and that its objective knowledge, i.e., knowledge untainted by the transcendental constitution of the knower's consciousness, is possible. Since Kant, the distinction between the subjective and the objective in knowledge has remained the cornerstone of epistemologies. While science strives to discover the laws of the objective world and of the relations within it, it would be the endeavor of philosophy to go deep into the reality of the subject, i.e., the a *pariori* and transcendental principles governing the subject. By any measure, the philosophies that have been most rigorously committed to this endeavor are Husserl's phenomenology and *The Real and The Constructed :* Śaṅkara's ātmalogy[1]. More than a thousand years' distance between them is not a factor which would make one dismiss the latter as less incisive or more mystical than the former.

Commonsense realism, empiricism, materialism, and now positivism-Whatever may be their shades are the philosophical undercurrent of science. Scientists strive to discover the laws of the objective-their goal is to state the truth about the objective structure of the universe. The most basic assumption of science is that objective knowledge is the only valid kind of knowledge, for it is definitive, exact, unambiguous, and mathematically statable. So for natural sciences, in order to know a phenomenon reliably, it must be reached objectively, i.e., it must be posited by mind outside itself. The ultimate design of all sciences, including quantum physics, has been to

build up a single system in which the totality of phenomena, actual and possible, would cohere in accordance with the tacit laws of logic.

The main thesis of Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason* leans toward subjectivism and demonstrates human mind's inherent incapacity to know the phenomenal world in itself. To know something, according to Kant, is to place it within the mind's ontological framework, to bring it under the "categories of the Understanding",and by that very process to construct it against the natural, a priori endowments of the knowing consciousness. Thus the knowing subject is unable to leave off the epistemic enclosure within which he resides and to leap out to the essence of the known. The knowing subject apprehends the world as it is given to him in his innate conceptual, rational setting and not as it is in itself. Things in their absolute objectivity, that is, things as they are, are called by Kant *noumena* or things-in-themselves. It can be said that, for Kant, our knowledge of the world is not, really speaking, the knowledge of the real world but rather the knowlege of the way or mode by which we perform the act of knowing. Kant's subjectivism is the first forceful attempt in epistemology to confirm that the scientist's faith that the knowledge of the world (as the world in itself is) is attainable is based on naiveté.

Kant's Copernican Revolution in epistemology is undoubtedly responsible for pushing into uncertainty our commonsense belief in what can be called the "solidity" of the world. The world and the relations within it, with which we are always acquainted as being "out there," was thrown into soup. The reality of this world has never been questioned by realists, empiricists, then by phenomenalists, positivists and natural scientists. They made this world the ultimate frame of reference for determining the meaningfulness or otherwise of our linguistic utterances. Their anchorage in this world was shaken by Kant's argument that this so-called *real* world is actually "constructed by the categories of the mind. Kant said:[2]

> An object within consciousness... as distinguished from a thing in itself, must receive its character not from anything lying beyond the circle of consciousness, but from something within consciousness itself.

What Kant had triggered off as the shift of the epistemological

concern to the transcendental make-up of our consciousness was envigorated beyond limit by Husserl in his doctrine of transcendental-phenomenological reduction. And, as I have already said, a time gap of over a thousand years notwithstanding, in his ātmalogical method Śaṅkara had dismissed the reality of the objective world and accounted for human consciousness's perceiving it to be "there" as a kind of its self-deceit (*bhrama*). To both Husserl and Śaṅkara, if one withdraws one's consciousness from what it has been conditioned to receive as obvious, and makes consciousnes itself the subject of scanning, one would have a radically different view of the consciousness and the world nexus. That is to say, not only did both of them repudiate our commonsense or natural (for Śaṅkara, the *vyāvahārika*) attitude toward the world, but they sought, and were cure of, its transcendental-phenomenological (for Śaṅkara, the *pāramārthika*) foundation. The world's being spatio-temporally there from our practical standpoint was not denied. What was stressed was the ultimate status it would attain when this practical standpoint is suspended and its meaning in the realm of the perceiving subject is grasped. Phenomenology and ātmalogy are profound endeavours to meet the seemingly strange dichotomy between the world's being "this" to man's empirical awareness and its being "not this" to his transcendental awareness. Thus for both Husserl and Śaṅkara the "real" is to be interpreted as the "constructed." The empirically "there" as the projected, the physical as the mental or intended (intentional), the existential as the essential (Eidetic) and the external as the internal.

The introduction of what is known as the method of "phenomenological reduction" by Husserl demonstrates his distrust in commonsense realism. The method throws open the door for a transcendental approach to our world-experience. The method, for instance, presupposes that the world that is taken by us as real in our everyday living is shaky and unreliable. What a philosopher sohuld aim at is the transcendental basis of this world, a basis which would be "seen" by consciousness as apodeictically given. Through the phenomenological method, therefore, the empirical world is to be put out of functioning, to be "bracketed," and its essential ground is to be grasped. This essential ground is the transcendentally reduced or transcendentally "purified" experience.

And since the method of phenomenological reduction is to be used as a somewhat psychological tool for attaining this end, there is an implicit sense of uncertainly in Husserl regarding the world or facts.

Once the ordinarily perceived world is bracketed and all its epistemic and historically derived conditions are suspended, as if they are inherited by us as arbitrary, the direction of investigation would shift from the external to the internal. The externally "given" does not form the focus of Husserl's inquiry at all. This is obvious because what really bothered him was the original wonder that human consciousness (human subjectivity) should happen to "intend" or be "directed toward" the world. The reason is to be sought, according to Husserl, within the domain of subjectivity, its, primodial, transcendental and pure structure. Husserl writes :[3]

> The objective world, the world that exists for me, that always has and always will exist for me, the only world that ever can exist for me this world, with all its objects-derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has for me myself, *from me as the transcendental Ego.*

The main design of Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction is that our consciousness should be allowed to find its own "roots." As consciousness conducts itself in the world, it is engaged only with the transient, contingent and fleeting domain of sence-experiences. For Husserl, there is nothing necessary, universal or indubitable about this domain although we regard it in our day-to-day existence as real and "solid." Phenomenological reduction is then to be guided toward the archetypal ground of this domain. This archetypal ground is called by Husserl the "Eidetic structures"-they form the very "stuff" our transcendental consciousness is made of.

One may passingly note that while Kant made categories the archaeological schema of consciousness Husserl claims to have gone farther in his philosophical investigation. For Husserl, the Eidetic structures themselves constitute transcendental consciousness - they are the seminal configuration into which the very notion of worldliness is inserted. In this sense, the world is constructed by the human, mental reality : what is transcendentally *given* is found by consciousness to be "there," "outside,"

"objectively real," separated and separable from consciousness. Our world-experience is embedded in transcendental consciousness, the latter being its very beginning. Although Husserl does not state it explicityly, his concept of transcendental, pure and trans-categorical consciousness conceals his reference to Being.

Although the primary interest of Śaṅkara's ātmalogy was visibly ethical and salvationistic, as an epistemology it has followed a path not much different from that adopted by Husserl's phenomenological reduction. In what may be termed as his genealogy of the human self, Śaṅkara indicates that our cognition of the phenomenal (*vyāvahārika*) world as real, our involvement in it as the space in which the history of our births and deaths and rebirths (all conveyed by Śaṅkara as *saṁsāra*) has taken place, and our being used to it as an indubitable mode (*sattā*) of our existence amounts to our natural nescience (*avidyā*). Indeed this is our everyday, existential nescience. As long as we live in this world as physiologically and psychologically controlled beings we cannot but respond to it as if it were ultimate, independently governed and perpetually present.

There is a certain leap in Śaṅkara's ātmalogical method from the empirically and phenomenally guided consciousness to the transcendental (pāramārthika) consciousness. What Husserl has graphically described as the method of phenomenological-transcendental reducton figures in Śaṅkara's writings[4] as a sort of transition human self undergoes without any prior decision. In fact one of the riddles we come across in Indian transcendentalism from the Upaniṣadic ātmalogy onwards is that nowhere is the transformation of the individual awareness from its world-bound state to the transcendental state, from its acceptance of the *samsāra* as real to its rejection as merely a projection of the transcendental dimension of consciousness, is accounted for. Sankara, like Husserl, seems to assume that it is consciousness itself that puts itself onto the track toward the transcendental, toward Being toward *ātman* (pure consciousness), toward *Brahman* (the unqualifiable Spirit at the foundation of all that goes on as the world).

The phenomenal existence, Śaṇkara says, gives us only the consciousness of the mutable, erroneous, deceptive and dubitable reality.

In-built in this consciousness lie the seeds of an awakening, an enlightenment (*jnāna*), the attainment of that certain, necessary and axiomatic "seeing" (called by Hindu metaphysicians *darśana* and by Husserl *Anschauung*) from which vantage-point the everyday reality we are accustomed to is discovered as a chimera.

The empirically experienced world is for Śaṇkara "structured" by consciousness and brought into being from *nowhere*, so to say. Through the use of some of the most suggestive analogies in the history of epistemology Śaṇkara tries to drive into our mind the dichotomy between "being blinded" and "being insightful," "being naive" and "being wakeful to truth," "being stupid" and "being wise." He compares our commonsense and realist reception of the world to our deceptive perception of silver in a shining conch, of the mirage in a desert sending out heat waves, our perception of a snake in a rope lying in a dark corner. Thus, not to identify the source of our everyday perception of the world, i.e., not to go to the "roots" of what figures on the canvas of our consciousness as "the world," is to live a life of ignorance, *avidyā*, error. To a person who has attained the profoundest insight into the meaning of worldliness, into its ontological status, into its incessantly fleeting character inseparable from the fleeting character of the very consciousness that perceives it, the world of senses is a "projected" world, constructed on or out of some non-world substratum. And this paradoxical process of regarding what *is not* there as being there, of perceiving the non-world as the world, must be attributed, according to Śaṅkara, to the very ambiguous phenomenal-transcendental, or *vyāvahārika-pāramārthika*, structure of human consciousness (the *jiva-ātman* syndrome implicit in our existence).

The ātmalogical concern which the Upaniṣads introduced into ancient Indian thought was perceived and developed by Śaṅkara with unusual philosophic depth. The concern is to explain how the world of the physical phenomena emerges from a peculiar self-deceiving activity of our consciousness (this activity is termed as *māyā*) and how consciousness withdrawn from worldliness could be made to *see* its own transcendental constitution. The transcendental constitution is *ātman* or *Brahman*, i.e., the unqualified (*nirguṇa*) and unconditioned reality, whose ontological status is underlined by Śaṅkara with the conviction of one who looked upon the

world drama as a kind of play of shadows (*lilā*). The transcendental consciousness is, for Śaṅkara, beyond the logical categories, beyond the modes of empirical existence, such as space, time, causality, change, substance, qualities and relations. When in complete unison with itself, the individual consciousness (*ātman*) would acquire the experience of absolute freedom and absolute fulfilment.

Ātman or, in its universal formulation *Brahman* is beyond any conditioning forces, beyond names and forms, beyond empirical states, beyond concrete representations. But once under the sway of some strange power which is present within itself, ātman generates the entire panorama of worldly events, and literally descends from its transcendental tier to the phenomenal tier. Human consciousness posits its own transcendental constitution onto the undecipherable and unidentifiable matter and creates the world of space and time, i.e., the world of our everyday existence, the world of the plurality of things and events. This world is constructed by consciousness out of what may be, or may not be, given to it as primordially there, out of what may be *there* as sheer presence (*Ousia*) or Being or Nothing. In fact there is no way for finding out why the world is there at all, or why it is there in its specific physico-chemical-biological characteristics. Śaṅkara claims that all that we know is that the world, describable in all its physical or material qualities, is there for our *vyāvahārika* consciousness and that we would realize with absolute certianty that it is the figment of our imagination (*bhrama*) or the product of our consciousness's play (*līlā*) when we withdraw to the transcendental (*pāramārthika*) state.

Husserl's genius finds its expression in his treatment of the perennial problem that he, like Śankara in his time, engaged himself to solve : how and from where could one obtain absolute certainty in knowledge? The *Eidos* (Essences) or the Eidetic axioms denote, for Husserl, the true forms of things. One of the distinctions on which Husserl has built his philosophy is between a fact and its essence. No particular spatio-temporal position is necessary for a fact to be. In other words, though a fact is generally recognizable in terms of its empirical characteristics, such characteristics have nothing necessary about them. Every fact, and indeed the entire world of facts and their inter-relations, i.e., the world realists and naturalists take

for granted, becomes thus contingent. For Husserl, the very notion of contingency (*Tatsächlichkeit*) emerges from the accidental nature of facts and entails the sense of "it is thus and thus, but it could be otherwise." Our consciousness of the contingency of the entire phenomenon of the world is itself due to our innately *Eidos*oriented being. For Husserl, as for Śaṅkara, the inner dynamics of human consciousness is to transcend the world of facts (that is, in Śaṅkara's words, to transcend the *vyāvahārikasattā*). It is because of this inner dynamics of human existence, as existentialists often stress, that we have the feeling of uprootedness and restlessness while we live in the worldly situations. The main objective Husserl's phenomenology is wedded to is to schematize an epistemologically complete organization of the entire cognitive consciousness on the ground of the direct "Eidetic seeing," i.e., the seeing of the essential structures and their architecture within the domain of the ego. These structures are so closely intertwined with one another that the very *stuff* of consciousness that they seem to determine involves consciousness's total operation vis-à-vis the world.

For Husserl, what is true of the facts in the world is also true of the conventional norms of thought, of the principles of the world-organization, the activity of the world-interpretation, all of us engage in as the core culture of our life. When these very functions are suspended by means of *Épokhé*, that is, when we proceed to bracket whatever is offered to consciousness by its contact with the world, the procedure could stop, Husserl maintains, only when a certainty about the source of what is *experienced* or *known* is captured. Husserl describes the state of mind-gripped-by-certainty as mind's being in "apodeictic self-evidence."

The evidence and the certainty in knowledge Husserl speaks about have their origin in the domain of what he calls "transcendental-phenomenological self-experience." Evidence, Husserl and the phenomenologists following him held, is the mental grasping of something that excludes all doubt, all suspicion about its possible falsity, at least at the moment when evidence is present to the mind. Such an evidence figures in Śaṅkara's analysis and is called by him *anubhava* or *anubhūti*, which is an experience of the basic integration and oneness of things, an experience of the identity between the thinker and the thought, or between the subject and the object. Actually, the expression "apodeictic knowledge" is intended

by Husserl, just as the expression "*anubhave*" is intended by Śaṅkara, to signify that there is such a thing as the transcendental evidence and that it is established by means of mind's immediate and direct act, a "seeing" or "vision" which, although possibly different in the case of different individuals, emits an absolute inward guarantee. The guarantee dawns from one's having touched the innermost point of the entire fabric of world-experience, the innermost point of the subject-object division iself.

Śaṅkara's ātmalogy and Husserl's phenomenology are both archaelogies of the self and have for their main thrust consciousness in its transcendental-empirical oscillation, so to say. Not only can the two paradigms be seen as repudiation of naive realism, phenomenalism and positivism, they are also attempts to establish that transcendental consciousness possesses a certain autonomy, a dynamics of its own, an independence and primordiality of operation. And it is not impossible to argue convincingly, Śaṅkara and Husserl seem to hold, that the real world "out there" and the world amenable to cognition, description conceptualization and language, are ultimately grounded in and discernible from the ontological structure of consciousness.

The main reason why our commonsense language with which we ordinarily describe the world, and the language of science (i.e., the language which refers to the empirical, i.e., the language anchored in the phenomenal, the language portraying facts) on the one hand, and the language of metaphysics, of transcendental experience (i.e., the language necessitated by the impulse to convey the experience one would have of uncovering the very raison d'être of all existence, or the language of Being itself) on the other, cannot be bridged is that either of them has its own lexicon of signification. To translate either of them into the other would require the rigor of a perennial hermeneutics-its task would be to contain within the everyday consciousness the essences *seen* as self-evident by the transcendental consciousness and also to discern the reality is perceived by the former from the constitution of the latter. The endeavors of Sankara and Husserl, the two most perceptive bridge-throwers between transcendental or pure consciousness and the world-bound consciousness, has been exactly to develop such a hermeneutic.

The transcendental (pāramārthika) consciousness of Śaṅkara is the self (*ātman*) which I, in my innermost being, am. Although it is possible to grasp it in its "pure," "uninvolved" and unqualifiable state, our acts of cognition, thinking and language-formation, according to Śaṅkara, represent the mundaneness of the self, i. e., the self hidden behind a veil (*māyā*). The veil is not externally acquired. The self by its very nature weaves it around itself. For Husserl, the transcendental or "pure" (Eidetic) ego is the ultimate ground from which structures constituting our world-experience arise. The transcendental consciousness, for Husserl, is the origin of meanings. The "intentional object" of Husserl is the constructed object, just as the everyday (*vyāvahārika*) world of Śaṅkara is posited as real by *ātman* (pure consciousness) itself, although the latter by its deepest vision *knows* that the former is not there as it offers itself to the senses.

One of the most penetrating theories in our time which has, though undesignedly, resurrcted the transcendental-empirical syndrome and posited the transcendental as the pre-thematic background of the empirical is Karl Popper' 3-world scheme.[5]

The world of naïve realists, that is, the world of physical entities such as plants, animals, stones, clouds and tables, is called by Popper "World I. This world is different from "World 2," which for Popper is the mental world, the world of psychological dispositions, the world of conscious and unconscious states. Now, there is, according to Popper, a world not exhausted by either World I or World 2. This is World 3. World 3 is the world of theories, scientific formulations, works of art, the world of *seeing* and understanding, the world of the entire spectrum of possibilities and insights and intuitions. Although this world can easily be seen to have a great resemblance with Plato's world of "Forms," "Ideas," or Universals, Popper asserts that we need not equate it with this world. Moreover Popper insists that World 3 is "man-made" in its origin.[6]

Our grasp of World 3, for Popper, is an "active process" whose push, as it were, figures behind our re-creating, reconstructing and re-making whatever is given in World I and World 2. That is why, World 3, like Kant's categorial constitution of the mind and Husserl's Eidetic

structures, is in the background of our rationality, our problem-solving and our system-generating drive. It supplies the inspiration and the thrust to the very cognitive process without which the world-experience would amount to nothing.

World 3, therefore, occupies in the 3-World foumula of Popper, a position basic to the contents of World I and World 2. One could even say that without the presence of World 3 the act of deciphering and comprehending and interpreting vis-à-vis World I and World 2 would not take place.

One could ask, in one's vein of imitating Heidegger : why is there something (the world's being *there* or, to use Popper's imagery, World I and World 2) rather than nothing? And, further, if what commonsense perceives and scientific explanations agree on as real is held as merely the construction by the transcendental order (i.e., the Eidetic of Husserl, the *pāramārthika* of Śaṅkara, the World 3 of Popper), one is compelled to ask: "what are the structure and the contents of the transcendental consciousness itself?" What is the origin of this structure and the contents? To answer this question, one will have to resort to metaphors. Just as th *Eidetic* and the *pāramārthika* are metaphors, the World 3 is also a metaphor. Did not Wittgenstein suggest that "the things that cannot be put into word's make themselves manifest as "mystical"? And the mystical can be spoken about only in metaphors.

NOTES

This paper is based on the one the author presented recently at an international conference on "The Real, the Given and the Constructed" at Delhi University

1. Ātmalogy (the word coined by me some years ago), like phenomenology, begins with the total suspension of the ordinary, *vyavaharika* about the nature and status of the world and aims at grasping the *essential* or transcendental foundation of the world. For a development of the idea of ātmalogy, see my *The Structure of Indian Thought* (Delhi : Oxford Un. Press, 1984), pp. 60 ff.

2. Watson, John, *The Philosophy of Kant Explained* (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1908), pp. 140 ff.
3. Husserl, Edmund, *Ideas,* trans. by W. R. Boyce Gibson (New Youk : Collier Books, 1962), pp. 107 ff.
4. See S. Radhakrishnan and Charles C. Moore (eds.), *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton : Princeton Un. Press, 1957), pp. 509 ff.
5. Popper, Karl R. and Eccles, John C., *The Self and Its Brain* (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 36 ff.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 67 ff.