

MODERN THOUGHT AND THE TRANSCENDENT

Some observations based on an Eastern view

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In modern philosophy notions of the transcendent are under attack. Some philosophers have put them aside, others have positively ignored them and yet others have openly rejected them. Of course there are also some great thinkers like Martin Heidegger who have given us new interpretations of the transcendent from their own very profound standpoints. However, even at the beginning we cannot avoid ironies. For is it possible, in a strange way, that the one who originally denied the transcendent to reason (Kant) still preserved the Eternal, while another who held the transcendent up to thought (Heidegger) let go of the Eternal?

But on the whole in modern thought in general, not just in philosophy, but in the wider field led or even followed by philosophy, the transcendent has been allowed to suffer attrition. There is in the first place the most dominant trend in all modern thought, namely, positivism, involving a radical turning away from the Eternal and the transcendent. In the face of it new expressions of profundities involving the question of being and hence the transcendent would appear to be a mere change of pace in a world too impatient to be held up unduly by matters that are not taken seriously any more. But then those who have the patience and requisite turn of mind to join in thinking about such matters do not feel justified in ignoring them.

Modern thought undoubtedly is Western not only in its origin but in its direction as well. Nevertheless no part of the world is any longer outside its embrace. Even the most sophisticated of Eastern cultures are waking up to the fact that something powerful has hit them. They notice, of course, the most obvious expressions of it, in Marxist revolution and technology particularly, which are both Western in origin, but they often do not see much of what lies behind these conspicuous expressions.

But some indeed do see it. And many of those who see do not react at all while those who react do so diversely. First of all there are the out and out Eastern protagonists of modernity in the East who never ask any deep questions but speak and act as though acceptance of modernity is a matter of simple technical and of external adjustment. Then there are two types of more serious people, who are rather given to apologetic interpretation and applied thought than to anything else. Here interpretation may take place in either direction. In other words, some people put modern Western thought in some traditional Eastern package, while others try to package traditional Eastern thought in the language and the categories of the modern West. As for the latter group, again, what is selected by each person as typical Eastern or Western thought will depend upon his own interest and bias. By and large, it is said that Chinese scholars are given to presenting Western thought in Chinese dress (to their own people, of course), while traditionally Indian scholars are apt to engage in expressing Indian thought in Western language and idiom. Both of

these types of activity require selecting parallels from the East and the West. And parallels, however superficial, are available in large quantities.

Leaving aside all these, let us turn to another kind of possible Eastern reaction, a genuine philosophical response. Now, this is a very difficult thing, to begin with. In talking about a philosophical response, are we not supposed to have an agreed upon understanding as to what philosophy is? And certainly one should not try to take advantage of the fact that there is no definition of philosophy on which all have agreed. Historically, philosophy is a Western phenomenon. There are even questions as to whether there is philosophy outside the West. Even such a great figure as Heidegger writes that philosophy is only Western "and there is no other, neither a Chinese nor an Indian Philosophy".¹ However, even if this contention were true in a narrow sense, by excluding certain highly specialized and sustained Eastern intellectual enterprises to know, one is missing a supreme chance to arrive at some profound understanding and possibly a definition of what philosophy is.

Really when we try to define philosophy a strange thing seems to happen, namely that we find that we have to come to grips with the task in terms of something elusive which controversially occupies the very centre of the philosophical enterprise. The concrete instance here is the transcendent. That is to say, is coming to know or at least to deal with the transcendent essential to philosophy? The fundamental controversy in modern philosophy is really about this question, although it may appear in several different garbs. No definition of philosophy is possible without including a resolution of this problem, and in fact none exists. Accordingly, today the very definition of philosophy must take into account the issue of the expulsion of the transcendent from modern thought. And even if we are only trying to consider this issue without explicitly linking it to attempts to define philosophy we are implicitly doing so; and contrariwise, even when we are only making an effort to define philosophy our effort is likewise implicitly tied to the issue of the transcendent. Surely there could be other such controversial issues which are linked with the projects of defining philosophy, but today this is the most central one.

In both respects, that is to say, that of defining philosophy in terms of something most controversial and that of having a most controversial issue, the Vedānta is well qualified to be welcomed to the stage. Its absolute certainty about Ultimate Reality (Brahman) has the power to ignite in new ways the philosophical problem of the transcendent.

Now, in view of Immanuel Kant's special use of the term 'transcendent' and the consequent association of that special meaning to the word in later philosophy, it is necessary to make some preliminary remarks about it. For the transcendent is to Kant a false dimension as it were that reason in its pre-critical arrogance assumes, whereby it fancies that it knows what is beyond its power to know, namely the Ultimate Real or the things-in-themselves. Hence he condemns it as a false principle.² Because Kant is dealing with the transcendent in the context of the method of knowing, or epistemology as it is called, he is naturally talking about knowledge in the sense of knowing the real that is out there from here. In fairness to Kant it must be said that he left the real in its complete aura of sacredness, so to speak, without allowing it to be touched with anything from here. The transcendent, accordingly, is understood as the principle of pre-critical reason's moving from here to a beyond that is out there. The distance between here and there, he felt, is immeasurable. Into that gap faith is introduced as a matter of practical reason. "I have therefore found

it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith", he writes.³

The Vedānta takes a very different approach. It is not talking about a beyond measured from here to an unbounded "there". It is reversing the base of the projection, from a definite there to an indeterminate (*anirvacanīya*) here. It is as impressed as Kant was about the sheer unknowability of the Real. In this context it puts forward the remarkable thesis that the Ultimately Real is unknowable for the utterly paradoxical reason that it is knowledge (gnosis) itself. Śāṅkara defines the Vedānta as philosophy in a breath-takingly simple and direct fashion thus: "it is the vision of the principle of Ultimate Reality wherein is no distinction of knowledge, known and knower" (*jñāna-jñeya-jñatrbhedarahitam paramārtha-tattva-darśanam*), Commentary on the *Mandukya Kārikā*, 4.1. The words, *jñāna* and *darśana* are worth pausing over a little: *jñāna* translated gnosis, and philologically cognate with it, primarily describes the disposition of the Ultimately Real within itself, and secondarily it means our knowledge of the Ultimately Real by virtue of that same disposition. *Darśana*, literally vision, view, perception, has the primary meaning of *theoria* and the secondary meaning of theory (which is itself metamorphosed from *theoria*). In the latter sense it is being used as a word by which to translate 'philosophy'. The compound word *tattva-darśana*, that is, *darśana* of *tattva* or principle can also be used in a primary or a secondary sense. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that *jñāna* and *darśana* are not identical except where the secondary meaning of the former and the primary meaning of the latter are concerned, which are the same. Also, as a precaution against confusion, it is good to be aware that in popular parlance words, even the highest, are seldom preserved for their pristine usages but are often stretched out into secondary or tertiary employment. Such an extension of usage is clearly evident in the case of the word *jñāna*. It is used for any knowledge, particularly for cognition. It is also used in lieu of *darśana* or philosophy. But in the compound form, *tattva-jñāna* it has been invariably used in the same sense, exactly like *tattva-darśana*.

But let us return to the essential meaning of *jñāna* as gnosis, defined above as the Ultimately Real's disposition in itself. Clearly, we have to grant that the word 'disposition' is a metaphor, and there just is no way of getting beyond metaphors when we are speaking about the Ultimately Real. When we say "there just is no way of getting beyond metaphors" we must not take this as the doom of thought or its eternal confinement to a terrestrial orbit. On the contrary, metaphor can mean our release towards that about which we speak, namely the Ultimately Real. The only precaution is that we must not make the use of metaphors a self-serving habit, an end in itself, a substitute for the real thing, a cause of illusion, a mere play.

When we speak of the disposition of the Ultimately Real in itself, and in so far as we do so metaphorically, we understand this disposition to be as it is *towards us*. This kind of disposition or dispositional activity is what is expressed by the Upaniṣadic-Vedāntic usage of the word *icchā* and its variants such as *īkṣaṇa*, *īkṣitṛtva*, etc. It stands for the very ground of the activities which we know diversely as thinking, willing, desiring. It is also the activity by which things come to be. We find references to it in the *Upaniṣads*, most notably in *Chāndogya* 6.2.3; *Aitareya* 1.1.1; *Praśna* 6.3. In that way gnosis is an activity, not in the ordinary sense of moving towards a goal or executing a purpose or anything of that sort, but rather in a metaphorical sense. But the metaphor must not be taken to mean a mere figure of speech whereby the

quality of a person, for instance, is attributed to a non-personal entity which is known not to possess them as when we say 'the sea is angry'. Texts of Vedānta take special care to say that the activity of gnosis is not such a figure of speech, technically called *gauṇa* in the Indian theories of meaning. Referring to such activity, *Vedānta Sūtra* 1.1.6 *gauṇāścet na ātmāśabdāt* (Is it a mere figure of speech? No, because of the word Ātman.) settles it. Śaṅkara commenting on it demonstrates the deep connection of such activity with Being (*sat*) itself and writes also "because the word Ātman is employed in reference to it *īkṣitva* is not used as a figure of speech (here)". Therefore, it is a metaphor in the deepest sense of the word. Heidegger's comment on Kant on a certain point is quite pertinent and illuminating in this context. "If what Kant terms 'our thought' is this pure self-orienting reference to . . . the 'thinking' of such a thought is not an act of judgement but is thinking in the sense of the free, but not arbitrary 'envisioning' (Sich-denken) of something, an envisioning which is at once a forming and a projecting. This primordial act of 'thinking' is an act of pure imagination".⁴ Agreed, but question, "who is the thinker in this thinking?" Or is it a mere subjectless activity? There is a thin line between metaphor and figure of speech, and yet it is also the widest gulf and therefore the most perilous. The Vedānta always insists that it is important to look at the other side of a metaphor to see what it is a metaphor of, as otherwise it could easily become a mere figure of speech emphasizing nothing but thought's "self-orienting reference to". Heidegger has shown us the great depth of what is called thought, and has analyzed in a masterly way that thinking is not grasping or prehending but receptivity to what lies before us.⁵ In the light of the Vedānta, one has to ask, "Has not what lies before us the character of gnosis, in which the very conjunction of *legein* and *noein* as the fundamental character of thinking that Heidegger speaks about⁶ is made possible, and does not receptivity itself insofar as by definition it is not activity, presuppose as a complementary an activity elsewhere, which is none other than gnosis?"

As far as the Vedānta is concerned, the metaphor of gnosis being its own activity is important for another reason, that is to say, in order to negate the impression that the knowledge of the Eternal that man gains is the result of any activity on his part. Śaṅkara writes: "The science of the knowledge of Brahman does not depend upon any activity on the part of man, (in other words it is not *puruṣa-vyāpāra-tantra*)," *Commentary on the Vedānta Sūtras*, 1.1.4. Gnosis is never produced; it is what is there, inseparable from the Eternal or Ultimately Real.

The Vedānta, beginning from the *Upaniṣads*, uses the analogy of light to describe gnosis. Brahman is the light of lights, *jyotiṣām jyotiḥ*, (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 4.4.16, 3.9.10). Everything is at sometime or other spoken of as light. Gnosis is described as the transcendent self-shining light of Brahman. There never was any need to establish the existence of the transcendent self-shining light. On the contrary, its self-evidence was demonstrated on the ground that all other evidences depend on it. This is the unique procedure of reasoning that the Vedānta in its scholastic development carried out to perfection. Ontologically there never was any attempt to prove the transcendent. On the contrary, the way chosen was to let it demonstrate itself as the sole ground (*ādhāra*) of all things. However, we must forbid ourselves to enter the vast and intricate area of the debate between the Vedānta and opposing schools like the Nyāya on what came to be advanced as the doctrine of self-luminosity (*svaprakāśa*) as these opposing schools rejected it

and proposed their own doctrine of other-luminosity (*parataḥ-prakāśa*).

Surely modern thought is a far cry from self-luminosity. For this reason when Vedānta joins in a philosophical response to modern thought, particularly in the context of the modern expulsion of the transcendent from the ground of knowledge, it is bound to take its stand on its unique views of gnosis and self-light. It is bound to be at odds with the basis of contemporary epistemology, with its views of positivist rationality. The latter assumes that our primary task in the pursuit of knowledge is executed by what is most tellingly called *research*, that is to say, our own bringing a little light into an inherently dark situation. There is no longer any notion of a general light which shines apart from our efforts, in which things can be *dis-covered*.

The turn away from the transcendent accords with the rejection of the notions of any general light which exists out there, apart from our own efforts to produce a little illumination by our own research. As for the grounds for the turn away from both these above, it is a matter on which great scholars have written extensively and deeply. But one circumstantial connection seems extremely interesting especially as viewed from the perspective of comparison with the Vedānta with its emphasis on the transcendent as gnosis and self-light. To point it out seems even more pressing because modern writers on the Vedānta who have striven to interpret it, including especially its typical views of the transcendent, to the West have simply failed to notice it. I am speaking of the Appearance-Reality metaphysics grounded in Kant's *Critiques*.

A hundred years of comparative scholarship on the Vedānta has assumed, based of course on striking similarity of language and even method between some works of the Vedānta and Kant, that it is an Appearance-Reality metaphysics. But the difference is very significant.

In the Vedānta only Brahman, the Ultimately Real, shines by itself, nothing else shines by itself but all things shine *in* the light of Brahman. As the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 2.2.10 and 11 has it:

In the transcendent golden sheath is Brahman without taint, without parts. Pure it is, light of lights. That is what the knowers of the Ātman know.

There the sun shines not, nor the moon, nor the stars, these lightnings shine not. So whence could this fire be? Everything shines only after that shining light. His shining lightens this whole universe.

Commenting on the line "everything shines only after that shining light", Śaṅkara writes, "In the light of that (Ātman) alone everything that is not – Ātman shines as it does not have power to shine by itself (*tasyaiva bhāsā sarvam anyad anātma-jatam prakāśyate, na tu tasya svataḥ prakāśana-sāmarthyam*)."

On the contrary, the Kantian doctrine seems to say that things that appear to us are dark, and we can see only darkly, based on our limited capacity for experience and the limited power of our reason; and as for the things-in-themselves, there is no hint of any light of their own reaching us. In some sense this doctrine seems to be the very obverse of the Vedānta.

It was Paul Deussen the great German scholar of the Vedānta and a friend of Nietzsche who wrote and worked on the assumption of a similarity between

Parmenides, Kant and Śaṅkara. Deussen argued that Kant's teaching that "the world reveals to us appearances only and not the being of things-in-themselves"⁷ is exactly the same as Śaṅkara's. Deussen set a pattern which is still very much in vogue.

Nietzsche, a close friend of Deussen, after reading the latter's *Das System des Vedanta*, wrote in a letter to him that having read the book page for page he found that his position was "Yes where your book says No."⁸ Nietzsche read some works of the Vedānta at first hand, and he rejected that system for the same reason he rejected Kant. He writes:

At bottom Kant wanted to prove that starting from the subject the subject could not be proved — nor could the object; the possibility of a merely apparent existence (Scheinexistenz) of the subject, "the soul" in other words, may not always have remained strange to him — that thought as Vedānta philosophy existed once before on this earth and exercised tremendous power.⁹

The mistake of treating the Vedānta in terms of Appearance-Reality will become clear as we probe the idea of the self-shining of Brahman.

The *locus classicus* of the idea is in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 4.3.1–6. Here different sources of light by which we can see things and are able to move about are discussed, the sun, the moon, fire and speech itself. The question finally is raised as to what happens in a condition in which all these various sources of light are no longer available. "When the sun has set, Yājñavalkya, and the moon has set and fire has gone out and speech has become silent, what light does a person here have?" "Ātman indeed is the light, said he, for Ātman as light one sits, moves around, goes about one's work and returns".

Among the most typical words for light are *jyotiḥ* and *bhāḥ*. In one place these two are used together, *svena bhāsā, svena jyotiṣā* (By his own shining, by his own light), *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 4.3.9. The stem *bhā* is cognate with Greek *pha*. *Bhā* is of particular importance because of what we can learn from the Greek parallel and also because it is picked out for analysis in the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* 6.7. "*Bhā* means that he illumines these worlds", (*bhā iti bhasayatīmān*)

Heidegger discusses words from the Greek stem *pha*. We are struck by the great similarity. To quote a lengthy passage from Heidegger:

The Greek expression φαίνόμενον, to which the term 'phenomenon' goes back, is derived from the word φαίνεσθαι, which signifies "to show itself". Thus φαίνόμενον means that which shows itself, the manifest [das, was sich zeigt, das Sichzeigende, das Offenbare] φαίνεσθαι itself is a middle-voiced form from which comes φάινω to bring to the light of day, to put in the light. φάινω comes from the stem φα like φῶς, the light, that which is bright, in other words, that wherein something can become manifest, visible in itself. Thus we must *keep in mind* that the expression 'phenomenon' signifies that which shows itself in itself, the manifest.¹⁰

In view of this the doctrine of Appearance (*Erscheinung*) as against Reality may have something to do with extending the concept of phenomenon in a new direction. Heidegger points out that 'phenomenon' has two significations, the first being 'that which shows itself' and the second 'that which shows itself as something which it is not, and therefore merely looking like so-and-so or

semblance'. The first one is the primordial signification while the second one is nonetheless founded on it. But Heidegger states that neither of them has anything at all to do with is called 'an appearance' and still less 'a mere appearance'.

In the Vedānta too all this is true. Light (*bhāḥ*, *jyotiḥ*, etc.) has the primary and secondary significations that Heidegger's discussion of 'Phenomenon' points out. There is also a seeming appearance, which is illustrated by the rope-snake analogy. But there is no such thing as a mere appearance without a transcendent substratum. A mere appearance is a mere illusion and it has no status whatsoever. *Māyā*, which is indefinable (*anirvacanīya*) is itself a phenomenon in the proper sense, a manifestation of the Ultimately Real. Even in the condition of *māyā* (which is the totality of all *conditions*) there is the possibility of transcendental certainty as to the Eternal. The work of philosophy is to show the way to that certainty. It only inculcates that certainty through exegesis of Being aimed at the removal of the veiling ignorance (*avidyā*) which obscures the unity of one's own being with Brahman. Śaṅkara writes about the discipline of this philosophy (technically *śāstra*) "It propounds Brahman as not being an object but as being the universal Self and thereby removes the distinction between the known, the knower and knowledge" (*Commentary on Vedānta Sūtras*, 1.1.4). Clearly, transcendental certainty is not outside the condition called *māyā* but within it. For outside *māyā* there is no need for philosophy, not even for certainty. It will be gnosis itself.

Now, is this transcendental certainty dogmatism? Nietzsche would describe it as such. He writes:

It seems that all great things first have to bestride the earth in monstrous and frightening masks (Fratzen) in order to inscribe themselves in the hearts of humanity with eternal demands: dogmatic philosophy was such a mask; for example the Vedānta doctrine in Asia and Platonism in Europe.¹¹

Now that we have come to Nietzsche and his reaction to the Vedānta, it is time to throw away all the books and speak a few words in aphorisms, and then conclude. I am not able to speak for Platonism and so will confine myself to the Vedānta. But it would seem that what is applicable to the one is in large measure applicable to the other as well.

If the Vedānta seems to be dogmatic it is for reasons diametrically opposed to those on which dogmatism is usually founded.

Even if the Vedānta were dogmatic it is so only for matters of a transcendent nature. If one has to be dogmatic at all it is perhaps better to be dogmatic for such matters than for worldly things based on empirical assumptions or dialectical laws of history and the like.

The transcendent without the immanent is benign. But the immanent without the transcendent is only harmless at best; without the transcendent the immanent has no bite.

When an immanentist doctrine assumes the character of transcendental certainty it has to trade knowledge for power. Then it becomes a tiger with which it is hard to live and dangerous to lie down.

The transcendent is the only defense against the tyrannies of history and against history itself which is probably the greatest of all tyrannies, because it is the most transcendental form that immanentist reason arrogates to itself.

The transcendent is the only true friend of the friendless. It alone keeps our secrets. Because of it what can never be spoken is also spoken.

Atheism, whatever it is, is a friend of the immanent gods. The transcendent is never a god.

There are three forms of temporal immanentism; past (history), present (social reality), future (technology). Those who are consumed by any of these are usually hostile to the Eternal while those who are consumed by the Eternal are always benevolently disposed to the three realms.

Total concentration on the immanent makes the immanent monstrous and diabolical. It generates the tyranny of immediacy, which is the impatience with the need to be patient, with delay of fulfilment, in fact frustration of transcendence itself. Do not call it freedom.

If we have to choose between transcendental certainty and immanent uncertainty on the one hand and transcendental uncertainty and immanent certainty on the other it is far better to choose the former.

Immanent uncertainty, that is, uncertainty about what is beforehand, is one of the highest gifts of the Eternal, if it already cohabits with transcendental certainty. There is no room for dogmatism here.

Transcendental certainty is to the Knowledge of the Good what the Categorical Imperative is to the knowledge of what ought to be done. Both are above dogmatism. Besides, because of transcendental certainty the Categorical Imperative will be able to bring forth noble deeds. This age especially cries for noble deeds.

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FOOTNOTES:

1. M. Heidegger, *What is called Thinking?*, trans. J. G. Gray, New York: Harper and Row, 1968, p. 224.
2. See I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith, London: Macmillan, 1929, p. 299.
3. *ibid.*, preface, p. 2.
4. M. Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. J. S. Churchill, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962, p. 158.
5. See *ibid.*, p. 160, and M. Heidegger, *What is called Thinking?*, p. 211, etc.
6. M. Heidegger, *What is called Thinking?*, p. 211.
7. Paul Deussen, *The System of the Vedānta*, trans. Charles Johnston, New York: Dover Publications, 1973, p. 48.
8. For information regarding exchanges between Nietzsche and Deussen, I am indebted to a seminar paper written by Hans Rollman of McMaster University on "Deussen, Nietzsche and Vedānta".
9. F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufman, New York: Vintage Books, 1966, p. 67.
10. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and F. Robinson, New York: Harper and Row, 1962, p. 51.
11. F. Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, preface, p. 67.