

FROM TRUTH TO TRUTH

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The highest form of art is identified by the infinitude of its interpretative flexibility. The same piece of music that could playfully tickle a child's imagination in daylight, could sublimate at night to inspire mathematical visions in a Physicist. If the amber rays of dawn reveal one hidden feature of a great painting, at dusk, another figure might emerge to the fore of the landscape. Swami Vivekananda, that clearest voice of Vedanta, is in himself one such timeless work of art. There is something for everyone, for every age, in those canorous words released from across the Atlantic more than a century ago.

To the child that I was, growing up in turbulent Assam of the 1990s, his words offered light akin to a storm-lantern: a faint hope of harmony in unquiet waters lingering at a visible distance. And to the amateur social scientist caught in the thick of acerbic ideological rivalry of the 2010s, his philosophy instilled confidence in dialogue and debate, over the dogmatic Popperian doctrine of falsification. It is precisely this inspirational spirit of Vivekananda that once led Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland to write, "I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are through the pages of books at thirty years' distance, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock. And what shocks, what transports must have been produced when in burning words they issued from the lips of the hero!"

The originality of the Swami's thought lies in his crystallization of Vedanta into palatable principles for the global audience of his time. Today, more than ever, we are faced with an exponential proliferation of divisive narratives, each of which lays an exclusive claim to the truth. In such a scenario, it is worth revisiting the most distinctive feature of Vivekanda's philosophy: the liberation of thought from language. This was in line with the Advaita tradition which believes in the possibility of attaining *moksha* (salvation) through cognitive insight alone.

Swamiji was acutely aware of the fact that all conflicts arise at the linguistic (descriptive) juncture. Although all religions have throughout history imagined the same divine Absolute, differences arise the moment one tries to describe or attribute qualities to that Absolute, forgetting that the Atman itself is potentially divine. Hence Swamiji wanted the absolute monism of Advaita to lead the world beyond the blind dogmas of both ritualism and monotheism. He said, "Advaita affirms that Purushas can be only One, that Purusha cannot be conscious, unconscious, or have any qualification, for either these qualities would bind, or they would eventually cease; so the One must be without any qualities, even knowledge, and It cannot be the cause of the universe or of anything. 'In the beginning, existence only, One without a second.'" Advaita thus aims to establish an existential foundation of the universe by identifying *asti* (is-ness) as the basis of all unity. This is why, when asked to explain what God is, Swamiji would often reply saying, "God is. God simply is."

However, this cognitive focus of Advaita is often misinterpreted as suggestive of inactivity or physical passivity. Nothing could be further from truth. To allay this misinterpretation, one just needs to refer to the only "definition" of God that Vivekananda offered, whenever pushed further by his disciples: God is love, and love is God. But how can God be love if God simply *is* ? To grasp this, one must understand that there are different levels of thought. The pure existence or is-ness (*Asti-tva*, *Sat-tva*) of God was Swamiji's response only at the discursive (conscious) level to those who tried to seek a linguistic description (a hypothetical this-/that-ness) of the divine. At the superconscious level, the response could only be the synonymity of God with Action. And pure, selfless action is nothing but Love. No doubt why he affirmed, "Service to man is service to God."

To understand this concept better, one may refer to one of Swamiji's lectures delivered in August, 1895: "The superconscious is God, is beyond speech, beyond thought, beyond consciousness. . . . There are three states, — brutality (*Tamas*), humanity (*Rajas*), and divinity (*Sattva*). Those attaining the highest state simply are. Duty dies there; they only love and as a magnet draw others to them. This is freedom. No more you do moral acts, but whatever you do is moral. The *Brahmavit* (knower of God) is higher than all gods. The angels came to worship Jesus when he had conquered delusion and had said, 'Get thee behind me, Satan.' None can help a *Brahmavit*, the universe itself bows down before him. His every desire is fulfilled, his spirit purifies others; therefore worship the *Brahmavit* if you wish to attain the highest. When we have the three great "gifts of God" — a human body, intense desire to be free, and the help of a great soul to show us the way — then liberation is certain for us. *Mukti* is ours."

Here, as a cautionary note, it may be mentioned that lately a few authors have misinterpreted and misrepresented Hinduism as a "postmodern" religion bereft of any values. Such an interpretation is fast gaining currency among the masses, who unwittingly contrast the seemingly "amoral" behaviour of many protagonists of the *Mahabharata* with the well-defined "moral" compass (however much irrational it may be) of the Abrahamic faiths. What they fail to comprehend is that the behaviour of protagonists of the *Mahabharata* was not amoral but supermoral, to be interpreted in the context of a narrative universe whose innocent, organic, moral unity was disturbed in the very genesis of the tale of the *Bharatvansh* . Similarly, attributing the highly contextual and recent "postmodern" tag to a worldview that has developed over millennia is the basest form of anachronism. In fact, there is a fundamental logical difference between postmodernism and the absolute monism of *Advaita*. The basic self-sufficient unit of language is the Sentence, which is often defined as a group of words that makes complete sense. A sentence consists of two main segments: a subject and a predicate. What postmodernism did in the second half of the twentieth century was critique and dissolve the predicate, by showing that it is contingent/dependent upon the politics of the subject. On the other hand, *Advaita* had realized millennia ago that the Universal Subject is the only reality. At the superconscious level, the question of "predicate" does not even arise.

However, if we were to seriously seek parallels with Advaita in Western Philosophy, the one who comes closest is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. There is undeniably a striking similarity between Vivekananda's articulation of *Advaita* and Hegel's Phenomenology, although Adi

Shankara, the consolidator of *Advaita*, lived almost a thousand years before Hegel. This resemblance is most apparent in the dynamic (process-oriented) understanding of Hinduism that Vivekananda highlighted. "The Hindu religion does not consist in struggles and attempts to believe a certain doctrine or dogma, but in realizing -- not in believing -- in being and becoming", said he in his lecture on Hinduism delivered at the Parliament of World's Religions, Chicago, in 1893.

In fact, the word "Upanishad" itself literally means "those who sit near", obviously referring to disciples seated near a guru. This again emphasizes the dialogic, dynamic nature of truth in the *Upanishadic* tradition of which *Advaita* is a part. In this tradition, truth is not a stagnant, static object of Being. Rather, it is a process of Becoming aware of one's own divinity and oneness with the *Brahman* (*Aham Brahmasmi*).

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* echoes this philosophical outlook. For Hegel, the Absolute is a process of self-manifestation through a series of dialectical stages in each of which a thesis (which contains within itself, its own self-negating antithesis) gives way to a higher synthetic form. Therefore, the lower levels of knowledge, however much erroneous, are necessary steps in process of realization of Absolute Spirit. There could be no knowledge of Truth without the experience of Error, and no existence of the Infinite, without the sublation of the Finite. The Child of yesterday is the Man of today. In the same vein, Vivekananda once declared, borrowing from William Wordsworth, "The child is the father of man".

The Swami articulated this sentiment when he asked that, although the scriptures categorize external or material worship as inferior to mental prayer, and mental prayer as inferior to the highest stage of Lord-realization, would it be right for the monotheist to call idolatry an error or a sin? "To the Hindu", he said, "man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth. To him all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realise the Infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association, and each of these marks a stage of progress; and every soul is a young eagle soaring higher and higher, gathering more and more strength, till it reaches the Glorious Sun."

This inherent humility of Vivekananda's thought only adds to the dynamic and liberal ethos of Hinduism. And it is perhaps the greatest lesson today's deeply divided world could draw from *Vedanta*. Only because the Einsteinian paradigm displaced the Newtonian, does it mean that Newton was wrong? Today nearly the whole of Freudian Psychoanalysis has been outwitted by far more exact and advanced theories and methods. But does this imply that Freud was wrong? Or did the collapse of the Soviet Union prove Marx wrong? No, Newton, Freud and Marx were all right, but within their respective temporal and spatial frames of reference. The problem begins when we try to find universal frames of reference, containing not only universal subjects, but also universal predicates, leading to a despicable tyranny of the mind.

Today, on this 159th Birth Anniversary of that young monk from Bengal whose lion roar once shook the world, let us for a moment look up to the heavens and acknowledge our own inherent

divinity, see our own reflection in the stars scattered above. The same dust that created the planets also created me. So, how am I different from them? How am I smaller than them? Or is this moment that I find myself in, only a speck in the eternal swerve of time leading me unto my own divinity?

The Swami would have replied, "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."
