

# THE METAPHYSICS OF SRI RĀMĀNUJĀṢ SRI BHĀṢYA

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## INTRODUCTION

The system of Rāmānuja occupies a significant and paramount place in the History of Vēdāntik philosophic thought. Starting from the Vēdic fountain, to use the orthodox phrase or metaphor, the rivers of interpretation flooded unrestrained in the very division and diversion of Sāmkhya, Yōga, Vaiśēṣika, Nyāya, Mīmāṃṣa, the Jaina and Buddhistic schools till finally every one of them was accepted and rejected in turn by the Philosophic Mind, and in exhaustion turned to the solacing grounds and surging oceanic expanse of the Vēdāntic thought. But neither did it find there what it vainly sought after, for wave within wave, and inundation after inundation revealed an unlimited and illimitable depth and interior. It could not (dropping the metaphor hereafter) sullenly closet itself to the fundamental assumptions, for never were they easy. It was alluring: pleasing in the extreme was the quiet rest in the initial revelation of the Vēdāntik aspiration in the Advaita of Māyavāda. But such a rest was apparently very shortlived. It was bound to be so, it could not be otherwise. It promised potencies of immense magnitudes and it heralded the death of ego-centrism in life, its bitter and garnering fruits, in the ocean of a pure chaste and illumed and absorbing Experience of the Eternal Absolute Bliss. But the demand of the world was not replied; after all the lure to thought was the world from which and for which it sought to exalt itself. So in its effort to conquer what it would enjoy, it could bear no divided rest, nor bear with quietude the hymn of hate against life in its' furious on march of time; it wanted to subdue rather than deny, to accept rather than reject; for power needs acceptance and overcoming, possession and glory, not the puny and impotent way of surrender and gloom, quietism and feebleness. But the lure was strong and remains strong, not only was the recoil from life real and psychological, its votary was a great man, a pure and magnificent flower of Humanity-Śaṅkara.

But something ought to be `done, that was the will of the Zeit Geist. Truth accepts no divided rule between itself and unreality. Understanding could be satisfied, if life would not be thwarted by mere denial. It may be called true and real and not a mere dream, for in as much as it exists should it not be called real and true, for, what is the criterion of reality but existence as it is for us?

It may have the attribute of significant meaning but yet there is no need to reject finally unity or identity, Ēkatva, with or immergence into the Absolute from whose loins it sprang. This reconciliation the Great Bhāskara and Yādava Prakāsa, the

samucchayavādins, sought to do. But for all the efforts of these two Vēdāntins, Existence would accept no halfway house. It said that it shall be treated as either an inmate, a genuine entity in the family, an organ of the Absolute, rather than be treated as a ghost (or a pitri) whose reality is affirmed as a ghost and who ought to be satiated by such routine ablutions as it deserves, but for all its importunities never be a real entity—it can claim only that much of existence—that is, of an ineffectuality. Thus the half-hearted concession of the Bhēdabhēdavādins was not accepted. It strained to be counted as an entity, real absolutely and without any reserve or not at all. It was perhaps better to be treated as eternally unreal rather than be treated as real and unreal by fits and starts. In Rāmānuja it found its leader, its voice and effectuality. It would live as one of the parent, in Union (ēkībhava) with its lord and God, rather than make the parent assume the ineffectual existence of the relations which he certainly would become if they are declared to be unreal. The inchoate utterances of the Vēdic Realists found its logical culmination and echoes in the System of Rāmānuja. Rāmānuja was the first to claim eternity and reality of the World in Vedanta (for Vyasa mentions that the world is real in his commentary on the Yōga-Sutras). He was the first to recognize the fundamental unity of Truth, Goodness and Beauty. As it was expressed “they are the three-fold cord by which our wagon is hitched to a star.” Of course we can neither entirely unify these three systems of value nor entirely separate them. To repudiate any one of them is fatal. As Dean Inge says “it leaves us with our ideals in the air, and with the bastard faith of *fideisme*.” For him the same logical Absolute, the demand of the intellect, is the moral Governor and the religious God or Personality and the Mystics lover. This integral union of functioning in triple phases of the same ultimate reality in the sense of highest Perfection, as Person, as Governor, as God and as the Ultimate Truth and Existence in which everything finds its residence and suffusion, Rāmānuja stresses in his philosophy.

It is a mistake to say that one of these phases can possibly be unreal, unreal because they are so different from each other, and because activity seems to be an effort and restrained by time and causal sequence, and further appears to be based upon imperfection. But the fault of such an argument lies in this very patent fact, namely, that they are considered to belong to one same category which they are not, as they cannot be compared at all with each other, belonging as they do to different kinds of valuing. The proposition that only the logical Absolute is real, and that the Moral Ideal and the spiritual God are unreal, does not sound true mainly because the comparison is not between the same kind of ideal or valuing but between different kinds of valuing.

In this thesis the metaphysical system of Rāmānuja will be traced. It is considered in three parts for the convenience of study. The first treats about the theory of cause (on in other words, the cause-effect continuum); the second about the evolution of the universe or the process as in space-time continuum; the third about the ontological

status of the ultimate reality or to use the well-worn phrase, the Substance. But the Vēdāntic substance is no scholastic category that goes by that name. It is a mistake, perhaps unpardonable, to treat the same as the scholastic substance. Nor is it a *tertium quid*. It is not the passive *tabula rasa* either, in which somehow the element or perception is inhered or introduced or the element of change predicated. It was a great day for Indian philosophy when activity was reckoned to be the core of existence rather than the mere passive spectator. The parallel in the west was the Leibnizian theory of the Monad as the active existence not merely the passive substance of the Cartesians. The merit of such an acceptance in Indian philosophy goes to Rāmānuja rather than to any one else. There is something radically wrong in the concept of Intelligence or the Conscious Principle or Spirit as a passive entity (as the Sāmkhya and the Māyavādins held), but whose activity (a fact of experience) is a mysterious and unreal attribution due to a third entity unreal by itself. Experience, qua experience, knows no such grand passivity and the life of the Spirit or even of the finite mind or self is a bubbling stream of overflowing creative dynamism. Life, or activity belongs to spirit; but matter is no vanishing entity, unreal in its core or even imperfect, one is tempted to add. “Perception does not grow into (knowledge or) reflection, and in so doing lose its specific quality as a mode of knowledge.....Perception makes its own unique contribution to the life of the process. There is no substitute for it, and no way of supplanting it or superseding it in its own kind. ....No conceptual activity whatsoever can conjure a single perceived fact or perceptual act into existence as a form of knowledge.....The deeper apprehension, the greater knowledge is a new creation of the energy of the mind, as distinctive in its order as that of perception, and as distinct in kind as one organ of perception is from another.”<sup>1</sup> But in cognitive activity the mind takes up an attitude of superiority in order to hold the percept fugitive and under its control, which act only leaves the mind to reflect upon the signs and symbols which it has created to represent such vanishing experiences of the objects. In a word, mind in its reflective and energetic experience signalises its superiority or transcendent character “Over the limits of perceptual fact by contriving mere perceptual symbols to correspond with and meet the abstracter aims of reflection”, but with this specific aim that what it attempts shall have its active response in the sphere of actual perception or matter. For direction the latter has none, even of the Unconscious. Sāmkhya is wrong in throwing the direction on the unconscious. All activity is founded upon a content upon which it can perform. Activity, qua activity, exists nowhere. It is sheer abstraction to claim that the percept is not the beginning and the primal necessity of reflection, and there is the organic connexion between the operations of perception and conception. Experience for us means to be factual, and though this factuality need not be always sensorial, yet it can be called perceptual, as something “given”.

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<sup>1</sup> Baillie. Aris. Soc. Pro. Vol.19 “Stereoscopic character of knowledge.”

Yet there is need for pointing out to certain criticisms at the very outset against the concept of a substrate behind activity, or an object for it to influence as mere 'scholastic' modes of thinking as one prominent writer on Indian philosophy has thought it necessary to style it. It may be so, here it is not wise to enter into any theorising as to its logicality or not, but only to call attention to the views of Rāmānuja and leave them there for what they are worth. But one is tempted, all the same, to retort that one is content to know and understand experience (in its actuality and purity) rather than jump with an understanding that clings to no basement, and descends nowhere but ascending to the pure regions of vacuity and therefore of lightness which in clarion calls, it trumpets as the REALITY, but all the while calling for the help it does not find (due to its own diseased reflection) in experience or reality. Content with this remark, what we seek in experience are principles, ultimate and real, their absolute relations, their function in reality as we know it, meaning by experience every kind of cognition and perception, be it from the spiritual and mystic revelations downwards into the unconscious and sub-conscious levels, but valid all the same, because of their ultimate non-contradiction with normal experience. The hope of every philosophical attempt has been and is, if it be worth its name, the ultimate analysis and synthesis of all experience, giving legitimate hopes that may be attained by us in our effort to master nature which somehow we feel fetters us. This is what Rāmānuja attempts to do in his Philosophy which we shall trace taking as his authoritative statement the Vedanta Sutra commentary known as the Śrī-Bhāṣya'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> All through this work the Translations given are that of Thibaut and wherever there are the pages noted they refer to that translation.