

THE ABSOLUTE AND IDENTITY STATEMENTS: SOME OBSERVATIONS

ABHINSHYAM SHANKAR TIWARI

I

The Indian Philosophical interpretations of the Upaniṣadic Mahāvākya ‘*Tat Tvam Asi*’ differ quite vividly when we compare the accounts given to it by the schools of Vedānta such as ‘*Dvaita Vedānta*’ of Mādhva, ‘*Vishīṣṭādvaita*’ of Rāmānuja, and most famously, the ‘*Advaita Vedānta*’ of Śankara. The statement translated into English reads something like ‘Thou That art’, which refers to making the individual Atman realize that he himself is the Absolute – The Brahman. In one way of saying, the different names given to the Absolute are synonymous while, in others, they may tend to differ. One way of interpreting these identity statements is Gottlob Frege’s theory of ‘Sense and Reference’ in which he advocates that two or more words may have the same referent but can differ in their ‘senses’ i.e. intensions, connotations, etc. By assuming that we can adequately understand synonymy in the extensional form, one can argue that all terms used for the Absolute are synonymous i.e. intersubstitutable. Though, still, they may tend to be different in their intensional mode and, hence, not synonymous. In this paper, an attempt has been to develop the idea of how the Fregean notion of Sense and Reference can be used on the identity statement ‘*Tat Tvam Asi*’ and, consequently, show how one can realize this synonymy of Ātman with Brahman, assuming that both the terms are referring to the same object factually and, like the realization of morning star and evening star, which is done by perception, can be realized by specific means of knowledge.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first, a brief description of Gottlob Frege’s distinction of sense and reference has been given along with its use on the assertive statements we use in our daily lives. The second section deals with the nature of Brahman and Ātman given in the light of Advaita Vedanta exclusively, for the sake of this paper’s length. The third and final section presents an application of the Fregean theory on the identity statement ‘*Tat Tvam Asi*’ and tries describing a way by which an individual can realize his perpetual union with Brahman.

II

Gottlob Frege is considered one of the biggest figures in the analytic philosophical tradition mainly for either of the two things. First, his famous work

Begriffsschrift, which attempted to define basic concepts of mathematics and to show that mathematical laws have its true foundation in the laws of logic, which was later developed by Russell and Whitehead in their magnum opus *Principia Mathematica*. Second, and the major focus of this paper, the theory of meaning given by Frege, which influenced the prominent figures of the twentieth-century analytic philosophy such as Wittgenstein and Quine. We will deal with Frege's semantic theory, which we find in his famous essay titled "Sense and Reference." Frege developed his theory because of his motivation of distinguishing between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*) to show how identity statements can be meaningful. Frege, at the outset of his essay, asks the question "is identity a relation?" and if so, is it "a relation between objects, or between names or signs of objects?" (Copi and Gould 65); the problem, as shown in *Begriffsschrift*, is what is being dealt with here: if we take identity to be a relation between objects, we are led into a paradox.

The classic example given in regards to this distinction is of Hesperus and Phosphorus, the evening star and the morning star, both of which were eventually discovered to be planet Venus. The issue is that if we take identity to be a relation between objects i.e., the extensional referents, we are led to assert that there is no new information gained when we assert 'Hesperus' or 'Phosphorus' to denote planet Venus as the names 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' both refer to the same object, i.e. Venus. In *Begriffsschrift*, Frege had held that the sole linguistic content of a proper name was its bearer, that is, the item the linguistic content referred to. But since 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' both refer to the same object, their linguistic content is the same i.e. the content of the sentence 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' is precisely the same and consistent with that of 'Hesperus is Hesperus.' The latter one is an analytical *a priori* statement, which is a tautology. However, the former one, too, becomes non-informative, if we assume that there is no way of knowing the content of a sign or symbol other than the referent it denotes. But this account of meaning becomes clearly unsatisfactory, because the two sentences are asserting different things and are not cognitively alike. It is possible to know that Hesperus is Hesperus without knowing that Hesperus is Phosphorus, as it is possible to know that $A=A$, without knowing $A=B$. To solve this difficulty, Frege advocates the difference between the reference of the sign i.e., the object denoted by the sign, and the mode of presentation of the sign i.e. the sense of the sign. Consequently, the connection between a sign, its

referent, and its sense “is of such a kind that to the sign there corresponds a definite sense and to that, in turn, a definite referent, while to a given referent (an object) there does not belong only a single sign.” (Frege 211). For example, the sign ‘Samuel Clemens’ refers to a referent in another sense than the sign ‘Mark Twain’ refers to the same (it could that one designates a man born in Florida and the other can designate the author of *Huckleberry Finn*). There can be many senses to a given referent but a single sense ‘serves to illuminate only a single aspect of the referent, supposing it to exist’ (Frege 211). We also see, in our daily lives, that the same name or sign belongs to different persons and even animals or plants, which are their referent. So it will be quite a mistake for us to consider such names as purely denotative

The definition of sense is not clearly defined in Frege, though we can, for ease of access into this paper, take it to be as the ‘mode of presentation of that which is designated’ (Frege 210). The distinction of sense and reference applies to sentences as well, where the sense of the sentence is the *thought* contained by the sentence (Frege 215) and the referent is the *truth-value* of the sentence as its referent (Frege 216). No thought, according to Frege, is “the subjective performance of thinking but its objective content, which is capable of being the common property of several thinkers” (Frege 214). Though we will not look forward to illuminate the niceties and subtleties of this application to every linguistic form, it will suffice us to know that (1) there can also be signs of signs; and, this, in turn, leads us to distinguish between a *customary* and an *indirect* sense and a *customary* referent from an *indirect* referent:

“In order to have a short expression, we will say: In reported speech, words are used indirectly or have their indirect referents. We distinguish accordingly the customary from the indirect referent of a word; and its customary sense from its indirect sense. The indirect referent of a word is accordingly its customary sense. Such exceptions must always be borne in mind if the mode of connection between sign, sense, and referent in particular cases is to be correctly understood.” (Frege 211-212)

And (2) that Frege agrees with the intuitive reception to a statement, that contains an empty referent i.e. it lacks a referent. For example, the statement "Superman is Clark Kent" has no reference to any of the senses given. But it is no doubt that statements like these have a meaning of some sort, though they do not contain any referent. The statement seems intuitively true to those who know that ‘Superman’ and ‘Clark Kent’

refer to the same person in the movie. But for Frege, the statement is neither true nor false. He remarks in *Logic*

“Names that fail to fulfill the usual role of a proper name, which is to name something, may be called mock proper names [*Scheineigennamen*]. Although the tale of William Tell is a legend and not history and the name ‘William Tell’ is a mock proper name, we cannot deny it a sense. But the sense of the sentence ‘William Tell shot an apple off his son’s head’ is no more true than is that of the sentence ‘William Tell did not shot [sic] an apple off his son’s head’. I do not say, however, that this sense is false either, but I characterize it as fictitious” (229-230)

There appear several inconsistencies in Frege’s distinction between a linguistic expression’s sense and reference, which is highlighted by Bertrand Russell in his “*On Denoting*”, but it is presupposed, for this article, that the sense-reference distinction, in the form approximately presented by Frege, can survive its critics.

III

Now that I have put a fair and summary of the semantic theory laid down by Frege, we should also look at some of the major defining characteristics of Brahman and Ātman as described in Advaita Vedānta, while keeping in mind to define it only for the sake of the application of the sense and reference theory given in the first section on the identity asserted between them. The crux of Advaita theory of Śankara’s account of Brahman is expressed in *Brahmajñānavālimālā* as “*brahma satyam jagan mithyā jiva brahmaiva nāparah*” (verse 20): Brahman is ultimately real, world is a false appearance and Jiva is non-different from Brahman. Śankara, again, in his *Brahman-Sūtra*, describes Brahman as

“Brahman is that whose nature is permanent purity, intelligence, and freedom (nitya *Śuddhabuddhamuktasvabhāvam brahmeti*); it transcends speech and mind, does not fall within the category of ‘object’, and constitutes the inward self of all. Of this Brahman our text denies all plurality of forms; the Brahman itself is leaved untouched the cause, ‘Nor this, nor that’ (*Neti, Neti*), negatives not absolutely everything, but everything but Brahman.” (3.2.22)

Brahman is assumed to be foundational, though it is in no sense a substance (Dharmaraja I). One of the most important statements, which is indeed deemed as one of the five *Mahāvākyas* is *Tat Tvam Asi* (that thou art), which appears in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (VI.Viii. 3.), and to which we see a major emphasis being given to by Śankara. For the Advaita Vedāntins, it is Brahman alone that exists. The negations are emphasized to negate the qualities rather than the substratum itself. The

Śāstras are real only till the Brahman is not realized by the seeker of *Ātmavidyā* has not realized his oneness with Brahman. There are various names This Absolute can be known: Ātman, Iṣvara, Brahman, and so on. Ātman and Brahman possess the same characteristics of being (*Sat*), consciousness (*Cit*) and bliss (*Ānanda*). ‘The purely subjective side is also the purely objective. Brahman seems to be mere abstract being, even as Ātman seems to be mere abstract subjectivity to the eyes of the intellect’ (Radhakrishnan 501).

Human mind realizes its own limitations; thus, when a person attains *Brahmānubhava* (integral experience with Brahman), he realizes the higher i.e. Para Brahman. He answers every question about the nature of the world in silence or in negative symbols. But Brahman, cast through the moulds of logic i.e. when it is attributed by *Avidyā* or lower knowledge, is Īśvara. Max Muller, in his *Three lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy*, gives us an account of Śankara’s attempt to clarify between the Para and Apra Brahman:

“When Brahman is described in the Upanishads by negative words only, after excluding all differences of name and form, due to Nescience-that is the Higher. But when He is described by such terms as (Khanda. III. 14, 2), the intelligent whose body consists of spirit, whose body is light, being distinguished by some special name and form, for the sake of worship only, that is the other, the lower Brahman” (133)

Thus, we see that Brahman can be described to an individual by three different descriptions: on the first description, it can be known as the eternal and pure “I” - Ātman. On the second, we can also know it as the Īśvara or Apram or lower Brahman, which is the ‘best image of the truth possible under our present conditions of knowledge’ (Radhakrishnan, 503). And on the third, it is the attributeless (*Niṣprapañca*), the differenceless Brahman which can only be reached by an integral experience (*Anubhava*) by the seer; in language it can only be asserted by a perpetual No. As Saint Augustine says in his *Trinity*, “We can know what God is not, but not what he is.” (viii, 2). This Absolute can be known in any one of the three aspects of reality. "Individual things cannot exist apart from Nature and they are thus all caused by Nature. But this is not to say that they cannot be accounted for in terms of particular connections, provided that we remember that *natura naturata* is not a substance distinct from *natura naturans*. There is one infinite system; but it can be looked at from different points of view." (Copleston 228). The significance of the

identity statement ‘*Tat Tvam Asi*’ is as much similar to that of ‘the morning star is the evening’ or ‘Samuel Clemens is Mark Twain’; all three of these assert identities between two senses, which have as their referents the same objects. And for the moment, it is assumed that all three statements have referents which can be known or perceived by one way or the other. However, in the first statement, which is the concern of this article, it is important to articulate a way to realize the oneness of the individual soul with the Absolute.

IV

We have, so far, been acquainted with both the description of sense-reference theory and the nature of the object of its application. It is now a fairly simple affair to affirm the identity between the Ātman and Brahman without making the relation look tautologous. Like we saw in the first section that although, the same planet i.e. Venus can be referred to by using two different ‘modes of presentation’ – Hesperus and Phosphorus – and yet, it could be informative for a person to know that Hesperus i.e. the morning star is the same as Phosphorus i.e. the evening star. In the same way, the identity statement ‘*Tat Tvam Asi*’ can refer to the same object i.e. the Absolute, while having two different ‘modes of presentation’ i.e. the Ātman and the Brahman. The other three Great Teachings: *aham Brahma asmi* (*Bṛhadrānyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.10), "I am Brahman"; *āyam atmā Brahma* (*Mandukya Upaniṣad* I.2.), "This Ātman is Brahman"; and *prajñānam Brahma* (*Aitreya Upaniṣad* III.3), "Consciousness is Brahman." These four *Mahāvākyas* recapitulate the same point: the identity of Ātman and Brahman.

It is, now, the matter to provide a substantial option to experience this identity between Ātman and Brahman where meaning is denotation. Various sorts of *Pramānas* (sources of knowledge) can do this inquiry; *Śruti* (scriptural testimony) is the only way advocated in the *Brahma-Sūtra* to know the Absolute Brahman: *śāstrayonitvāt* (I, I, 3.). Further, we see the saying ‘*tat tu samanvayāt*’: “But that [Brahman is to be known only from the scriptures and not independently by any other means is established] because It is the main purport (of all Vedānta texts)” (I, I, 4).

However, this article differs here from Śankara’s main attempts to explain the ways to know Brahman for one can also find another way to realize this identity with Brahman. We know that identity between the morning star and the evening star can

be known by the act of apprehension known as perception; thus, it will be more convenient to regard the identity between Ātman and Brahman capable of being known by another act of apprehension. We can term this act of apprehension and the apprehension itself as *Mokṣa*. Though *Mokṣa* seems an unhappy term as its connotation must be uncomfortably narrowed down to act only as a description of a kind of an act of apprehension; yet, we find that the term is not absolutely unrelated to this sort of use. "*Mokṣa* is founded on Ātmajnāna, which is the knowledge of the self." (Chatterjee 102). This knowledge does nothing else except removing ignorance. *Mokṣa*, therefore, means the removal of ignorance by knowledge: *mokṣapratibandhanivṛttimātram eva ātmajñānasya phalam*. This knowledge is objective and, just like Frege's concept of *Thought*, does not depend on the mind but on the existent fact: *Brahmajñānam vastutantram* (*Brahma-Sūtra* I, I, 2.) It must be said that the referent i.e. Brahman, once known, does not abolish the sense of duality, but only makes us know the identity between the sense: *Jñāte dvaitam na vidyate* (*Mandukya Upanishad* I, 18). We see the same appearance, but give a different value to it (Radhakrishnan 597).

Now that it is adequately put that *Mokṣa* as a term can be used to describe the act of apprehension in identifying the oneness of Ātman with Brahman, a brief explanation is to be put as to how is it, assuming that it is, possible to attain this state of apprehension (as we all know *Mokṣa* is radically different from an empirical i.e. *Vyavāhrika* perception). According to the Advaitins, *Mokṣa* is already an existing thing (*Siddha*). It is, as Śankara Says in his *Śankara-Bhāṣya* part of *Brahma-Sūtra* (IV. III. 31):

“Since Brahman is Present everywhere, within everything and is the self of everything... it is altogether impossible that it ever should be the goal of process of going. For we do not go to what is already reached; experience tells us that a person goes to something from him.”

It is now that *Mokṣa* need not be a newly attained power to perceive supernaturally than we do otherwise. It could be said as just a shift in our perspective to look at the same thing. The same act of apprehension, which, after our knowledge of identity between morning star and evening star, allowed us to view planet Venus differently, can be said to analogously be similar to knowing the identity between Brahman and Ātman (which were understood to be different before). Śankara declares many times

that the true nature of individual is that of the Absolute itself. In his *Brahma Sutra*, it is stated that the Self of the highest lord is “the real nature of the embodied soul; and the state of embodiment is due to the limiting adjuncts”: *Pārameśvaram eva hi śarīrasya pāramāthikam svarupam, upādhikṛtam tu śarīratvam* (III, IV, 8). Taking from Hiriyanna’s *Popular Essays*, one may put it:

“The end sought may be already there, and yet we may not be able to get at it owing to some obstacle or other as, for example, in the case of buried treasure. Here achievement consists merely in removing the obstacle...To give a trivial but typical example, a person may be so much beside himself as to set about searching for his eye-glasses while he is actually wearing them. Here "attainment" consists in the person in question overcoming the delusion into which he has fallen, either by being appraised of the fact by someone else or by himself coming somehow to discover it” (66)

What is now be sought is a simpler approach toward identity: one can know this similarity of the Ātman and Brahman by being told by any authority (a *Guru* and teachings of *Śruti*) on whom the seeker has an unwavering faith (*Shraddhā*) and, thereby, concentrating the intellect on the ever-pure Brahman (*Samādhāna*). Therefore, it rightly seems that *Mokṣa*, as an apprehension, is a two-fold act of denying and affirming; denying the difference between the Absolute Brahman and the individual Ātman by the removal of nescience (*Avidyā*); and affirming the identity (*Tadātmaya*) between the two. This shift in view could, then, be a sight of the differenceless and unlimited Brahman. “To us, from our limited view-point, the soul with its outlooks confined to the body, the senses, the mind and understanding, is the real; and the liberated soul which has realized its oneness with the universal self, has conquered time, and reached life eternal, seems to be unreal” (Radhakrishnan 599)

The apparent inability of various people to communicate precisely with one another, especially when talking about God, or Ātman, or Brahman, or Iṣvara, may justly be based upon nonessential, or could be region-oriented, characteristics of the senses of those names, obscuring whatever characteristics they have in common. It might seem quite plausible that there can be one Absolute, just one universe, just one God, and only one infinite Being. But the senses describing an indescribable reality (*Anirvachanīya*) are an effort to get beyond the bounds of language; the same person can have different senses (in the fregean sense of ‘sense’) at different times to describe the same referent i.e. Brahman. It would then be a call for a completely different attempt to perform an Occam’s razor to

distinguish the most commonly held senses for this referent from the senses subjective to an individual. A paper of this length does not allow us to do so; it should only be looked as an attempt to clarify the semantic meanings of the words attributed to the Absolute.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the Fregean theory of sense and reference can be applied to the linguistic assortment of identity statement ‘*Tat Tvam Asi*’ by presuming some alternative definitions to the term ‘*Mokṣa*’. I have first put out a brief description of the Fregean theory of sense and reference; in the second section, the nature of the referent i.e. Brahman on which the theory needs to be applied has been described. In the third and the final section, I have made attempt to apply this theory on several proper names by which we refer to this Absolute Brahman. There are other, different, and more successful theories of meaning than the one Frege has advanced. However, we should not deny the inherent plausibility of the sense-reference distinction to the linguistic forms, which makes me justify my acceptance of this position for this paper. The apparent success, which this paper proposes is another reason for accepting this theory of meaning. If the problem of the identity between the supra-objective Brahman and the supra-subjective Ātman can ever be solved linguistically by some theories, the Fregean theory of Sense and Reference would be one of them

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