

STUDY OF THE MODERN CRITICISMS
OF
THE PHILOSOPHY OF RĀMĀNUJA

It is an interesting and important part of any philosophical estimate to consider the criticisms that have been leveled against it by subsequent thinkers. The most devastating criticisms have been leveled by the scholastic school of Advaita and the modern interpreters of Indian Philosophy have made some additional remarks apparently and some times have brought forth new criticisms.

The claim of Śrī Rāmānuja and certainly of his great and illustrious expounder Śrī Venkatanātha is that the Philosophy of Viśtādvaita is the system which satisfies all demands of consistency of thought, and Veda and perception. It is a synthetic presentation of the Nature of Reality as expounded by the Seers and justified by experience in philosophical and mystical experience.

It is admitted on all hands that Śrī Rāmānuja is loyal to the interpretations of the Vedānta as given in the Sūtras of Bādarāyana. The Vedānta Sūtras is one of the prasthanatraya-the other two being the Upanisads and the Bhagavat Gītā. It is suggested that the Bādarāyana Sūtras is only one of the many interpretations of the Upanisads or the Vedānta. Śankara's philosophy with its unflinching monism is his own rather than Bādarāyana's says Max Muller¹. Prof.R.G. Bhandarkar declares "There re two doctrines indicative of the relation of God to the world, the so called parinama-vāda and the vivrta-vāda. The last is the doctrine of Śankarācārya; while the first is that clearly held by the author of Sūtras"¹ Dr. Surendranath Dasgupta is inclined to believe that the dualistic interpretations of the Brahma Sūtras are more faithful to the Sūtras than the interpretation of Śankaracāryā². Mr. M.T. Telivala writes "The fact that through

¹ *Six systems of Indian Philosophy*: Max Muller, p, 117.

out the latter portion of the Brahma Mīmāṃsā Brahman is described as possessing of some attributes confirms the view that the sūtrakara has not in his mind the jijnāsā and the sastra-samanvaya that Śankara wants to impose upon him in the samanvaya that Śankara wants to impose upon him in the samanvaya sūtra 1-1.4”³ “Kesavabhata Kāshmīrin after showing the contradiction between the views of the Sūtrakara and Śankara observes that according to the reasoning of sankra there can be neither anything like jijnasya- Brahman nor even sastra-rambha”⁴. Books of the east Series of both the commentaries of Śankara and Rāmānuja, holds that the Śrī Bhasya of Rāmānuja is in accord with that of the Sūtras while it is likely that the interpretations of Śankara are in accord with that of the Upanisads.

While it is rather unfortunate that by this controversy dust is raised between the two prasthanas by a type of opposition being assumed between them, the real conclusion to be drawn is that the Vedānta Sūtras of Badarayan is a great and excellent attempt to synthesize the divergent or rather convergent views of the seers of the Veda and the rather convergent views of the seers of the veda and the Upanisads, though only one attempt among many. It is difficult Upanisads, though only one attempt among many. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the aim of Śankara in commenting on these Sūtras was not fruitful, as too many contradictions with his views become apparent in the later Sūtras.

¹ *Vaisnavism, Saivism etc.*,: Bhandarkar, p.160.

² *History of Indian Philosophy*: Vol.I.P.421.

³ *Discuss how far Sankaracarya truly represents the view of the author by Brahma Sūtras* by M.T. Telivala, Bombay. Cf. *Teachings of the Vedānta according to ramanuja*: Dr.V.S. Sūktankar and Vedānta by Ghate.

⁴ Ibid.p.10

On the other hand, it is conceded that Śrī Rāmānuja has ably given a monotheistic interpretation of the Vedānta Sūtras. That this monotheism is the

real doctrine of the Upanisads was shown by that great Master in his Vedartha samgraha and by Śrī Venkatanātha in the commentary on the Īśāvāsyopanisad.

Dr. Arthur B. Keith says “The Śrī Bhasya in substantial merit and completeness far outdid any previous effort to find in the Brahma-Sūtras a basis for monotheism”.¹ Dr. Radhakrishnan writes, “Rāmānuja’s faith is more philosophical and restrained than that of his predecessors”, though here the reference obviously was not to the other philosophers like Śankara but to the Alvars and acarya-predecessors of Śrī vaisnavism².

The aim of Sir Rāmānuja as well as of the Alvars previous to him was nothing less than the most intense and or God Himself. The philosophic poise rises beyond the ordinary levels of values of *Kama*, *artha* and *dharma* to perceive in the Divine the source of all the truth of these and thus interrelates these in the proper manner in the Divine nature. Thus a criticism that may be raised against the view of Śrī Rāmānuja that it is partial or fragmentary misses the main contribution that Śrī Rāmānuja made to Philosophy, which is precisely the axiomatic character of the reality of all experience, momentary or dreamy or deep sleep or trance or waking consciousness or the divine consciousness levels when consciousness attains or retains its illimitable and reality-character. Consciousness gives reality; distortion and unreality are due to karma and kama which breed beginningless avidyā.

The criticisms can be classed under different heads. The philosophical criticisms are of course the most important.¹ The relationship between the Brahman and the soul and Nature is such that if Brahman were to be the material Cause of the world or creation, Brahman must be undergoing change. Śrī Rāmānuja attempt to show that the relationship is one of Self and Body between Brahman and Nature and the souls, then the changes of state in the latter do not affect Brahman at all. Dr. Radhakrishnan points out that “Rāmānuja is obliged to concede that Īśvara is a also subject to change.” The change that is said to be conceded by Rāmānuja is certainly no such change in His nature, as would

certainly imperil His Nature. Īśvara continues to have all the qualities in an undiminished form which He possessed in the earlier stage. The causal and effectual states are distinguished by the subtle condition of thecidacit in the

¹ *History of Sankrit Literature*: p.475 cf. Rudolf Otto: Christianity and the Indian religion of Grace.

² *Indian Philosophy* : Vol.II.P.669.

former state and the gross condition in the latter. The changes that take place do not at all apply to the spiritual nature of Brahman but only to the souls in so far as some of them undergo contraction in their intelligence-function (*dharmabhuta-jñānā*) and to the Prakṛti which evolves its several categories of *mahat*, *ahamkara*, *manas*, *indriyas* and *bhutas*. It is a status of willing the projection or evolution or manifestation by the Divine Lord and withdrawal of creation which may be said to be the change in the lord, but a change of this kind is not to be classed as the upadana or material change. This can in no sense be said to be a change in nature, affecting His status. The change that can make a difference to the status of the Īśvara or Brahman by either making Him imperfect or involved in the process of imperfection does not occur to the Īśvara. Īśvara does not become subject to karma or ignorance since He is the transcendent principle, the self-principle which is unaffected by the changes in His body, which He Himself orders and controls.

Dr. Radhakrishnan writes that, “Rāmānuja makes the finite the attribute of the infinite which means that the Infinite cannot exist without its attribute, nor the attribute without the Infinite.¹”

Firstly, Śrī Rāmānuja does not make God the sum of the infinities. The infinite is something different in kind from the finites. It is a qualitative infinity and to import a mathematical formula is a mistake. The substance-attribute (*visesanavisesya*) relationship between Īśvara and the jiva is a statement of dependence of the attribute on the substance. It does not follow that the

substance depends and exists because of the attribute. Spinoza's statement that an attribute that an attribute is that through which the substance is apprehended is a very limited statement which cannot meet the criticism of Dr. Limited Radhakrishnan. In the system of Viśtādvaita, the relationship is such that the souls cannot be conceived as existing apart from God, and not conversely that God cannot be conceived or exist apart from the souls. God can be apprehended apart from the souls in His transcendent nature through other avenues of knowledge than perception or inference. Infinity if it be a mere sum of the finites would yet be a commensurable number-finite therefore, even as Leibniz pointed out.

The attribute or adjectival theory is not the full statement of spiritual relationship that the Divine, Īśvara, bears to the soul. One should consider that it is an abstract statement even as monism is, a metaphysical abstraction that is a near statement of the position. The soul is not a duality or attribute or even a characteristic merely but is all these, and more. The meta-physical form of the relationship is the peculiar relationship of viśesana to the viśesya, the particular in relation to the concrete universal, a particular that is qualitatively different from the universal because of its essential dependence on it for its existence.

In this context it is necessary to cite another criticism made by the same Professor: "Brahman is not only a supreme Self but an eternal society of eternal selves¹". The Infinity of Brahman is not a sum of these finites, nor is it a society of these souls or an ordered or arrangement of these. The fundamental philosophic point of view taken by Rāmānuja is to present all the realized experiences of the Divine in a synthetic form. The supreme Self is transcendent, qualitatively distinguished from the souls in their severality and collectivity. But it is related to each of these in a significant body-soul maintaining them in an intrinsic or immanent form. The supreme meaning of the transcendence is brought out through this immanent activity of the Transcendent. His *paratva* is reconciled with His *antarāmitva*. The Divine is one only in all His manifold

immanence in all souls. It would be wrong to say that God in one part of His Being intains transcendence that is to say beyond change and Oneness)

¹ Ibid,715. (quoting with approval Ānandagiri's criticism in his commentary on Śankara Brahma Sūtra Bhasya I.ii.8)

whereas in another part He is subject to change and so on¹. This is to functional division either, and certainly no metaphysical division is here intimated. The Divine is One and the many, the *Para* and the *Antarāmi* in all creatures and Nature at the same time and there is not any separation of powers and so on. The relationship between the souls and the two poises of the Īśvara is through out he same, namely inseprable dependence, and whether it is society of *nityamukta* souls with an interior significance of the immanent presence of the transcendent within each other or not, the Transcendent is qualitatively distinguished from them in all His forms or poises.

The criticism that the relationship between the Supreme and the soul is not logically determined when it is stated that it is one of body and soul, requires a clear answer. Any logical consistency in thought. It is the following: Logic means consistency in thought. It is the validity in a system of coherence. It is or can be an epistemological discussion as to the status of the individual soul either as subject or an object in relation to the Divine. If it is a logical proposition, then there is need to state that the judgment should reveal that the Īśvara or Reality being such the individual soul is the body of God. It is a predicate of the Divine. It does not show the inevitability of the relationship between the subject and predicate. Logically then the soul and Nature are predicate terms. But then it is clear that the predicate terms can be taken either in the denotative or connotative sense, even as the subject can be. Śrī Rāmānuja definitely taken the relationship to apply to the subject and predicate in the connotative sense which makes the Organic relationship truly logical as it includes the metaphysical substance-attribute relationship. It is because critics of Śrī Rāmānuja have not really looked into the significant modification of the metaphysical relationship of

visistaikya between the Divine and the soul, that they have missed the synthetic contribution made by him.

If however by 'logically' is meant the necessary relationship of ground and consequent or cause and effect which is a special form of the former; and what is necessary is the establishment of the ground and consequent relationship between God and souls (and Nature), then Śrī Rāmānuja, emphasizes the adheyatva of the soul and adharatva of the Godhead. Śrī Rāmānuja affirms by his theory of śarīra – śarīrī relationship (otherwise called Viśtādvaīta) this relationship of the body as that which is absolutely dependent on the Self or God. Necessity is now enlarged to include the entire pattern of mechanical, organic, psychical, spiritual relationships that are available in experience between the One and the Many. The relationship is not one of illusion and reality, between the many and the One. The many which are different in kind from the Infinite One and also the many which are but the self-projection, or descents of the One.

It is to be noted that Śrī Rāmānuja's definition of the nature of the body is not made to suit the *metaphorical* or analogical purpose¹. The relationship between God and the souls (and Nature) is not like that of body and soul, but is the relationship of body and soul. The śarīra is that 'which a conscient soul supports, utilizes, and enjoys for itself and that which exists for the purposes of that soul alone'. Śrī Rāmānuja, shows that the other definitions of the śarīra are either too narrow or too wide: (i) the body is nothing more than a congeries or collocation of parts; this is an absolutely mechanical definition which makes no allowance for the self-activity of the soul: (ii) the body is just something that falls to pieces when the soul departs from it, is a definition that again does to show the self to be anything other than the principle which maintains its unity : (iii) the body is that which exists for enjoyment; (iv) The body is that which has size, colour, and other accidental qualities. We find that definitions such as these do not state the distinctive features to be found in the body or omit the distinctive features or some of them. The body is thus an entity or thing, which be it noted,

¹ All metaphors or analogies have limitations. Correspondential Realism which is that of Yathārtha Khyāti, however, grants a new significance to the value of Upamanic or analogic inference. The value of an analogy varies from infinity to zero according to the points of identity taken into consideration or the evaluation of the similarity.

may also be a conscient thing, which another conscient self, supports, controls, enjoys for its own purposes and which exists as such controls, enjoys for its own purposes and which exists as such for such purposes, of that soul. Thus the unity of the body is maintained, its activities controlled or directed, its pleasures and pains enjoyed and all exist for the experience of the soul. It is true that this relationship of body can last only as long as the soul does the functions of supporting, controlling and enjoying it. Minus the soul, the body is not a body whatever else it may become.

Śrī Rāmānuja thus in his concept of the śarīra includes the concepts of viśeṣana, and prākara. His concept is not less logical but more truly logical.

Again another consideration compels attention. The evolutionary theory is a modern discovery. The ancients believed in the actual possession of the sheaths or kosas, viz. annamāyā, prānamāyā, manomāyā, and vijñānamāyā kosas. The moderns know of the material, the vital, the psychological, and spiritual levels.

In another form we know of the bony, muscular, neural and harmonic organic structures within the body. The organic changes here are interactionistic and inter-dependent, but hierarchically arranged. The neural system controls almost all the other physiological functions. So too the vijñānamāyā controls the lower levels and the spiritual controls and directs all. The lower sheaths, and organs, are subordinated to those about it. A more highly developed body means that which is controlled by the higher level implicit within it or directing it. In yoga

it is this integration that is sought after. When the soul-nature begins to control, support and enjoy, then the body and soul are recognized as two distincts in unity. Śrī Rāmānuja shows that the concept of śarīra-sarari relationship is valuable of course not only between God and Nature, but also between God and the souls. The body and soul relationship between the soul and portions of Nature is of temporary nature because the soul is not fundamentally controlling and supporting the body it has, thanks to the limitations of avidyā and karma. The Divine Lord not being subject to avidyā and karma is the ultimate Organic Self of the World and souls which are His body. This view is intelligible, and is religiously and occultly possibility of becoming the embodiment of the Divine within and incidentally of erecting an immortal natural body of the Divine in and through oneself.

Viewed as a causal relation, the two persisting under the stress of unity changes in the organism, the appetitions and perceptions and evolutions. All changes emerge within the organism, not as imperfections but as expressions and manifestations of Divine will.

Dr. Radhakrishnan says that it is impossible to reconcile the double status of the Brahman as changeless and transcendent with the temporal creative process of the world. "If the Absolute is supposed to be a transcendent changeless existence, it is a problem how such an Absolute which has no history, includes the time-process and the evolution of the world; unless Rāmānuja is willing to explain away his immutable perfection and the Absolute and substitute for it a perpetually changing process, a sort of progressing perfection, he cannot give us any satisfactory explanation of the revelation of the soul or the Absolute to its body".¹

The reality of religion requires of God not merely a double poise but even a quintuple poise as Śrī Rāmānuja pointed out. The understanding of the relationship between these poises of the Infinite Godhead or the Absolute which retains its fundamental quality of Unity and transcendence is then a necessity. If

changelessness means only non-activity of any kind, and if change means only imperfection or an effort to become more perfect, then these are purely arbitrary interpretations. To be perfect does not mean to be inactive as well. Existence presents both possibilities and in the Divine existence or Being, changelessness means only no change towards imperfection or diminution or loss. That is the

¹Indian Philosophy, Vol.II

reason why the Īśāvāsyopaniṣad beautifully states that the Full remains Full in every expression and manifestation revealing the qualitative distinguishing characteristic of Divine Transcendence. The *Transcendence is absolute because* it is equally transcendent in immanence, in manifestation and in historical descent and iconic presence. The question of History can again be nothing like what Dr. Radhakrishnan thinks it should be. The problem is not explained away. The inconveniences are all Dr. Radhakrishnan's. The real trouble with the Absolutist Mind is its inability to see the rich possibility of any other method of significance, to understand the terms of other philosophers. Dr. Radhakrishnan is not clear as to the meaning of the words 'changeless', 'Immutable', 'perfection' and 'history', in the passage quoted above. For Rāmānuja changeless means that there is no change in nature as spiritual in the Lord or Isvra and as omniscient creator, and omnipotent knowledge. And immutable perfection means the dynamic un-diminishing deity realizable as the most perfect and satisfying without any possible return to imperfection, which grows in satisfyingness to the soul and does not tend to become monotonous or familiar. In Plato's language "The deity is morally immutable but not immutability".

A criticism against the too much historical-mindedness of Śrī Rāmānuja is made by a student of Aurobindonian thought. He remarks that Śrī Rāmānuja's system commits the mistake of exaggerating or emphasizing the play of the One in the many, at the expense of the other self-poise of the One beyond the many.¹ The function of religion is the principle of recognition of the one central personality in relation to the individual souls. Thus naturally the interest of the

seeker or mumukshu is to know all about the poises of the Divine in relation to the world and the souls, and more primarily the latter. That Śrī Rāmānuja was not oblivious of the self-poise of the Brahman in His Para or inexpressible, indescribable, transcendent form is quite effectively shown by the emphasis that he makes of that Transcendence over every *heya-guna* and his emphasis of the *Ananta-kalyāna-guna*. It would be unjust to say that he emphatically criticized what the Brahman's transcendence should be characterized as characterless and qualityless. The question may be reduced to one of terminological difference, but it has all the importance for the religio-mystical consciousness.

Professor Hiriyanna writes that the concept of *aprthaksiddha* is meaningless. He says "If *samavāya* tries to unite what are supposed to be distinct, the *aprthaksiddhi* tries to separate what are supposed to be one".¹ This criticism is without point. *Samavāya* relationship in Vaiśeṣika Philosophy is inseparable conjunction between substance and quality, and individual and *jati* etc. It is translated as inherence. It is conceived as a category and it exists between a whole and its parts also. The causal relationship is also said to be one of *samavāya* as found in the classification of a type of *karana* as *samavāya-karana*. The whole analysis of Vaiśeṣika is atomistic and analytical. The *aprthaksiddhi* relation however seeks to extend the scope of the *samavāya-siddhi*. *Samavāya* is mechanical and it has been strenuously criticized as requiring another *samavāya* and so on. It suffers from the fallacy of infinite regress. But the *aprthaksiddhi* relation does not need any such third entity. All that this concept shows is that there is *absence* of separate existence. God and the soul are inconceivable apart from one another. Another point to be noted is that here the relationship is between entities or existences and not metaphysical categories. The fundamental principle of this assertion is the experience of existential unity of two persons, one higher and another lower, one an infinite, *vibhu*, and another finite, *anu*.

Regarding the explanation of the illusion which happens to the individual soul when it perceptually identifies a rope with a snake, a colour of the rose with

the crystal, or when the finite is identified with the Infinite, body with the soul or vice-versa, Śrī Rāmānuja attempts to solve it realistically by a radical affirmation of there being some real ground for the illusion; and non-observation or mal-observation or indescribability or self-projection or subject being mistaken for an object do not explain it; the fundamental quality of consciousness is to give truth. Our ignorance or limitation of action (karma) and passion makes impositions or cross-references through imaginative fusion or comparisons. Comparison being as much an intellectual process we have to find out the real intrinsic nature of the presented content, since however meager the similarity between any two, at moments this meagerness gains great dimension even like a short man gaining great status under certain conditions. Thus Śrī Rāmānuja is a radical empiricist and traditionalist and realist and has fundamental faith in the reality of experience whether waking or dreaming or deep sleep. All that he points out is that real objectivity of the consciousness which results from a life devoted to the seeing of the Divine as the self and author and agent of all processes and personalities would present all in their true or real nature. Dreams as well as psychic states and experiences of objects which are similar would not lead to illusion but to the understanding of the real tattva of each.

Śrī Rāmānuja therefore being a fundamental realist, accepts the reality of all experience for the purpose of integral understanding which would guide us through the wonderful manifoldness of the Unity of God and His omniscient power, omnipotent knowledge and omni-embracing goodness.

The concept of *dharma-bhuta-kanana* is another point which is unique to the doctrine of Śrī Rāmānuja. It is not a quality merely but something which is capable of increase to the infinite extension as well as decrease to nullity. It is a dynamic property as well. All that happens to a soul in its freedom is its unconditioned freedom from all limitations and in bondage complete or more or less complete conditionedness. If the self is said to be consciousness. If the self is said to be consciousness itself and that it is both an activity of knowing and

¹ Dr.S.C. Chatterjee (Vednta Kesari 1942) points out that if knowledge is quality, it cannot give an 'ideal reference'. Knowledge is an intermediate between quality and activity, says Reid. Knowledge as Dharma is an activity, which combines both quality and activity and as memory conserving it, it is also a retainer of the results of activity.

object of knowing and also the subject of knowing, then it would be necessary to make its transcendence which issues out into the three forms mentioned.¹ Such difficulties could be avoided if it is stated clearly that a self has the property of knowing which grants knowledge of objects or itself to itself. This may not be suitable to idealism or absolute monism. All souls have this functional consciousness though themselves known and experienced as substantive consciousness. The Humean or Buddhistic criticism that we never come across either a substance or self apart from the qualities or states of consciousness such as perceptions, imaginations, feelings and etc., would be valid within limits. But in the presence of the experiences of those who have glimpsed their souls as self-luminous, substantive, immortal and integral with the Divine who again is known and entered into, their statements can be said to be true only of the pragmatic emotional soul that is yet identified with the bodily states of feelings and notions and perceptions.

The last criticism to which we may now turn is that the Viśtādvaitic view is not sufficiently synthetic or synoptic. Does it not forget the utterance that God is all – *sarvam khalvidam Brahama*? The assertion of the three entities is something that is not true to it. Perhaps the reduction of Nature and souls to real statuses of the One supreme Brahman as Śrī Aurobindo does is more satisfactory. It is however clear in the system of Śrī Rāmānuja that God's inseparable relationship of controlling, and directing and enjoying Nature and souls is equivalent to the assertion of the Allness of the Divine Godhead and this does more justice to the realities of the world and souls and their fundamental existence has regard to the infinity of God and His mysterious wonderful ineffable nature.

¹*Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 410 cf. Śrī Bhasya II.i.12.