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THE DOCTRINE OF MAYA

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जगन्मिथ्याभूतं मम निगदतां वेदवचसाम
अभिप्रायो नाद्यावधि हृदयमध्याविशदयम् । जगन्नाथ

The doctrine of *Māyā* is the most widely known doctrine in Indian Philosophy. This doctrine is a corollary to the two principles of the Advaita Vedanta, *viz.* (1) that the ultimate reality is absolute and that (2) this absolute is the self. These principles imply that the world of everyday experience is not absolute and therefore not ultimately real. Whatever is not ultimately real is to that extent false. But everything excluding the self is only proximately and not ultimately real. Therefore whatever is "not-self" is false. It is at this point that the Advaitists have to face a great difficulty. The question naturally arises, "If everything is false, how is it that it is not known to be so ? How is it that the objective world, even though it is declared to be false, still haunts us and in some sense is 'out there' ? Why should this falsity *be* at all there ? What is the nature of this falsity ?" To these questions the Advaita dialecticians have tried to give some answers. The problem before them was broadly to reconcile the objectivity of the relative with the absoluteness of reality. That the relative or phenomena have some kind of being they could not deny; but the question was, what kind of being is compatible with the absolute ? In order to meet such questions, the Advaitists have advanced various arguments. These arguments deal (1) firstly with the nature of the world of phenomena and (2) secondly with its relation to the absolute. Some of these reasonings are epistemological. Others are ontological. Let us deal with the epistemological reasonings of the Advaitists first.

Epistemological Arguments for Mayavada

Advaitism holds a doctrine of error which is known as the *Anirvachaniyakhyāti*. According to this doctrine, erroneous knowledge also has an objective basis, the very nature of which is inexplicability or *anirvachaniyata*. The Advaitists believe in the existence of objective falsehoods. They say that there are some objects the very nature of which is constituted of falsity. Falsity belongs to them in their own right. When we perceive silver superimposed on a conch-shell, we are not to suppose that the silver is only in our mind, or more properly

in our knowledge, and not objectively present. The illusory silver is also objective, like the real silver; but there is a difference between the two kinds of silver. The difference consists in this that the real silver is, let us say, constituted of reality while the illusory silver is constituted of falsity. We cannot further explain the nature of the illusory silver than saying that it is made of falsity; and therefore we can say that its very nature is inexplicability.

This analysis of the nature of the object of erroneous perception is extended by the Advaitists to the whole cosmos. They say that like the illusory silver the so-called real silver also is constituted of falsity, because the only difference between the two is that the latter is relatively more "stable" than the former. But this is only a difference of degree and not of kind. Therefore all the objects of knowledge are constituted of falsity; and inexplicability is their nature. This is what is meant by saying that the world of phenomena is *mayika* or illusory.

This Advaita doctrine of error is certainly interesting though it looks peculiar at first sight. The doctrine can be supported by the following arguments.

It is generally supposed that in erroneous perception what we see is in our minds and there is nothing outside answering to it; while in true perception, there is an exact correspondence between what is in our minds and what is outside. Thus when I see the real silver there is a real silver which is exactly reflected in my mind and the correctness of my seeing depends on the exactness with which the reflection and the original tally. Contrarily when I see silver where in fact there is only a conch-shell, the silver is only in my mind but not outside in reality; there is only a reflection without any original and there is no such thing as correspondence between the reflection and its original. This lack of correspondence is supposed to be the nature of error.

But this view is not tenable. Psychologically it is unfounded; because when I see things I am not aware that I am seeing only their reflections to which the real things correspond. Even after being told by the upholders of correspondence that what I see is a reflection which corresponds to an original, I seem to know not a reflection but something original to which nothing corresponds. However closely I introspect my knowledge of things, I cannot find any *tertium quid* between things and the knowledge of them. It seems self-evident that what I see is not in my mind or knowledge; I am undeniably aware of seeing something *outside* my knowledge; I am aware that the object of my knowledge is not *in* but *before* my

knowledge. Thus the theory that the object of knowledge is merely a copy is psychologically ungrounded.

Again even logically the theory does not hold. Even the upholders of correspondence have to accept that we know the copy immediately, if not the original. Thus even according to them, knowledge must somehow be immediately related to its object at some stage or other. Knowledge of the copy, if not the knowledge of the original, is such that it is immediately related to the copy—its object—without any third thing intervening between them. Now if this is so, why not straightway maintain that all knowledge is immediately related to its object without any *tertium quid* between knowledge and its object? Why this psychologically false presumption that the object of knowledge is a copy of an original object?

The reason for this is that if all knowledge be immediately related to its object, we cannot account for erroneous perception. If the illusory silver is as much an object of knowledge and immediately related to it as the real conch-shell, how are we to account for the vast difference between the two? On the correspondence notion we can very well account for error by saying that the object of erroneous knowledge has nothing corresponding to it in reality; but if the object be directly related to knowledge, as the present view would have us believe, there will be no such thing as error; because what we know will always be an object of some kind in reality.

The Advaitists solve this difficulty by denying that there is any essential difference between error and true knowledge. There is only a difference of degree between truth and error according to them. When we see the conch-shell our knowledge is true; whereas when we see silver in its place, our knowledge is erroneous, not because knowledge as such is different in the two cases, but because the silver disappears when we try to know it further and better and because knowledge of the conch-shell dispels the former knowledge of the silver and shows it to be erroneous. Knowledge of the conch-shell, on the other hand, is not dislodged, even when we try to know it further. This shows that it is true.¹ Truth and error can thus be shown to be different even in the absence of the correspondence notion.

But they are not essentially different. Even the knowledge of the conch-shell is not absolutely true. It is only truer than the knowledge of the silver, in that the conch-shell maintains itself longer in knowledge. But it does not have absolute reality because before the penetrating analysis of the philosopher even the conch-shell cannot stand and gives place to a dance of electrons and then to some

mathematical formula. Thus even the conch-shell is only relatively, but not absolutely true and its nature is similar to that of the illusory silver.

On the strength of this theory of truth and error the Advaitists contend that all objects of knowledge are similarly cancellable and therefore ultimately untrue. Their very nature consists of cancellability and falsity. The world of objects is therefore *mayika* or illusory. *Maya is only a cosmic extension of the anirvachaniyakhyati or the theory of error which believes that the object of erroneous knowledge is positive and constituted of inexplicability or falsity.*²

Refutation of the Epistemological Arguments for Mayavada

Let us now examine Māyāvāda as represented above and try to see whether it is tenable. I have said that the doctrine of error which believes in objective falsity has many points in its favour. Nevertheless, even if falsity is believed to be objective, Māyāvāda does not follow from it. The illusory silver may be objective like the real silver; but the two objects are different in kind. The Advaitists commit a great mistake in supposing that the only difference between the two lies in their different degrees of durability or persistence. This mistake is further aggravated by supposing that durability is identical with reality. But reality cannot be identified with persistence. A thing having greater durability does not have more reality on that account. Reality is *sui generis* and cannot be identified with something else that has degrees. Whatever has degrees is never bare reality; but it is reality with a particular content and degrees of persistence belong to that, and not to reality itself. Thus the difference between degrees of persistence cannot constitute the difference between two kinds of objects having different degrees of reality. So the doctrine that all objects of knowledge are affected more or less with lack of persistence and therefore are constituted more or less of falsity is unjustified.

Other Epistemological Arguments for Mayavada

The epistemological argument refuted above is specific to the Advaita; but there are other epistemological arguments besides these that may be brought in to defend Māyāvāda. These arguments are characteristic of the idealists and they go to show that the so-called external world is dependent on the mind for being what it is. These arguments take many shapes and all of them do not support Māyāvāda.

२. अनिर्वाच्याविद्याद्वितीयसचिवस्य प्रभवतो । विवर्ता यस्यैते विषयनिलतेजोवचनयः ।
यतश्चाभूद्विद्वं चरमचरमुच्चावचमिदं । नमामस्तदब्रह्मापरिमितसुखज्ञानममृतम् ।

भामती

Kant, for example, believes that what we see is an admixture of reality with what we superimpose on it. Thus reality as such is never seen. Therefore he calls the world of experience phenomenal. But this view is not akin to Māyāvāda because Māyāvāda believes that there is nothing outside phenomena excepting the self, and besides the self there is nothing in itself as Kant supposed. Berkeley's subjective idealism is nearer to Māyāvāda; because he believes that the world of experience is wholly in the mind; and not independently real. Later on he says that the world of experience, though dependent on the mind, is not dependent on my mind, but on the mind of God and thus though the world is purely subjective to God, it is not purely subjective to me. This reminds us of the Advaitic distinction between *Māyā* and *Avidyā*. *Māyā* is the subjective activity of the absolute self while *Avidyā* is the subjective activity of the finite self³ Thus even for Advaita Vedānta the world of experience is not wholly subjective to me, though it is wholly subjective to the absolute self. For an Advaitist, there are insuperable difficulties in explaining the relation of the finite self with the Absolute self, but this need not concern us here. What I want to point out here is that Māyāvāda is much nearer to subjective idealism than the Advaitists are willing to concede and therefore an examination of the Berkeleyan arguments will be helpful in understanding Māyāvāda.

Berkeley's famous doctrine is that *esse is percipi*, i.e. the essence of a thing consists in its being known, and therefore everything depends on the mind for its existence. His argument for this was that if we strip off from an object everything that is created in the process of our knowing it, nothing remains. Thus colour, taste, smell, etc. are supposed to be qualities inhering in the object, but really speaking they are our sensations. It is as ridiculous to speak of colour being in the object as it is to say that sweetness is in the orange and not in my tongue. Apart from the tongue's experience there is no sweetness in the orange as such and the same is applicable to all the qualities of the object, primary or secondary. Thus it can be easily shown that an object is nothing but our experience of it.

Māyāvāda is not far different from this position though some Māyāvādins protest against its being so. Prof. Dasgupta who has spent most of his life in studying Indian philosophy is inclined to believe that the philosophy of Shankara is a compound of the Vijānavāda or subjective idealism and the Shūnyavāda of the Bud-

३. माया तु प्रकृति विद्यान्मायिनं तु महेश्वरम् । श्वेताश्वतर.

dhists with the Upanishadic conception of the self superadded. This shows that subjective idealism of the Berkeleyan type is quite akin to Māyāvāda.

Refutation of the Subjectivist Arguments for Mayavada

Let us now see whether the Berkeleyan subjective idealism is well-founded. Subjective idealism urges that the object of our knowledge is always *in* our knowledge; and its nature depends on the nature of the knowing process. Thus colour is only a factor in the sensation of colour and if the nature of the sensation differs the nature of the colour will also differ. This principle is plausible enough; but I think that it is a mis-statement of fact. It seems plain that when we sense colour we sense it as external to our act of sensing it and not as a factor within the sensation. If it were a factor within the sensation, we could have asserted with justification that our sensation itself is coloured and not that it is a sensation of colour. The phrase "sensation of colour" clearly means that colour is external to the sensation and is in no way a constituent of the sensation. If it were a constituent factor of the sensation itself, we could have said with justice that when we see a table, our seeing itself is a table or when I know a horse my knowledge itself is a horse. This proves that objects of knowledge are in some sense external to knowledge or mind and they cannot be said to be wholly subjective on that score.

Mayavadin's Argument from the Creativity of Knowledge

It might still be urged that even though objects of knowledge are not *factors* in the knowing process they are *products* of the knowing process and therefore they can be said to be subjective to that extent.⁴ Thus when I know colour, colour may be external to my knowledge; but still colour has been produced by a particular mechanism of rays in my eyes and therefore my knowing process is responsible for *creating* the very object it knows. This shows that knowing is making and the objects of knowledge do not exist in their own right. They will not exist if we do not know them and as long as this cannot be denied it must be accepted that the objects of knowledge are subjective and therefore in some sense false and illusory. My knowledge itself may not be a table when I know the table; but my knowledge is the cause of the table; and the table is a construction by my knowledge and therefore it can be rightly called *mayika* if we use the word in the sense of a thing whose being is not in itself but somewhere else.

४. सर्वं चैतदविद्यया त्रिगुणया विश्वं मया कल्पितम् । शंकराचार्य.

Refutation of the Argument from the Creativity of Knowledge .

This argument is probably the most formidable that can be advanced in favour of Māyāvāda. Before proceeding to examine it let me make it clear that even if the argument is accepted *in toto* it cannot be said to prove Māyāvāda as such, though it is sufficient to shake our confidence in the absolute objectivity of the world we see. The argument simply proves that what we see is not wholly objective because knowledge while knowing it also *makes* it what it is. But this does not prove that nothing apart from what our knowing "makes" is objectively present. My knowing process may *transform* the object, but it does not wholly *create* it. Thus the present argument does not suffice to prove the thesis of Māyāvāda, *viz.* that everything excepting the self is illusory. It only proves that what *we know* is a fabrication made by ourselves; but the opponents of Māyāvāda may assert with justification that there might be much else besides what we know, and this might be absolutely objective and not a mere fabrication and yet it might be quite different from the self.

Again the argument itself is not strictly true. Nobody would dare to say that the objective world is exactly as we know it to be, but if we carefully consider the nature of knowledge we shall find that it is not altogether impossible that at least some aspects of it are exactly what we know them to be and will not change however much our minds change. To realise this we have to bear in mind that knowing is far different from making. Knowing can be said to be the direct antithesis of making. The mechanism of rays in the eyes is said to make colour. But can the mechanism of rays by any chance be called knowledge or a knowing process? It cannot be called knowledge, clearly because exactly the same process might take place in some mechanical instrument, in the camera for example, and no one is likely to call it knowledge. If the mechanism of rays in the eyes is knowledge even the camera may be said to know colour.

Again the mechanism of rays is not even a knowing process. A knowing process may be a process which is identical with knowledge just as a walking process is identical with walking. That the mechanism of rays cannot be called a knowing process is clear from the argument which proves that it is not knowledge. Moreover the mechanism is not a knowing process in the sense that it *leads* to knowledge. The process does not *necessarily* lead to knowledge as will be evident from the example of the camera. In the camera too the process is there but it does not lead to knowledge. Again knowledge is or may be possible without this process. There is no proof

to show that knowing must involve some previous process. Knowledge as we know it is *sui generis*; *prima facie*, it cannot be said to be identical with making; and even those who say that knowing is making have to admit that the mechanism of knowledge is something over and above ordinary making. Colour is made in the camera as it is in the eye but still it is not known. It is known only when it is made in the eyes. Again it is not further transformed by knowing it once it is made by the eyes. Those who identify knowing and making succeed at the most in showing that making always takes place before knowing. But even they have to admit that knowing does not further transform the product of this previous making. Thus knowing itself is not making and it seems an open question whether all knowing must be preceded by making. For aught we know there might be cases of knowing without any previous process of making and such knowing may reveal to us the object as it is in itself.

Now it is clear that the mechanism of rays is not a knowing process. It is as much a process as any other existential process in the world such as the flowing of a river or the writing of this essay. It is not knowing that makes its objects. It is some objective and real process that makes them and this disproves the cardinal principle of Mayavada that all knowable objects are dependent on knowledge for their existence.

Mayavadin's Argument from the Dependency of Objects on Our Nature

But it might still be urged that knowable things are dependent for their existence on our psycho-physical nature even though it be independent of knowing. Thus the quality of the colour we see is dependent on the nature of our eyes. A jaundiced eye sees yellow where the normal eye might see white. Again the sun is moving for a man on the earth, while it will be seen to be stationary by one who manages to live on the sun. This shows that the world of objects is still subjective, though it might not be dependent on knowing.

Refutation of the Argument

Even this argument is far from bringing strength to Mayavada. The objects we know might be dependent on our psycho-physical nature for being what they are. But does this prove that they are false or illusory? It is no demand of logic that what depends on our psycho-physical nature must be false. Our character, our position in

society and our relationships—all depend on our psycho-physical nature. I am a student because my psycho-physical nature is suited for learning; I am a husband because my psycho-physical nature is that of a male; I am not a mother because my psycho-physical nature is not suited for becoming a mother. Does the Māyāvādin want to suggest that because all these aspects of my personality are dependent on my psycho-physical nature, they are illusory and that really speaking I am not a husband and might as well be a mother? Things dependent on my nature cannot be said to be illusory unless my nature is declared to be illusory.

The yellow seen by the jaundiced eye is not illusory *because* it depends for its existence on the nature of the eye, but because this yellow is taken to be the yellow seen by the unjaundiced eye. The analogy of the illusory snake super-imposed on the rope is a case in point. The illusory snake is not false because it depends on the psycho-physical nature of its perceiver. It is false because it is taken to be a snake which is not so super-imposed.

This proves that the Māyāvādin cannot declare the world to be false simply because as it is known it is dependent on our nature.

The Ontological Arguments

After thus disposing of the epistemological arguments for Māyāvāda, let us now turn to the ontological arguments.

Shankara constantly says that logic is to be employed only for proving the thesis of the scriptures and not anything independently. He therefore employs logic only for refuting the rival schools. In his refutations of the rival schools some philosophically valuable arguments are found. In these refutations he seems to imply that mere logic cannot successfully deal with the world and any treatment of the world on the basis of mere logic is bound to be fallacious. Subsequent Advaita dialecticians seem to have caught this suggestion and developed their theory of *anirvachaniyata* or the inherent inexplicability of the world by criticising logical explanations offered by other schools. This tendency is most marked in Shriharsha and his *Khandana-khanda-khādyā* is regarded as a classic of this negative dialectic of the Advaita school. Logic is mostly employed in the Advaita in this negative aspect and it is for this reason that I said above that the ontological arguments for Māyāvāda are numerous and important. Let us therefore examine some ontological arguments for Māyāvāda and see whether they contain any truth.

Shriharsha's Arguments against the Reality of Difference

Mayavada results from the fundamental principle of the Advaita, viz., that reality is non-dual or non-plural and therefore all plurality must be illusory or false. Shriharsha in his *Khandana* tries to refute the reality of difference in order to prove this thesis. His arguments against the reality of difference are briefly as follows.

Anything that cannot be correctly defined is false.⁵ Definition gives the self-nature or the very being or the essence of the thing; and therefore the thing that has no definition has no self-nature. Now a thing that has no nature of its own cannot be said to be real. Therefore whatever is indefinable is unreal. Difference can be easily shown to be indefinable, because whatever definition of difference is proposed turns out to be unworkable.

Refutation of the Argument

Shriharsha's critique of difference can be easily disposed of. It is an example of the failure of logic when logic is employed not as a guide but as a handmaid for proving some preconceived idea. First the contention of Shriharsha that whatever is indefinable is unreal cannot be accepted. I do not see any connection between indefinability and unreality. A thing might be indefinable simply because it is not complex. Definition being a verbal statement involves analysis and synthesis of concepts. This is clearly not possible with regard to a thing which is so simple that it has no factors or smaller constituents in terms of which it can be analysed. There is no logical demand that everything must be analysable. Consequently showing a thing to be indefinable is simply establishing its incapability of being conceptually reconstructed by breaking it up into pieces and again joining them together. This by no means proves that the thing is false.

Again even if it is supposed that the arguments of Shriharsha succeed in destroying the definitions proposed by him, one can still say that some other definition which Shriharsha has failed to notice might be perfectly valid and true. There is no evidence to show that the definitions offered by Shriharsha are the only definitions possible. It is not possible therefore to prove Shriharsha's thesis merely by examining stray definitions. Shriharsha, on the contrary, should have tried to prove *a priori* the general principle that being a thing is to be indefinable. This he does not do. I however do not see any con-

५. बुद्ध्या विविच्यमानानां स्वभावो नावधार्यते
अतो निरभिलप्यास्ते निःस्वभावाश्च देशिताः।

nection between indefinability and unreality. There is no reason to suppose that to be a thing in the world is to be, by that very act, indefinable.

I have referred to Shriharsha's arguments against difference just as a sample of the vast literature, both in eastern and western philosophy, which seeks to demonstrate the self-contradictory nature of the world. Time, space, motion, etc. are all, like difference, shown to be indefinable and therefore unreal. A good many of such arguments are full of simple verbal fallacies. Against others that are not so, it can always be urged that they do not demonstrate the logical impossibility of giving a consistent account of the experienced world. They are valid only against the particular accounts which they assail.

Thus Māyāvāda does not have any conclusive arguments in its favour. Some people may however find emotional satisfaction in believing this world to be illusory. I myself get emotional satisfaction in believing it to be real and would require much more solid grounds for changing my belief than the Mayavadins have given so far.

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