

# INDIAN METAPHYSICS

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A paper presented at the "Science et Metaphysique" Conference sponsored by the  
Academie Internationale de Philosophie des Sciences in Cesena, Italy May 19-21, 1988

Philosophical thought in the Indian tradition was an experiential and experimental discipline. As such, direct experience plays a crucial role, whether it was sensory or mental. Many crosscurrents and dichotomies are evident in our experience: the individual versus the cosmic, the primitive and instinctual versus the refined and the upward striving, the atomistic versus the holistic, the causal versus the creative and so on. The nature of experience, and an individuals relation to the world of experience, occupies much of this thought. And most of the systems of Indian philosophy take up the question of the existence of misery and the use of metaphysical search to transcend misery.

As understood by Indian tradition knowledge itself is endless and beyond complete literal comprehension in its totality by any individual. There is a broad classification of knowledge (vidya) into non-ultimate (apara) and ultimate (para). All knowledge including traditional scriptures, the languages, linguistics, mathematics etc. are thus apara vidya: only that knowledge which enables the knower to know the nature of the Self, of awareness, is the ultimate knowledge (para vidya). Thus divided the apara vidya (metaphysics) is an experimental discipline with direct perception as its role. The person practicing the discipline of apara vidya thus becomes a seer, a ṛṣi. In the Mundāka Upaniṣad of the Atharva Veda this is clearly presented as a dialogue between Śaunakan, a householder and Angiras, the great ṛṣi. In the First Canto of the Mundāka Upaniṣad metaphysics (apara vidya) is first of all distinguished from all other knowledge; and given as its aim the knowledge of the Self. There is no middle ground for a mere theory of knowledge as such. Metaphysics is the route to and practice of transcendence

In the folk tradition in Skandapurāna, Pārvati asks her consort Lord Śiva "By what process does the individual (dehi) acquire transcendence (brahmamaya)?" Śiva answers in detail that the process of learning, of perceiving is symbolized by the active principle of insight as the guru cakravarti (the teacher who ensures the harmonious cycle of the world) seated on a golden throne in the Centre of the heart of the disciple. Such a guru principle

is the remover of darkness (of ignorance), removing all doubts and questions, unifying one's knowledge and experience and thus functions as the agency for enlightenment. This guru is the path to transcendence. We see in this Hymn to Preceptor (Gurugita) the same sentiment as stated by Apostle Paul "He who works in me is not myself but Christ Jesus". Just as in Christian spiritual discipline one projects this indwelling spirit onto persons and institutionalized clergy, so does the Indian tradition (be it Vedic, or non-Vedic) often attribute the manifestation on to persons who then became agencies for transcendence.

But despite all this, tradition often reemphasizes the role of the indwelling spirit as the Self. In the Bhagavadgita Lord Kṛiṇa reminds Arjuna that at the end of many cycles of happenings the wise man recognizes that everything is the manifestation of the Self; but he hastens to add that such people are very rare.

So Indian metaphysics has transcendence as its aim; it is not merely a theory of knowledge. The position is taken that any such knowledge is part of the non-ultimate knowledge (apara vidya); and being part of knowledge any assessment of the essence of knowledge by such a means is less than complete. So the essence of metaphysics is the discipline and knowledge of transcendence.

There are two broad groups of philosophical systems in this path of transcendence. One group avowedly accepts the misery of everyday life and considers the cessation of misery and the release from the bondage as its essence. The other group is more optimistic and asserts that the ultimate is bliss and not the mere absence of misery. In this as well as other aspects of the study of reality, it appears to me that the difference is one of emphasis and accent rather than of essence.

Greek metaphysics came after physics and the two can be easily distinguished. This is not easy in Indian thought. I believe that this is partly due to the ambitious undertaking of Indian thought where time, space, causality, and natural laws are themselves

secondary. The primary question is one of experience and its systematization. *Śāṅkya* postulates Nature and Self (*prakṛti* and *puruṣa*) as two distinct entities while *Yōga* deals only with the self and its functioning and culture. *Vedānta* deals with the identity of the Self and the Cosmos, but *Boudha* deals with the perceptions with clinical detachment. *Vaiśeṣika*, which is nearest to Greek physics itself, does not make a clean break between the observed and the observer.

If the time, space, and causality are secondary concepts, the relevant space-time frame depends on the nature of the experience *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* which deals with the waking-dreaming-sleeping phases and their substates states this most clearly. The wakeful person and the dreamer have similar cosmologies but they are not the same: the three levels of awareness, *vaiśvānara*, *taijasa*, and *prajña* are distinct and get integrated only in the transcendent *turiya* modality which is indescribable (but experienceable!). Since waking, dreaming, and sleeping states are recurrent, time is a many stranded flow and has the topology of a braided braid rather than of a straight railroad track. The cycle of day and night and the seasons perhaps equipped out language with paradoxical phrases like "same time next year." The nontrivial connectivity of time is familiar to most of us engaged in creative work. It is, therefore, not surprising that Śiva in deep trance, Viṣṇu in his cosmic dream while sleeping on the waters, and the Buddha in meditation with his eyes almost closed are evocative of the undifferentiated universe full of potentialities but not yet committed to one amongst the many possibilities. In a curious way it finds an echo in modern scientific cosmology at the Big Bang.

If time has a nontrivial topology, the usual notions of cause and effect are inapplicable at the fundamental level. This, in turn, points out that "laws of nature" are also appropriate only to restricted sections and are not fundamental. It is not that the physical universe ceases to be; it is that the physical universe is a section of reality so constructed by the observing intelligence as to be able to do the best systematization.

Rather than despair, this gives us even more aesthetic reason to look for a beautiful scientific theory.

An excellent example is given by the cosmology expounded in the Aitareya Upaniṣad. It looks like a primitive fable until it is compared with the perception of a person waking up from a nap after a satisfying lunch! Not only are the sensations on waking up excellently described but even the second law of thermodynamics is invoked in a most natural fashion in terms of the *āpna vāyu*, the agency for the digestive decomposition alone being able to obtain sustenance from food and with the aid of the other *prāṇas* transmit it to the sense organs and thus maintain sentient life.

But what about the physical universe for a person whose awareness can transcend the transient states? Does he cease to perceive the world or does he become unable to maintain his transcendence? This question is beautifully described in the Third Canto of the Mundāka Upaniṣad which gives the metaphor of two birds allied in friendship perched on the same tree: one eats of the sweet and bitter fruits while the other watches on. This conclusion that the person of higher wisdom continues to live as if he is an ordinary person has been declared by most philosophic traditions. The lotus which is in water but not of water, is rooted in mud but always turning to the sun; or the burning bush where the fire glows and illuminates but does not consume the bush are evocative of transcendent wisdom and ordinary common sense experience coexisting.

What is the ultimate reality? What is it that one may seek to end all seeking? Most of the Indian systems of thought avoids this question and only extols the virtue of release from bondage (*kaivalya*). The wise Buddha remained silent when questions were asked on such topics. But the *Vedānta* system answers categorically that bliss is the nature of the Self and when all coverings are removed then bliss will shine forth. Bliss is therefore not brought about by actions. Rather we remove the false perceptions of misery and bondage. Again, in the limited domain of creative scholarship, we are all aware that

creativity is really discovery!

What do these things mean for science versus metaphysics? It appears to me whether I identify myself with the small self (with a name, form, and social security number) or with the grand Self, the realm of traditional science is unaffected. The physical universe functions more or less the same way and the physical laws would be formulated the same way. This is the domain of *artha*, of artifacts and accretions. At a more biological level, the genes and chromosomes would behave according to biological laws, and the preservation of species would involve mating and parenting. This is the domain of attachments and desires, of *kama*. When living beings coexist they must obey social laws which involve not only accretion but dispersal, not only selfishness but also altruism. This is the domain of universal harmony, of *dharma*. But all these are instrumentalities created to make the self function; for what purpose? The purpose is the practice of metaphysics, of the search for illumination. In this process all previous attachments and accretions, even the finer ones of *dharma* must be let go to get freedom, *kaivalya*, and *mokṣa*. Thus *artha*, *kāma*, *dharma*, and *mokṣa* are the four goals. Curiously, there is much ground in tradition from which to assert that if the first three are pursued properly, the fourth will come of its own accord.

Returning to science, what is the prognosis? There is no question of supplanting the sciences; rather the tendency is to unify them. The essential difference is in anti-reductionism. Scientific laws are going to be dependent on the state of awareness, and, hence, as the awareness becomes greater, the science will span more of the universe. But at all times the laws would be tentative and the categories subject to change. There is then no question of reduction to a given framework. However, in the Indian tradition metaphysics does not come after physics but before it, and as metaphysical awareness grows, it elevates science also.

This is the ideal, but there is not much of this in practice. Most scientists are

allergic to metaphysics and most metaphysical systems deal with archaic and irrelevant science. Perhaps this too is transient. But I for one have been a practicing theoretical physicist for the past four decades and find no contradictions between my science and metaphysics. I see the metaphysical guideposts as an aid in expanding the domain of science making it more adaptable and appropriate for yet more domains of experience. After all, any limits that are set for science are challenges to be transcended rather than restrictions to be obeyed.