

## THE CONCEPT OF ABSOLUTE IN MADHYAMIKA, VIJNANAVADA AND SHANKARA: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

**Sonjoy Mondal<sup>1</sup>, Debarshi Adhikari<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> M. A. Dept. of Philosophy, Gauhati University.

<sup>2</sup> Research Scholar, Dept. of Sanskrit, Gauhati University.

### ABSTRACT

Nagarjuna, one of the most important thinker of Madhyamika academy of Mahayana Buddhism. Nagarjuna's theory of Sunyata is a veritably important conception of Buddhism. Madhyamika conception of 'Absolute' shows that Absolute is Sunya. According to Madhyamika, Sunya, which is beyond the four orders of cognition, essentially means "inexpressible" (chatuskoti vinirmukta). It is the reality that transcends both actuality and virtuality as well as both of them. The Absolute, according to Madhyamika, is neither protestation nor denial, nor both, nor neither. In Madhyamika, the term "Absolute" refers to both Reality (tattva), which is the liberation from multiplicity, and Relativity, which is a phenomenon (Nirvana). According to Madhyamika, the universe is indescribable because it is transcendental and cannot be accurately described by any order of cognition. It is inexpressible since it is neither real nor unreal. Everything is Sunya: the Absolute is Prapancha Sunya, or devoid of multiplicity, and appearances are svabhava Sunya, or free from ultimate truth. According to Vijnanavadin, the external universe is a production of Absolute Consciousness rather than of human knowledge or thinking (Alaya). Vijnanavadin divided consciousness into two. They are---individual consciousness and Absolute Consciousness (Alayavijnana). This Absolute Consciousness is called Parinispanna. There is intimate relation between abhuta-parikalpita and parinispanna. The Absolute has a transcendent and immanent relationship to things. According to Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, the Absolute transcends subject-object duality, the triad of knower, known, and knowledge, as well as all orders of cognition. It is also self-luminous. It is a strict Absolute. For Shankara, Sat-Cit-Ananda is the Absolute. Absolute, also known as Brahman, is unadulterated consciousness, existence, and happiness

**Keywords:** Absolute, Consciousness, Sunya, Parinispanna, Abhutaparikalpita, Alaya, Vijnana

### INTRODUCTION

In Indian philosophy, the Madhyamika, Vijnanavada and Advaita Vedanta all are veritably important schools of philosophy. All the three schools explain Absolute from their own viewpoint. The Madhyamika academy explain through sunyata. Vijnanavada gives more importance on mind. For Vijnanavadin, there is nothing outside of Vijnana. Shankara's explanation about Absolute also different from Vijnanavada and Madhyamika. For Shankara, Brahman is the Ultimate Reality. Shankara criticised both the schools and established his philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. Shankara believes that all religious demands of an unevolved humanity requires that there should be the generality of a 'particular' God. But this particular God has no existence from the point of view of the Absolute. All the three schools explain absolute from their own viewpoint but it is also said that there is no real difference between the Absolute of these systems; the differences are superficial and pertain only to language.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodological frame is philosophical analysis of Madhyamika, Vijñānavāda and Śaṅkara's conception of Absolute. Towards this end the descriptive methodology is used to explain different aspects of Absolute. Further analytical method is used to bring forth the meanings and interpretations of different scholars, authors and experts. Then the data is collected substantially from primary sources and some data is also collected from secondary sources.

## OBJECTIVES

There are various objectives of the paper. Some are as follows

1. To understand the different aspects of Absolute.
2. To know how Madhyamika's conception of Absolute is different from Śaṅkara.
3. To understand the conception of Absolute in Vijñānavāda.
4. To understand how the conception of Absolute is related to different schools of Philosophy.

## DISCUSSION

The distinction between them is highlighted by the Madhyamika interpretation of Vijñānavāda. According to the Vijñānavāda, awareness exists independently of the object, as it does in dream states and other illusions. According to Vijñānavādin, awareness should be thought of as the creator of the object, deriving the various contents of its dreaming states from its own inner potentiality, which is self-determining and subject to its own rules of growth. They view consciousness as being both self-luminous and self-aware.

Nagarjuna defines "Reality as that which can only be directly realised, that which is Calm and Blissful, that where all plurality is merged, that where all cries of intellect are satisfied, that which is the Non-dual Absolute."<sup>1</sup> To Nagarjuna Sunya or Asunya, neither, neither both, nor neither is reality. From an empirical perspective, it is known as sunya. Reality is unadulterated and devoid of all cognizing intellect. The mind is empty and unable to recognise itself. It must focus on something since a simple form cannot supply the substance. For them, "Even the sharpest sword cannot cut itself; the finger-tips cannot be touched by the same finger-tips. Citta does not know itself."<sup>2</sup> "How can anything be the knower and known at once without, splitting itself into two? If it is known by another act of knowledge the later knowledge will be known by another, thus leading to a regress."<sup>3</sup>

The Madhyamika examination of Vijñānavāda calls to mind Kant's critique of Idealism in a number of areas. Immanuel Kant argues that simple categories or even the transcendental "I" are essentially empty and that it is impossible for us to have self-knowledge in the absence of object knowledge. Similar to this, Madhyamika and Vijñānavāda believe that idealism undermines conventional ways of comprehending objective existence without providing any corresponding benefits. The Kantian or Madhyamika perspective, which acknowledges the empirical reality of objects with their transcendental or ultimate unreality, can be described as Transcendental or Critical Idealism. Neither a pure subject nor a pure object can exist independently since they are mutually dependent.

---

<sup>1</sup> Madhyamika-Karika, XVIII,9.

<sup>2</sup> MKV The Madhyamika Criticism of the Svasamvitti Doctrine, p. 61

<sup>3</sup> The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, p. 318

According to the Vijñānavāda understanding of the Absolute, Sunyata negates not everything but rather the duality of subject and object in anything. There is something that is the Absolute when the negation of duality is realised. There is truth in constructive idealism (Abhuta-parikalpah). Duality does not exist in it. There is still nonsubstantiality (sunyata) in it. Constructive Idealism can be found in this non-substantiality. The word "abhuta-parikalpa" refers to the foundation of that inaccurate construction rather than the incorrect conception itself, which is phenomenal. This transcendent dynamic stream of awareness, or abhuta-parikalpah, is what gives rise to all phenomena, substances, elements, or more accurately, subject objects, etc. All relationships are internal to it and not with anything outside of it. Although the manufactured subject-object world is not genuine, the abhuta-parikalpah, which serves as the foundation for the false subject-object duality, is nonetheless real. The distinction between abhuta-parikalpah and Absolute, according to Vijñānavāda, is that the latter is completely devoid of duality, whilst the former has that superimposed over it. In another sense, the two are the same since the parinispāna is nothing more than the Abhuta-parikalpita that has been released from the corrupting illusory duality.

For the Madhyamika both the given thing-in-itself and the creative ideation are related to each other; we cannot have the one without the other. According to Madhyamika, thinking and objects are valued according to non-relative, unconditioned immediacy. Sunyata, also known as emptiness, can be thought of as a more inclusive version of the Absolute than Pure Being or Pure Ideation.

It is obviously difficult to concur with this interpretation of sunya in light of the Madhyamika view of the Absolute based on explicit assertions of the original works and the full logic of the system. The truth of things is understood to be their actual essence (bhuta koti), as well as their being (tathata). Absolute is associated with Tathagata, the Perfect Being. The Madhyamika's "no theory about reality" stance often confused for the "no reality" doctrine. They must deal with doctrinal systems because the Madhyamika contains no doctrine on standard topics like God, the soul, matter, etc.

According to Shankara, Brahman as Infinite or Pure Consciousness is the Transcendental Consciousness called **Turiya** which constitutes our Self. Pure Consciousness that the Self is not the consciousness we understand in the philosophical study of Phenomenology, where consciousness is always directed or intended towards something. This Pure Consciousness is devoid of any object, is what Shankara calls the Self or Atman. According to Shankara This Transcendental Consciousness, which transcends the subject-object dichotomy and the triad of knower, known, and knowledge, is this Pure Consciousness, which makes up the very character of the Self. This is so because this consciousness itself is a presupposition of all knowledge concerning the subject-object duality. It is the sole Reality and an unequivocal Absolute. There is neither diversity nor dualism. Because every claim, every scepticism, and every denial start with the assumption that there is a Self or Absolute, this Pure Consciousness can never be disputed or questioned. This consciousness is authentic or self-validating (svayamsiddha. For Shankara, the Self is pure transcendental, where all notions of dualities vanish; as it evident in the text "Because when there is duality as it were, then one sees something... But when to the knower of Brahman everything has become the Self, then what should one see and through what?"<sup>4</sup> Only Pure Awareness is ultimately capable of being. Although we cannot immediately realise it with our limited brain, we may do so through pure intuition. This ambiguous and unqualified Reality combines all linguistic criteria and the six modes of knowing. "Being and non-being, one and many, qualified and unqualified, knowledge and ignorance, action and inaction, active and inactive, fruitful and

<sup>4</sup> Brihadarnyaka Upanisad IV. v. 15

fruitless, seedful and seedless, pleasure and pain, middle and not middle, sunya and asunya, soul and God, unity and plurality, etc. etc---all these determinations do not apply to the Absolute. He who wants to grasp the Absolute by any of these determinations, indeed tries to roll up the sky like a skin or tries to ascend space like a stair-case or wishes to see the footprints of fish in water or of birds in the sky.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Shankara, every experience contains the given genuine thing-in-itself, which acts as the passive foundation for the superimposition of mental categories. According to Shankara, the empirical world of appearance is real from the perspective of Brahman. He views knowledge as something that is predetermined and object-based. The knowing function just discloses, or discovers, something entirely complete existence rather than creating or even distorting the object (parinisthitavastu). Knowing something as it is, without any manipulation of subjective forms, categories, or representations, is the goal of pure knowledge. As the knowing act is completely free of any subjective bias there, the knowledge of the Brahman is pure knowledge. It is so pure and transparent that it is impossible to distinguish between the Absolute and the Brahman.

The true knowledge-object does not exist in and through our knowing act, that is, in relation to our knowing; rather, it exists independently of our knowing. According to this standard, only Being that is unadulterated, all-encompassing, and self-evident can be considered genuine. That is all that is Sat, which is inherently self-sufficient. The Absolute Brahman is that. A evolving Being is conditioned; it does not exist in and of itself. The self-evident does not require confirmation by another since it is obvious without reference to a knowing act.

The thing-in-itself is everything that exists, according to the Advaita Vedanta explanation of experience from the perspective of knowledge; knowing simply discloses. Any object that is not by itself but only via knowledge is called an appearance, such as the "rope-snake" in the example given. The Advaita Vedanta's epistemology may be viewed as realistic since it affirms the reality of provided (thing-in-itself). The Advaita Vedanta demonstrates that the fundamental object of knowledge is outside the realm of empirical experience and that what we know via empirical means is the appearance of reality rather than reality itself. Rather than Idealism, the Advaita Vedanta has a stronger affinity for Kant and the Madhyamika.

The Idealistic position of Vijñānavada accepts that the knowing act or consciousness to be the only real and the object is projected, created out of it. Although the Yogacara uses the terms jñāna, vijñāna, vijñapti, citta, svasamvedana etc. Yogacara 'Vijñāna' is really Pure Act; pure as it is not conditioned by anything outside it with regard to its existence and function; it is act as it is not a static passive Being like the Vedanta Brahman, but an incessantly self-active creative entity. The object is just another extruded and projected out of itself by the sheer self-creative of vijñāna. The creative projection is not empirical in character, but transcendental; it is the act of a deeper subjectivity.

The western counterpart to Vijñānavada is the philosophy of Fichte or Hegel, who both view the Pure Ego or Reason as having self-legislative power and being responsible for both the categories and the objects that the categories apply to. The Hegelian Absolute is thinking or reason, and as a result, possesses the duality of opposites. In contrast, the Vijñānavada Absolute is above reason and is non-dual (advaita).

## CONCLUSION

To conclude I would like to say, the main position of Madhyamika, Vijñānavada and Advaita Vedanta is that in reality there is no real difference among them. In Madhyamika, the Absolute is Sunyata. There is no permanent concrete reality. They deny only the ultimate

<sup>5</sup> A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, p. 285

reality, not the relative existence, of phenomena. In pure sense they transcend even the relativity itself. They are the real followers of middle path of Buddha. For them reality is Silence. Vijnanavada also says Pure Awareness is Reality. Because of its innate strength, this Reality (Vijnaptimatra) suffers for them. The subject and object, according to Vijnanavada, are merely variations of the Alaya, which is only a variation of Pure Consciousness. Hence, it may be claimed that for Vijnanavadins, Pure Consciousness is the sole Reality (Absolute). The Advaita Vedanta declared that the world is a manifestation of one reality that is Brahman or Absolute. According to Shankara, Absolute is Nirguna Brahman. Nirguna Brahman is the ultimate reality. The Advaita Vedanta is that constant discipline that enables us to instantly, obviously, independently, and without categories realise the Thing-in-Itself, the Pure Object. The Vijnanavada is an effort to eliminate all traces of the provided in order to get at Transcendental categories (pure mind). Because there is neither thinking nor the given, we get at absolutism in both directions. Both Vedanta and Vijnanavada arrive at their distinctive positions through an examination of illusion from their unique vantage points. Sunyata, a midway route, is most frequently developed by the Madhyamika system. The critical Reflection is Madhyamika Absolute in and of itself.

#### REFERENCE

1. Sharma. C.D. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 2016
2. Misra. L. S. *Buddha and His Philosophy*. New Delhi: Mahaveer and Sons Publishers and Distributors, 2011
3. Bartley, C. *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*. Chennai: Replika Press Pvt. Ltd, 2010.
4. Capra F, and Luisi, L. *The System View of Life: A Unifying Vision*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016
5. Murti. T. R. V. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 312
6. Ibid: p. 315
7. De Silva, A. Lynn. *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity*. Houndmills: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1979