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Can Saṅkara's Concept of the Self Be Called Transcendental? -A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The study of 'self and its knowledge' has a great importance, because the term 'self' has a natural use in moral, social, legal, philosophical and psychological contexts. Transcendental philosophy does not want to give any explanations of things or facts. It only seeks to account for the possibility of meaning. The transcendental self is the explanatory principle that underlies our understandings of self in the areas of philosophy of mind and metaphysics. Transcendental self or subject is the condition of the possibility of objective world and science. Saṅkarācārya is the advocate of Advaita Vedānta. The self in Advaita Vedānta, which is pure consciousness or *Brahman*, is transcendental by nature because it is underlying reality of the world, not merely of the actual but of all possible worlds. In this paper a brief outline about the philosophy of Saṅkara has been given. We know that the transcendental philosophy and the philosophy of Saṅkara are very critical and consist of vast contents. It is not easy to discuss the philosophy of Saṅkara in a couple of pages.

Keywords: *Brahman, Consciousness, Self or ātman, Sachidānanda, Transcendental self*

1. Introduction

Transcendental subject really explains nothing. Transcendental philosophy does not want to give any explanations of things or facts. It only seeks to account for the possibility of meaning. The transcendental self or subject is nothing but pure consciousness. Transcendental self or subject is the condition of the possibility objective world and science. The term 'transcendental' may be taken provisionally to mean what we are certain about as not objective. By 'object' it is meant a content that is other than the consciousness of it. So the transcendental then would be a content that is not distinct from the consciousness of it.

We find the idea of the transcendental self or subject in Advaita Vedānta philosophy. Saṅkara admits the transcendental self. As if we say that the transcendental self is that, from which the actual and possible worlds derive their meaning then we can say according to Advaita Vedānta the self, which is pure consciousness, or *Brahman* is transcendental by nature because it is underlying reality of the world, not merely of the actual but of all possible worlds.

2. Review of Literature

Highlights of few past research works on the present topic are being incorporated in this section of the work:

Dutta (2003) in her article, The self and self-knowledge in Indian tradition, Calcutta: *Rabindra Bharati Journal of Philosophy*, page-1-8. mentions that Self-knowledge is a major topic in Indian

philosophy. This knowledge is taught by the process of insight alone. This paper of Srilekha Dutta provides a clear and distinguishing idea of the term self or *ātman* of the different schools of Indian philosophy. She mentioned here that Indian philosophy has a practical goal, namely, *moksa*. This *moksa* is possible through self-knowledge. The self or *ātman* occupies centre stage in all philosophic discussions because ignorance or misconception regarding the real nature of the self is the root cause of suffering or bondage (*samsāra*). Furthermore, she presents a clear idea of self-knowledge in Indian philosophy and different meanings of self-knowledge.

In his book, '*A critique of Vedānta*', Rajagopal, (1993) has used Whitehead's definition of metaphysics. After thoroughly reading the crucial metaphysical positions of the *Vedāntic* School of thought, he has analyzed critically the three well-known systems of *Advaita*, *Viśiṣṭadvaita* and *Dvaita* philosophy. Author has given critical analysis in the light of rational metaphysics based on a sufficient analysis of our common and immediate experience in its widest range. This book is an original work to make new thinking among the readers about *Vedānta* philosophy and it gives an extraordinary critical description of the logical structure of three main *Vedāntic* schools.

Chandradhar (1994), in his book, '*A critical survey of Indian Philosophy*' provides a clear and critical ideas about the different schools of Indian philosophy. On the basis of original texts and some lectures of renowned philosophers' lectures he involved in criticism and evaluation of the different systems of Indian philosophy. Throughout the exposition of the different systems which involves criticism and evaluation. Author in his work gives a general idea about the Upanisads and Bhagavadgītā. This book deals about the study of Materialism, Jainism, and Early Buddhism, the six systems of Indian Philosophy with special reference to *Samkara*, the pre- *Samkara* and the post- *Samkara*. But we don't obtain details idea about Buddhism and *Vedantā* in this book.

3. Objective of the Paper

The main objectives of this paper are-

1. To know the real nature of the self of Advaita Vedānta.
2. To know the concept of the transcendental philosophy and transcendental self.
3. To prove after critical analysis, the self of Advaita Vedānta is transcendental by nature

4. Sample Source and Methodology

This research paper is basically descriptive and analytical in nature. In this paper attempt has been taken to analyze the key-issue of the fundamental themes, concerning around the self, which is pure consciousness, or *Brahman* of Advaita Vedānta is transcendental by nature. The secondary information has been collected from various publications, books, journals etc. Other internet resources and websites are also used.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 *The concept of transcendental philosophy and transcendental self*

What is transcendental philosophy? In reply to this question we may use Mohanty's words to answer this question: "Transcendental philosophy seeks an understanding of the broad categorical features of our experience and of the world in terms of the structure of (human) subjectivity which is taken as the ultimate underlying principle, the source of all structuring and orderings, of meanings and interpretations." (Mohanty, 1984) This idea of subjectivity is known as transcendental subjectivity.

The idea of transcendental self is important because it forms a background in which we can understand any kind of discourse regarding the metaphysical nature of self-substance. It also forms the logical bases for the possibility of experience of the self. As a philosopher it is a duty to extend

and investigate this logical foundation, in the backdrop of which all discourse about self becomes meaningful.

Kant (1958) in his theory of knowledge commenced a new word- 'transcendental'. According to Kant this word is concerned with conditions of possibility of knowledge itself. The term 'transcendental' is coming from Latin word 'transcendent'. The ordinary meaning of the term 'transcendental' is going beyond. Kant does not accept this meaning. He also uses the term 'transcendental' as conditions of possibility of knowledge. According to Kant knowledge will be transcendental, if it is free from any objects but concerned with the conditions of possibility of knowledge. So in modern sense transcendental philosophy gives emphasis to the a priori conditions of knowledge than material things. Transcendental philosophy is a system of all principles of pure reason, and this philosophy has to contain a complete analysis of the whole of a priori human knowledge. Transcendental philosophy is a philosophy of purely and merely speculative reason. To the empirical sources of knowledge belong all that is practical, so far as it contains motives, relates to feeling. (Kant, 1958)

The term 'transcendental' may be taken as something which is not objective. We generally accept object, as a content of consciousness. So object is different from consciousness. As the term 'transcendental' may be taken as something which is not objective, so we can say that the term 'transcendental' is not different from consciousness.

We can say that transcendental philosophy is purely subjective, because its object cannot become the object of external or outer intuition. The main subject of transcendental philosophy is act of construction of knowledge. This act of construction is completely internal thing. I have already said transcendental philosophy is a subjective process, because it deals only the conditions of possibility of states of understanding. In case of states of understanding we also give emphasize on subject, because in this ground subject makes the meaning of things, cognition, perception etc. So we can say if transcendental philosophy deals with possibility of states of understanding and states of understanding means the ways in which subject can make sense of things, cognition, perception, then we can say any complete theory of mind must be in part transcendental theory.

The transcendental philosophy also includes the method of transcendental reflection. As per transcendental philosophy subject means pure consciousness and so consciousness must involve reflecting on its own operations. This type of reflection means that object is constituted by subject. We find this type of subjective possibility of transcendental philosophy in Husserl's philosophy also. With the help of the method of *epoche* or bracketing Husserl reaches to transcendental domain. By the method of *epoche* Husserl suspends all world and worldly experiences and finally reaches to the domain of pure consciousness or subjectivity which is ultimate principle of our experiences and world. According to Husserl the world is intended as a noematic structure within this consciousness or subjectivity. (Mohanty, 1984)

So finally we can say that transcendental philosophy is concerned with the pure subject or consciousness, which is the ultimate principle. This transcendental subject makes the experiences meaningful. Hence it is the structure of human knowledge. Husserl says that everything in the world and the world itself derives its meaning from consciousness and its intentionality, so all things are constituted in consciousness and in this sense consciousness is said to be transcendental.

Transcendental philosophy does not give any explanation of nature and material objects. It only finds the conditions of possibility of meaning. It does not explain the nature of apple, like where from it comes? What is the colour of apple? etc. It only seeks the structure of knowledge of apple. Transcendental philosophy does not give any answer to 'why' type questions (e.g.; why is the apple red? why was the universe created? etc.). It is the condition of the possibility of objective world and science.

Transcendental subject is taken as the ultimate underlying principle and it is the source of all structuring and orderings of meanings and interpretations. We will see, the whole perspective of transcendental philosophy is a turn towards subjectivity. This subject should not be confused with the

inner and the private entity. Transcendental subject is not like psychological subject, which is related, variable and empirical in nature. We have to understand that the transcendental subject provides the frame of reference within which the concept of the mind or the ego as an inner private entity finds its meaning. This subject is not naturalistic and empirical. Lastly, transcendental self has a 'Paradox of Subjectivity', namely, the fact that the subjects are both subjects for the world and objects in the world. (Carr.1999).

5.2 The concept of self in Advaita Vedānta

Indian philosophy is not only engaging in theoretical discussion, it has also a practical utility. Indian philosophy seeks the way of freedom from suffering. We see in Indian philosophy liberation is the highest end of life. The self or *ātman* occupies centre place in all Indian philosophic discussion because it is the self who suffers pain and wants to get freedom from that suffering. The ignorance regarding the real nature of self is the basic cause of bondage (*saṁsāra*) (Dutta.2003)

In this part I shall discuss the nature of the self of Advaita Vedānta in brief. Saṁkarācārya is the founder of Advaita Vedānta. We find the central theme of Advaita philosophy in Māndūkya Upanisad. The main book of Saṁkara is *Brahmasūtra*. The major doctrine of Advaita philosophy "*Brahma Satyam Jagan mithyā; Jivo brahmaiva nāparah*", in other word *Brahman* is alone true, and this world of plurality is an error; the individual self is not different from *Brahman*. Therefore, the Advaita Vedānta is an idealist-philosophical concept which is at the same time, non-dual. According to Saṁkara plurality is wrong and this sense of plurality comes from the ignorance about the real nature of *Brahman*. This world has no existence apart from *Brahman*. As per Advaita Vedānta *Brahman* is pure existence, pure consciousness and pure bliss. *Brahman* is the ultimate reality. (Sharma. 1997)

There is no difference between *Brahman* and self or *ātman*. No one can deny the existence of self, because no one can proclaim that 'I am not'. We can divide all our experiences in four categories and these are awaking (*Jāgrata*), dream (*swapna*), deep sleep (*susupti*) and *turiya*. In all the four stages we find the existence of self. As when we are in awaking and dream stage we are becoming conscious about something. We also feel the existence of ego or 'I', as the subject of conscious experiences. At the deep sleep stage, we say after awaking from sleep 'I slept well', so this stage also proves the existence of ego as subject of our consciousness. So we can say that there are self and objects in the first two levels. In the third level we can't find the object like first two stages, but the self is there. In this stage we find self is *cit* or consciousness, *sat* or existent and *ānanda* or bliss. In the final *turiya* level saints realize the true nature of self. This *turiya* stage is fully self-conscious enjoyment of bliss. We have already discussed that consciousness in its purest nature is also bliss or *ānada*. By the ordinary sources of knowledge, we cannot know the existence of self but no one can doubt it, because in every stage of our experiences we feel existence of self. *Yajñavalkya* maintained that, through which everything is known, that cannot itself be made an object of knowledge; none can know the knower (Yajñavalkya 1950). This is self which is identical with pure consciousness and *Brahman*. According to the early prose of Upanisads *ātman* is the principle of the individual consciousness and *Brahman* is the super personal ground of the cosmos. (Hiriyanna, 2000)

The Advaita Vedānta philosophy holds that self does not possess both Physical and mental qualities. According to Advaita Vedānta the real self is devoid of all mental and physical properties. According to this view real self is *nirguna*. *Saguna Brahman* or *Brahman* with qualities is the result of superimposition. (Bhattacharya, 1983).

The Advaita Vedāntins proclaim that the 'I' or '*aham*' does not signify the real self. Actually 'I' or '*aham*' refers to individual or empirical self that is called in their language *vyāvahārika Jiva*. 'I' always stands for consciousness falsely identified with inner organ or *antahkarana* (*antahkarana-tādātmayānacaitnya*). This empirical self is not real self.

The empirical self is locus of *Pramātrva* (knowerhood), *Kartrva* (agent hood). But these properties actually do not belong to the real self. These are belonging to *antahkarana* or innerorgan. Thus this complex of consciousness and inner organ is referred to by 'aham' or 'I'. This 'I' possess different qualities knowledge, happiness etc. (Mohanty, 1983).

So we have seen that according to Advaita Vedānta reality is one, and that is *Brahman* or *ātman*. This *Brahman* or *ātman* is different from inner self in each individual being. We see in the Upanishads the *ātman* refers to pure consciousness. This pure consciousness is not empirical consciousness. This is trans-empirical consciousness and it also forms the basis of the empirical individual being. As the real self or *Brhman* is trans-empirical consciousness, it is therefore, beyond words to explain. The real nature of self is unknowable and unexplainable to us. So actually the *Brhman* or self is quality less (*nirguna*), limitless (*ashim*), shapeless (*nirākāra*), and unperceivable (*adrishya*). But we use three concepts to attain the nature of *Brahman* or self. This is called '*Svarupa lakshna*'. It declares the actual nature of *Brahman* or self. Three concepts are cit or consciousness, sat or existent and *ānanda* or bliss. From these three concepts we can say that whatever is conscious, existent and bliss, that is called *Brahman* or *ātman*. Consciousness and being are inseparable. When someone says, "I am here," he or she is actually saying, "I am conscious of my being here." His or her consciousness does not differ from his or her being. Therefore *sat* is *chit*; *chit* is *sat*. Bliss - *ānanda* - is the highest freedom that we can attain. Therefore, the prime reality is *sat-chit-ānanda*.

Brahman or self is very peculiar in nature. This is very impartial in nature. This is not committed to any particular world, but it is the basis of all actual and possible worlds. So we can mention here that the *Brahman* or self of Advaita Vedānta is very close to the concept transcendental self. As we know that transcendental self is non-empirical, the basis of actual and possible worlds and identical with pure consciousness.

According to Advaita Vedāntins consciousness is not a property of *Brahman* or self but its very nature. *Brahman* is often described as '*neti neti*' or 'not this, not this'. So we cannot properly explain the nature of *Brahman*. It is '*Sachidānanda*' or, infinite truth, infinite consciousness, and infinite bliss. As *Brahman* is one, so it is free from any kind of differentiation.

When *ātman* is reflected on *avidya* or ignorance, *ātman* becomes *jiva*, a living being with a body and senses. The concept of *jiva* is true in the Pragmatic level. But actually *Brahman* or real self is devoid of all bodies and sense organs. In the transcendental level, only the *ātman*, or *Brahman* exists and that is ultimate true.

5.3 *Brahmanjñāna, vṛttijñāna and sāksin jñāna*

We have already discussed that is the reality is one and that is called *Brahman*. *Brahman* is defined in Vedānta as being-consciousness-bliss.

The *Brahman* or self is knowledge as such. It cannot be object of knowledge because there cannot be a knower of *Brahman*. If we say that *Brahman* is its own knower, then it will provide a contradiction, because in that case *Brahman* will be the agent of knowledge and it will also be the object of knowledge.

As the *Brahman* is indivisible and part less entity, it cannot also be hold that the self is knower to some person and it is object of knowledge to other person. Since we know a part less entity cannot hold a duality form, the knower and the known in a same time. So we can say *Brahman* or self of Advaita Vedānta is knowledge as such. When we say that *Brahman* is knowledge as such then we accept that knowledge as a metaphysical entity. *Brahman Jñāna* is only reality.

Through the knowledge of *Brahman*, we achieved Liberation. Due to ignorance the *jiva* wrongly imagines that he is separate from *Brahman*. *Brahmanjñāna* or knowledge of *Brahman* remove this ignorance and *jiva* takes place in his own nature *Sat – Chit – Ānanda Svarupa* or in other word after removing the ignorance (through the *Brahmanjñāna*) *jiva* takes place in *Brahman*.

Brahman jñāna or knowledge of *Brahman* is different from ordinary knowledge (*vṛtti* and *sāksin*) because in ordinary knowledge there is the knowledge of something which is different from the

knower. For this reason, the ordinary knowledge is limited and so consumable. But *Brahman jñāna* is eternal; there is no difference between the knower and the known. It is the knowledge of unity of knower and known and it is the pure and infinite knowledge. So in *Brahman jñāna*, *Brahman* is the knower and *Brahman* is the known.

The ordinary knowledge or *jñāna* is neither *vṛtti* of the internal organ or *antahkarana* nor a *Sākṣin*, rather of both, that is the *vṛtti* as inspired by the *Sākṣin-jñāna*, contains two elements. One is eternal element. This eternal element is consciousness which is *Brahman*. Another element is contingent element that stands for the changing *vṛttis* that appear and disappear. As the eternal element, consciousness is associated with *vṛttis*, so consciousness only seems to change, but actually the eternal element or consciousness is not affected by it. In view of Advaita Vedānta cognition is nothing but consciousness. Consciousness can only illuminate object. Perceptual cognition is also a consciousness qualified by *vṛtti*.

Antahkarna is constituted by five physical elements although *tejas* predominates it which is the reason for its unstable and changing character. *vṛtti* or mode is known as the activity of *antahkarna*. *Sākṣin* means ‘observer’, it refers to the ‘pure awareness’ that witnesses the world but does not get involved. In other word we can say *sākṣin* witnesses all thoughts, words and deeds without interfere with them or affected by them.

The Advaita school admits two kinds of *sākṣin*, one is *jīva sākṣin* and another is *isvra sākṣin* and both *sākṣins* are consciousness only. But due to *upādhis* or limiting adjuncts consciousness are classified in different categories. The consciousness with the adjunct *māyā* is called *isvarasākṣin* and the consciousness with the adjunct inner organ is *jīva sākṣin*. So we can say *sākṣin* is consciousness But due to *upādhis* or limiting adjuncts (*māyā*, inner organ) it is classified in *jīva sākṣin* and *isvra sākṣin*. Thus as per Advaita school *sākṣin* can also be a wrong cognition. For this reason *sākṣin jñāna* is different from *Brahmanjñāna*, which is real and eternal. *Brahman* is pure-consciousness which is not delimited by any adjuncts or *upādhis*.

We have discussed *sākṣin* is consciousness. *sākṣin-jñāna* is the constant element of knowledge. It is different from *vṛttijñāna* because *vṛttijñāna* is empirical knowledge, which is not constant but changeable. Also, all states of the *antahkarana* are necessarily illuminated by *sākṣin*. *sākṣin* is passive observer of the *antahkarana*, the inner organ. The unity of passive *sākṣin* and active *antahkarna* is real for any practical purpose or ordinary knowledge. *Jīva* or empirical self is the complex form of *sākṣin* and *antahkarana*. We can also say as *Sākṣin* is associated with *vṛtti* or modification of inner organ, so the *sākṣin-jñāna*, is relative by nature. Therefore *sākṣin* as such is not the same as *Brahman*.

The *vṛttijñāna* is a form of modification. When the inner organ reaches to the objects through the external sense organs then *vṛtti* take place. The Advaita Vedānta philosophy holds that the consciousness delimited by the *vṛtti* is perceptual cognition. *vṛttijñāna* is different from *Brahmanjñāna*, because *vṛttijñāna* is empirical by nature and it is changeable, *Brahmanjñāna* is eternal, it is not an empirical knowledge. *Vṛttijñāna* is also different from *Brahmanjñāna* because *vṛttijñāna* is a process of ordinary knowledge; it is not a metaphysical entity but when we say that *Brahman* is knowledge as such then we accept that knowledge as a metaphysical entity. *Vṛttijñāna* has content. It has a subject to which it discloses and an object which is exposed by it.

At the time of liberation that the complex unity of *sākṣin* and *antahkarana* disintegrates and *antahkarana* combines itself in its cause, *māyā* and accordingly *sākṣin* loses its *sākṣin*-hood and becomes *Brahman* indeed. (Rajagopal.1993).

6. Conclusions

My observation regarding the nature of the self of Advaita Vedānta is transcendental or not.

In this part I will try to establish that the self of Advaita Vedānta is transcendental by nature. Transcendental subject is not like psychological subject which is related, variable and empirical in nature. We have to understand that the transcendental subject or self provides the frame of reference within which the concept of the mind or the ego as an inner private entity finds its meaning.

Keeping in mind all general characteristics of transcendental self we can consider the self of Advaita Vedānta as transcendental by nature. Because-

1. The self in Advaita Vedānta, which is pure consciousness or *Brahman*, is transcendental by nature because it is underlying reality of the world, not merely of the actual but of all possible worlds. Sāṅkara also establishes knowledge or consciousness as foundation of everything. According to him knowledge of the object is not possible without consciousness, for the reason that every object derives its existence and manifestation from this ultimate principle, namely consciousness.
2. The self or subject of Advaita Vedānta is nothing but pure consciousness and is not distinct from the consciousness of it. This self is the transcendental and foundational consciousness. Consciousness is not attributing of self, actually consciousness is self. The two terms transcendental and the foundational do not serve as adjectives of a transcendent substance. There is no distinction in the self as it is the presuppositions of all distinctions.
3. The self of Advaita Vedānta remains unchanged. It is eternal. It has no opening and it has no ending.
4. The self of Advaita Vedānta is knowledge as such. The self cannot also be the object of knowledge.
5. The self or subjectivity of Advaita Vedānta is not like psychological subjectivity which is related, variable and empirical in nature and it provides the frame of reference within which the concept of the mind or the ego as an inner private entity finds its meaning. The self of Advaita Vedānta is not psychological or empirical because the Advaita Vedānta philosophy considers that self is not endowed with both physical and mental qualities. According to Advaita Vedānta the real self is devoid of all mental and physical properties. According this view real self is *nirguna*. *Saguna Brahman or Brahman* with qualities is the result of super superimposition.

Sāṅkara holds that the 'I' or '*aham*' does not signify the real self. Actually 'I' or '*aham*' refers to individual or empirical self that is called in their language *vyāvahārika Jiva*. 'I' always stands for consciousness falsely identified with inner organ or *antahkarana* (*antahkarana-tādātmyāPanacaitnya*). This empirical self is not real self. The empirical self is locus of *Pramātrva* (knowerhood), *Kartrva* (agent hood). But these properties actually do not belong to the real self.

Lastly we can say the pure consciousness of Advaita Vedānta, is transcendental by nature because it is the underlying reality of the world, not merely of the actual but of all possible worlds. The world is not the creation of *Brahman* that is the pure consciousness, not an emanation out of its being but an appearance of *Brahman*. The world can't exist without *Brahman*, but *Brahman* can exist without world and so it is an entirely one-sided dependence. Appearance presupposes Reality, but Reality does not need to appear. So in one respect the transcendental subjectivity is closer to the pure consciousness of Vedānta, for it has certain neutrality as against various possible worlds, it is not committed to any one world or any one science, it is concerned with possibilities. Therefore we may call the self of Advaita Vedānta is transcendental by nature.

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