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The Philosophical Base of Advaita Vedanta and its Relevance to Present Day Students

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A B S T R A C T

A philosophical system is generally classified under three important facets, namely, epistemology, metaphysics and ethics. An attempt is made in this paper to expound the above facets of Advaita Vedanta and discern its relevance to present day students. The epistemology of Advaita Vedanta states that scriptures (or) revelation (*sruti*) transmitted through the verbal testimony (*abda*) of the Guru is the ultimate means of measurement (*pramana*) regarding the source and validity of knowledge. The present day students are offered an important understanding that even though there may be innumerable sources of acquiring information, teachers are still the foremost, primary and un-substitutable source for acquiring valid knowledge. The ethical structure of Advaita Vedanta is given by the standard; Purification of the mind (*sattva* (or) *citta suddhi*). Purification of the mind points to the influences in the doer's frame of mind or the betterment of character. The present day students are offered an understanding that self-effort in the form of further reading, doubt clearance, etc., must be adopted in order to better understand the concepts imparted by teachers. Self-effort results in internalization of the acquired knowledge According to the metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta, Brahman alone is ultimately real and Is non-different from the essential and eternal nature of man (ie) *atman*. Knowledge of Brahman-*atman* is not an external acquisition but an inner intuitive experience (*anubhava*). To know Brahman is to be It. Epistemology merges into metaphysics. Modern day students are offered an important learning that the culmination of knowledge lies in its practical application. Thus, we are able to clearly observe that the philosophical base of Advaita Vedanta enable the modern day students to understand that the process of acquiring valid knowledge is complete only when it passes through the three vital stages of (1) Acquiring knowledge from the teachers (2) Self-effort, leading to internalization of knowledge, by the students, and (3) Experiencing the practical application of knowledge by the students.

Introduction

The etymological meaning of the word 'philosophy' is 'love of learning/knowledge'. It signifies a natural and a necessary urge in human beings to know themselves and the world in which they live. The structure of any philosophical system may be classified into three broad facets, depending on the subject-matter under consideration. The three broad facets are; (Sri Sankaracarya, 1995) Epistemology (Sri Sankaracarya, 1993) Metaphysics and (Chandogya Upanisad, 1996) Ethics. Epistemology deals with the theory of knowledge, its sources and its validity for man. Metaphysics explores the ultimate real nature of man. Ethics is concerned with the social and spiritual code of conduct of man.

Indian Philosophical Tradition

The 'Vedas' which means 'to know' as well as 'knowledge', are the oldest literary monument of the Indian Philosophical tradition. The *Vedas* consists of four portions, namely, the *Mantras*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanisads*. The *Mantras* consist of hymns addressed to various Gods and Goddesses.. The *Brahmanas* deals with the rules and regulation for the performance of rites and scarifies. The *Aranyakas* consists of the mystic interpretation of the vedic sacrifices. The *Upanisads* consists of doctrines about the highest Reality.

Vedanta

The *Upanisads* are popularly known as Vedanta. There are basically two reasons for it. First, the *Upanisads* are literally the concluding portion or the end of the *Veda*. Second, the *Upanisads* are the essence, the cream, the fountain-head of the Vedic philosophy.

There are three main interpretations of the Vedanta. They are *Advaita Vedanta* (Non-dualism), *Vishistadvaita Vedanta* (Qualified non-dualism), and *Dvaita Vedanta* (Dualism)

Advaita Vedanta

Advaita Vedanta is one of the most complete and holistic system of Vedanta. Advaita teaches that Reality is beyond all dualities and It refers to the highest realization of the non-dual Oneness of all being, Sri Sankaracarya is considered as the greatest preceptor of the Advaita Vedantic tradition. He was the first to systematize and strengthen the philosophy of Advaita. Sri Sankara, in his *Brahmajnanavalimala*¹ presents the basic tenets of Advaita Vedanta as under;

*Brahma satyam jagan mithya
Jivo brahmaiva naprah*

(Brahman is the Reality. The world is illusory. The embodied soul is indeed Brahman and not essentially different from It.)

Epistemology of Advaita Vedanta

In the Indian epistemological system, the source of knowledge and the means of measuring its validity is referred to as *Pramana*. It is a means of discovering new truth as well as a means of verifying knowledge.

Advaita Vedanta recognizes six kinds of valid knowledge (*pramana*). They are ;

- (1) Perception (*pratyaksa*)
- (2) inference (*anumana*)
- (3) Verbal testimony (*sabda*)
- (4) Comparison (*upamana*)
- (5) Postulation (*arthapatti*) and
- (6) non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*)

The Importance of Verbal Testimony (sabda)

According to Advaita Vedanta, Verbal testimony is the only *Pramana* which can communicate the facts of sense-universe as well as the supra-sensible truths. Supra-sensible truths are contained in the scriptures (*sruti (or) veda*). In his commentary on the *Brahma-sutra*, Sri Sankara States that *sruti* is the only source of revelation regarding the knowledge of non-dual Brahman.

Advaita also maintains that the contents of the *sruti* is transmitted only through the verbal testimony (*sabda*) of the *guru*. The *Chandogya Upanisad* states that “only a man having a teacher acquires knowledge” (*Acaryavan purusah veda*). In his *Vivekacudamani*, Sri Sankara points out that discipleship under an enlightened teacher is one of the three rarest fortunes achieved by man through God’s grace.

Thus, we observe the importance accorded to the verbal testimony of the *guru*, in the epistemological domain of Advaita Vedanta.

Implications of Advaita Epistemology for the Present Day Students

With the rapid growth and development of Information technology and communication links, modern day students have a number of sources to acquire information and knowledge. Moreover, all these information can be gathered at the convenience of the students. In such an environment, the role and effectiveness of a teacher, in a class room condition, comes into sharp focus.

It is this context that the epistemology of Advaita Vedanta enable the modern day students to understand the fact that even though there may be innumerable sources of acquiring information, teachers are still the

foremost and primary source of acquiring valid knowledge. It is often said that only a lighted lamp can lit another lamp. Bulbs and tube lights cannot perform the task. All other sources of knowledge may compliment a teacher but can never substitute a teacher. Thus, we see the importance of teachers reaffirmed by the epistemology of Advaita Vedanta.

Ethics of Advaita Vedanta

In the system of Advaita Vedanta, the ethical standard is given by; Purification of the mind (*citta (or) sattva suddhi*), by which moral judgements are effected. In his commentary on the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, Sri Sankara points out that actions are performed as a means to the purification of the mind and only a purified mind can easily know the Self, that is revealed by the *Upanisads*. This means that the goodness or rightness of any action is determined by the degree of *cittasuddhi* it promotes. Since *Karmayoga* (wherein, actions are performed without attachment to the rewards and as worship to God) promotes *Cittasuddhi*, actions performed as *Karmayoga* are considered as good actions in the ethical system of Advaita Vedanta.

Undertanding Citta (or) Sattva Suddhi

Every action, in addition to its own objective result, influences the character of the doer also. It produces in the mind of the doer a tendency (*samskara*) for similar action. A bad action creates a tendency know as *durita*. A good action cultivates a counter tendency known as *citta suddhi* to remove *durita*. Thus, in the removal of *durita* or *duritaksaya* consists the purification of the mind. *Citta suddhi* refers to the influences in the doer’s frame of mind or the betterment of character.

The *Bhagavad gita* points out that our desires and dispositions, moods and temperaments, actions and tendencies, feelings and emotions, are all to be traced to the influence of the three *gunas*, namely, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* of *prakrti*. No one is exempted from the influences of these *gunas*. The essential nature of *sattva* is serenity (*prakasa*), *rajas* is restlessness (*pravrtti*) and *tamas* is slothfulness (*alasya*). Even though *sattva* is very proximate to the essential nature of man, man is often influenced by *rajas* and *tamas*. The aim of moral training is to restore man to his *sattva* nature by reducing the influence of the other two *gunas*. This process is indicated as *sattva suddhi*.

Thus, we are able to observe that *citta* (or) *sattva suddhi* refers to the betterment of character, the mental purification of man towards the objective of *sattva*, effected by successfully counteracting the evil tendencies (*durita ksaya*) prompted by *rajas* and *tamas*.

Implications of Advaita Ethics for the Present Day Students

In the modern day world, where information are readily and conveniently available, students merely gather information from different sources and tend to feel that they have mastered a topic or a subject. A few basic and searching questions on the subject would expose the students to the fact that they are indeed far from adequate knowledge on the subject or topic under consideration.

It is in this context that the ethics of Advaita Vedanta enable the modern day students to understand the fact that the acquired information and knowledge must be internalized through self-effort. Self-effort may take the form of further readings, arguments, dispel of doubt and wrong

understanding, reasoning, etc. Self-effort, leading to internalization, enable the students to have a firm grasp, correct and logical understanding of the imparted knowledge.

Thus, we observe the importance of self-effort for students underlined by the ethical perception of Advaita Vedanta.

Metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta

According to Advaita Vedanta, reality is explained as that whose nature remains uncontradicted (or) unsublated (*traikalikabadhya*) and ever real at all times (*traikala satyam*). In his commentary on the *Brahmasutra*, Sri Sankara states that Brahman is the only reality because It is never sublated by an higher experience. The *Taittiriya Upanisad* states that the knower of Brahman attains the highest. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* points out that Brahman-knowledge is the supreme attainment, the supreme glory, the highest world and supreme bliss. The same *Upanisad* refer to Brahman as completeness (*purna*). Therefore, Brahman is the ultimate and highest reality (*paramarthika satta*).

Understanding Brahman-atma anubhava

Advaita Vedanta maintains that Brahman, the eternal objective Self, is synonymous with *atman*, the inner subjective Self of man. The *Mandukya Upanisad* states that "This *atman* is Brahman". The *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* states "I am Brahman". The *Chandogya Upanisad*¹³ states "Thou art That" (*Tat Tvam Asi*). Thus, Advaita advocates the complete identity of Brahman-*atman*.

According to Advaita Vedanta, Brahman-*atman* is not an external acquisition but an inner intuitive realization (*anubhava*). *Anubhava* may be understood as the

intuitive experience of the ultimate truth (Brahman). Sri Sankara, in his commentary on the *Brahmasutra* states that the knowledge of Brahman must culminate in the direct realization (*anubhava*) of Brahman. It refers to the realization of Oneself as Brahman (*brahmatmabhava*). As the *Mundaka Upanisad* states “One who knows Brahman becomes Brahman”. To know Brahman is to be It. Thus, in the system of Advaita Vedanta, we observe that epistemology merges into metaphysics.

Implications of Advaita Metaphysics for the Present Day Students

Most of the students are of the opinion that acquiring knowledge is predominately a theoretical pursuit with little practical dimension. Even if students are exposed to practical, they perceive it as an extension to knowledge and perform it as a ritual, without much enthusiasm, not knowing the value of practical knowledge.

It is in this context that the metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta enable the modern day students to understand the fact that the process of acquiring knowledge itself is not complete unless the knowledge is put to practical application. In fact, the experience of the practical application of knowledge is the culmination of the knowledge acquiring process. In other words, the fructification of the knowledge acquiring process lies in experiencing its practical applicability. Thus, we observe the importance of practical application of knowledge being affirmed by the metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta.

Conclusion

From the foregone discussion, we are able to clearly observe that the philosophical base of Advaita Vedanta provides vital learning

for the present day students. The epistemology of Advaita Vedanta points out the essential and primary source of acquiring valid knowledge – the teachers. The ethics of Advaita Vedanta underlines the important role played by self-effort in internalizing the acquired knowledge. The metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta provides the much-needed completeness to the knowledge acquiring process-experiencing the practical applicability of knowledge.

Comprehensive Learning Method for the Students

Advaita Vedanta provides the students with a comprehensive learning method to acquire valid knowledge. The learning process can be presented in the form of three important steps (or) stages.

Step/Stage I Acquiring basic and primary knowledge about the subject from the teachers.

Step/Stage II Putting in Self-effort by the students to internalize the acquired knowledge.

Step/Stage III Experiencing the practical application of knowledge by the students.

The process of acquiring valid knowledge would be complete only when all the three stages are successively attained by the students. Let us hope that the knowledge thus acquired would convert itself, in the fullness of time, as wisdom for the students.

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