H.P. Blavatsky and Radhakrishnan

Advaitic Series.

No. 4.

REASON AND ITS LIMITATIONS.

3[1]

BY

G. R. Malkani.

Published by the Indian Institute of Philosophy.
Amalner, E. Khandesh.

[1] The original editor inserted "3" by hand

PREFACE.

The subject of this little essay forms the ground of the whole Advaitic philosophy. Naturally I have found great difficulty in presenting it in proper form. I am quite aware that I shall be accused by many of inconsistency so far as the main argument of the following pages is concerned. But I believe that such inconsistency will be found to be partly at least due to the nature of the subject. I have tried to show the unlimitedness of reason, and yet at the same time I have been pointing out its limitations. I hold both views to be true, and both consistent with each other. All that I have to say in this place is that I shall be very thankful to those of my readers who will kindly favour me with a thorough-going criticism of this standpoint.

Indian Institute of Philosophy.
Amalner—E. Khandesh.
25/2/24.

G. R. MALKANI.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

Problem of Nothing	…	…	Price Re.	1.
Metaphysics of Energy	…	…	Price Rs.	2/8/-
Method of Philosophy	…	…	Price As.	-/8/-
Essay on Suicide	…	…	Price As.	-/4/-

Can be had from the Indian Institute of Philosophy.
Amalner—E. Khandesh.

REASON AND ITS LIMITATIONS.

§ I.

Every system proceeds on the assumption of the unlimited powers of reason.

It is common to speak of the limitations of reason. But that is a view of reason which is not self-consistent; it is irrational. Every system of thought necessarily proceeds on the assumption of the unlimited powers of reason. Even systems which are most critical of those powers do imply that that criticism is rational. Reason then is the only judge of its own limitations; and this is to give to reason a potency beyond its supposed limitations. There is no point of view higher than reason from which reason itself may be criticised. We are not in this unduly stretching the meaning of the term "reason." For wherever we are required to philosophise we are understood to proceed on the assumption that reason is the highest tribunal of appeal; even in cases in which direct mystical experience is supposed to be higher than reason, the assumption is that it is higher because it makes good the deficiencies of reason and thereby makes reason more rational; in other words, that it is a higher form of reason.

Reason and the "concrete universal."

Philosophy, in our opinion, is the attitude of reason towards reality. This reason is not to be understood as any set of ultimate positions; such positions, if attainable, require reason to establish them. It is not the same thing as what Dr Bosanquet means by the concrete universal.* His concrete universal is a construction of thought, and implies all the latter's postulates. It is neither a presupposition of thought, nor is it a fact of direct experience; it is not real in either of these two senses. Dr Bosanquet is no doubt "inclined to see in thought the principle of concreteness;" but what is really significant is his admission that "no absolutely self-contained experience is accessible to finite intelligences, and that therefore they must always be on one side discursive," p. 56. Our standpoint is necessarily that of the finite intelligence; and for it, the concrete universal can only be a construct, a system of formal connections, and not something in which "every detail has gained incalculably in vividness and in meaning, by reason of the intricate interpretation and interconnection, through which thought has developed its possibilities of "being" " p. 56. This language can only be significant of a fact of direct experience. But the concrete universal is not the experience of any one. Thought as such is not intuitive; and anything which has the universality of thought can never be an experienced.

* The appeal to "the whole" is not a detatched or arbitrary procedure but the same thing with the principle known as the principle of non-contradiction." The principle of Individuality and value p. 46. Also see pp. 51 and 56.

whole. The concrete universal is a whole which is formal and it presupposes all the postulates of reason.

Reason and formal principles.

This reason is also not, ultimately, a set of formal principles. Formal principles are merely the formulation of certain general intuitions; and it is the self-evidence of these intuitions which constitutes them rational. We take an instance. The whole is greater than the part. This is true not because it is a principle of reason. It is a principle of reason, because in any intuition of part and whole, that is so. Again let us take the principle,—nothing can come into being without a cause. There is no reason why this principle should be regarded as true. And yet nobody can question it. The reason is not that it is such a principle, but that in any intuition of something coming into being, the antecedent condition necessarily forms part. We could not intuit the advent of an event without constructing a movement from one set of conditions to another. Perhaps nothing is really intuited to come into being at all, and that when we suppose that the contrary is the case we are introducing in our intuition an irrational element from sense-experience. That however is a different matter. What is important is the fact that whenever we employ a ratiocinative process, we accept certain principles to be true; and the ultimate ground of the validity of these principles lies in an appeal to the individual's intuitive judgment.*

* Compare the following: "Ultimately, certain *notions* must be taken as intelligible without definition, and certain *propositions* must be taken as assertible without demonstration. All other notions (intrinsically logical) will have to be *defined* as dependent upon those that have been put forward without definition; and all propositions (intrinsically logical) will have to be *demonstrated* as dependent upon those that have been put forward without demonstration." Johnson's Logic Part I, Chapter III, p. 29.

The procedure of thought.

The next point which we shall consider is the procedure of thought. It might appear that thought has to take several steps, called the links of the argument, before it comes to a conclusion. That is true in a way. And yet on closer examination it will be found that every step of thought is a step from one self-evident position to another. We can never start on a piece of reasoning unless something is taken by us as self-evident. We are indeed told by logicians that a "thinking process is normally initiated by a question and terminated by an answer." (Johnson's Logic XVIII). But to this we have to add that we cannot formulate a question if nothing is determined for us as fact. Also no progress can be made in an argument if every new consideration advanced in respect of the same does not bear this character of factual validity or self-evidence.* We reason no doubt to find an answer to a question. But the only way this can be done is to analyse a problem into elements which are all self-evident,—which are

* This will explain the view of certain writers that truths which we arrive at by long processes of reasoning are seen by the divine intelligence in a single glance. It also explains the tendency of many logicians to regard induction as only a form of deduction.

facts. Reason can do no more. And the expectation that it should, can only be described as irrational.

The notion of self-evidence.

This brings us to the notion of self-evidence. For ordinary reasoning we mean by the self-evident that about which no question arises. What is self-evident now may not appear to us to be self-evident at some later time and in some other connection. But for the purpose in hand, it is taken as ultimate, and no process of thinking is required to validate it. This naturally leads us to ask, what is self-evident in a truly ultimate sense?

The self.

The question can be answered very simply. *The tendency on our part to prove is the evidence of what cannot be proved*. A process of thinking, if it could be taken in detachment from the ego, would constitute neither proof, nor disproof, nor doubt etc. It has no demonstrative value; it does not constitute a rational process. What constitutes it rational is the ego or the self which determines it in one of the afore-said mental attitudes. A doubt is a determined attitude. Even indecision is determined in so far as an issue is regarded as lacking that determination which it might have. All these various attitudes which characterise different processes of thinking give evidence of that which cannot be itself determined in any attitude, but which determines everything forming an element in a rational process. This then is the only self-evident

reality,—that without which proof cannot be proof, but in which and for which all rational processes are determined to have the characteristic which they seem to possess. In other words, if we can put aside the self, or so much as raise a doubt or a question in respect of it, we have made thinking meaningless and ruled out the very possibility of ratiocination.

§ II.

Reality and experience.

Philosophy, we have said, is the attitude of reason towards reality. Whatever now this attitude might be, one thing is absolutely certain, namely that reality is determined in this attitude as *that which is experienced*. That which may be in itself and is not part of experience can itself be fact only as involved in the rational criticism of experience. This criticism is for us the ultimate ground of all facts. What is a postulate of experience might transcend certain limits artificially set to experience; it cannot transcend experience as a whole. Also it will be noted that what cannot be experienced but which nevertheless is, is experienced in that we know it to be different from that which is experienced. In other words, the differentiation in question to be significant must itself be based upon the ground of experience, which is thus an all-inclusive term. Our conclusion is that rationality covers the whole of reality, and in doing so, it determines it as that which is experienced.

Does objectivity in experience signify real independence? Limits of rational explanation.

Now it is evident that experience as such does not require any proof of its validity; all its facts are self-evident facts; and they do not lend themselves to any distinction of the phenomenal and the noumenal. Certain facts of experience however seem to contain reference to an *independent* reality; and question has been raised as to the rationality of this reference. It is clear however that what forms part of experience has no reference to anything which falls outside experience. It has reference only to itself as object. The obvious answer then to the above question is that for reason no object ever has any reference to a reality which is independent of experience, and that the appearance of "otherness" which characterizes every object is completely comprehended *within* experience, and is ultimate and incapable of further explication. To try to explain any further this appearance is to ignore the demands of rational explanation. We have in fact no question here; and if we tried to formulate one, we would be making the fact of "otherness" the condition of the question being significant. Such a question can never be resolved except by showing that the question is vicious, and that it does not really arise.

A historical point.

The empirical writers of the seventeenth century went quite on a wrong track when they started with the assumption that unless the existence of some independent substance could be proved our experience as it is becomes wholly irrational. Kant who wanted to

vindicate the fabric of knowledge erected by scientific thought, tried to shift the burden of validity of knowledge from the existence of an independent substance to the constitutive activity of reason, or as he called it the synthetic activity of thought. He accordingly made a distinction between the thing-in-itself which we never knew, and the thing as it is experienced. But within experience itself a duality had to be maintained. There was the contribution of the thing-in-itself in the form of material of sensation, and there was the contribution of reason in the form of categories of thought. The two could not be reconciled; the sensuous always remained something foreign to reason; something that could not be assimilated in the effort of reason for complete comprehension. Even Hegel who carried the constitutive character of reason in experience to the extreme and enunciated the doctrine that the real was the wholly rational, had to explain away sense-experience somehow, and to restrict himself in his logic of the real to what he conceived to be the categories of pure thought. Such restriction may not prove the limitation of reason, but only the unreality of that which was not rational. But after all, if we identify reason with thought, it is evident that there are elements in our experience which are not thought, and it will not be true to say that the real is the rational. Also there is no principle of thought which we can think of which is not held up by its own irrationality. The form which gives to thought a certain concreteness and applicability to things is at the same time that which is irrational in thought. Pure thought is really no thought at all. It is a myth of the philosopher's

mind. And when this pure thought is active it can make no progress, for it has no content to operate upon.

In what sense is the real rational?

The real is not rational in the Hegelian sense, the sense namely in which thought is the very essence of things. Nor is the real rational in the Kantian sense, according to which the real conformed to a scheme of reason, the apriori forms of the understanding. The real is rational in that it can be reduced to a statement of ultimate and irreducible fact,—fact beyond which thought cannot go without self-contradiction. There will be appearances. But the rational basis of these appearances will not be that they are not those appearances, or that they are somewhere reconcilable in thought,* but that no legitimate question can be raised with regard to them, that they are ultimate and irreducible in character, and that they must be accepted the appearances they are. The statement of irreducible fact is the *best reason* of that fact; and it is in this sense that the whole of reality is rational We can then ascertain the real as it is: and there is no legitimate question regarding it which cannot be solved by us. It is only when we raise questions which are illegitimate that the real does not appear to be wholly amenable to reason.

* This is the line on which most of the western absolutists proceed.

§ III.

Limitations of thought. Is a higher instrument of knowledge needed?

It might be said that thought could never ascertain the true nature of the real; for thought has to assume fact somewhere, and it must necessarily be limited by this assumption. There will always be room for doubt, and we can never be sure that the fact is as it has been assumed. It is therefore suggested that the only way to know truth is to transcend the limitations inherent in thought and get to a pure intuition of the understanding or mystic experience.* The object of philosophy, namely to know the whole truth, can never be attained in any other way.

No higher instrument can alter facts with which reason has to start.

There is no doubt an element of truth in this argument. Our thought does not make its own content. It is confronted by something which is "other" to it, and which it is said to cognise. The limitations of such knowledge are quite evident. Thought can never give *certitude*. The remedy proposed however is worse than useless, for where doubt is of the very nature of a fact, no revelation can make that fact appear otherwise. We might even say that a fact that is amenable to doubt is as well revealed as anything of a super-sensuous character that might be revealed. Such a fact is for reason an irreducible datum, and has to be stated

* This view forms the basis of the philosophical systems of Plato, Spinoza and Kant.

as such. In no case can we infer, because of the doubt, that the true fact is not known. The true fact does not exist if it is not known. And all the intuitions are irrelevant if they do not bear on the facts with which we have necessarily to start. The problems which confront us,—and they are problems relating to our common sense knowledge,—cannot be solved by taking a leap to some other realm, the realm of the so-called super-sensuous experience.

Why reason is competent to know the real as it is?

Let us suppose however that it is part of the rational criticism of sense-knowledge that truth cannot be known. In that case, the criticism will not have been sufficiently critical. For how could reason determine what truth must be like if nothing that is known conforms to its idea of it? The very requirement of reason for abstract consistency is governed in the end by the unity of experience. It is not a deliverance of reason that precedes experience and awaits its realization in some future experienced whole. All the elements of rationality are to be found in the nature of experience as it is. Reason brings no rules to dictate to experience. For reason then to conclude that truth cannot be known or that it falls outside our actual experience will be a self-contradiction. On the other hand, the very fact that within this experience reason can discriminate between truth and error, fact and appearance, proves its competence in the matter. And even where it leads to the consciousness of the failure of the discriminative process to grasp the real, it points to the latter as

truly and as unmistakably as a disclaimer does to the statement disclaimed. Or what is the same thing, in knowing its own limitations reason really goes beyond itself,—it transcends the limitations.

§ IV.

Thought and its power of making for ignorance.

Thought can always raise questions. It has almost unlimited powers of making for ignorance. We may know never so much: our knowledge can always be made to appear a mere islet in a limitless ocean of the unknown. Even this islet could be attacked; and a consistent rationalist arguing on these lines is bound to come to the conclusion that nothing *at all* could be known. But reason is disruptive when it is least critical. We may indeed doubt what is presented, or raise regarding it questions which are almost endless. But the whole of presented and presentable reality can in this respect be no better assured than the meanest of its parts; it is not a real whole,—a whole which would include the doubt itself.

The real whole: The fact of ascertainment.

What is this whole? It is the fact of ascertainment implied in all judgment operations. No reasoning could doubt *this*. We cannot think, we cannot reason, without ascertaining something or the other all the while. Even when we appear to be in suspense, we have the ascertainment of the suspense. This then, the fact of ascertaining

which underlies all rational processes, we might truly say is absolute in the knowledge of reason. Everything else is subject to the criticism of reason; but that which is presupposed in these operations cannot itself be amenable to criticism. Also, no revelation can be more assured: for revelation itself would have to be assured *in it*. It is not a separate state of the mind as is implied by revelation: it is common to all the states alike. It is, we might say, literally, truth in error, knowledge in ignorance, certainty in doubt. What better assured whole can reason aspire to get at?

The true office of thought.

We cannot indeed be aware of this fundamental fact, unless we take the guidance of thought. But guidance is not limitation. We know everything else by limiting it; and this limitation constitutes the proper nature of that which is thus known. We do not know the fact of ascertainment which underlies all mental operations by any such limitation. What thought does is simply to point to it: and in pointing, it does not make it its object,—it does not limit it; it really transcends its particular office in the very act of trying to discharge it. A common and somewhat crude illustration is that of pointing the exact position of the new moon to someone. We take in this the help of the forefinger and of all the prominent features of a landscape. We say, for example, to our companion: It is just there—between those two stems of the tree! We know that the two stems do not constitute any limitation of the moon. The moon does not really lie between them. The stems

are merely pointers, useful aids for localisation. They have no necessary relation to the moon which is a huge body thousands of miles away. Similarly we might hold that thought in pointing to what is really beyond it, does for us an office analogous to that of the stems in the above instance; it merely directs the understanding, without implying any real limitation of that to which it directs.

Identity of the ego and that which constitutes the ascertainment of a fact.

It will be noted now that the ascertainment of a fact cannot be distinguished from the relation of that fact to the ego. This relation is not the relation of one fact to another fact. In fact, it is no relation at all,—in the same way as there is no relation between a fact and what we have called the ascertainment of a fact. To be a fact means to be an ascertained something. The fact is not one thing and its ascertainment another. This ascertainment and the relation to the ego are only two ways of looking at one and the same thing. There is no possible ground in experience by which the two can be separated.

The Truth of Advaitism can never be superseded.

A further point emerges from the above discussion. The conclusion of Advaitism can never be superseded. The absolute reality is not something to be constructed. Every construct is bound to be inadequate. The absolute reality is *presupposed* in all constructs, and is their very truth. Inadequacy is a conception which is relative to

what is a construct. It signifies that something is deficient in certain respects, or that something excludes something else. But that which can never be objectified, which is never a construct, can never be deficient in anything, or exclude anything. The relation of exclusion is a relation between objects; it presupposes the Advaitic Absolute. The latter offers no point of attack to thought. It can never be shown to be either doubtful, or abstract, or deficient,—epithets which are applicable only to contents of thought. It is truly super-rational. It is the Absolute Truth.

Reason that is constructive.

Reason can be constructive. And when it is, truth is not an ideal object of search beyond its reach. It is something which is realized even when we seem to be seeking for it,—even when it appears most distant. It lies at the very root of every process of reasoning,—in fact of every question and doubt. It is that by which everything else is ascertained,—but which itself can never be ascertained by anything else.

Summing up.

To sum up, (1) we know the limitations of reason. And yet when we know them, we know them *by* reason. (2) Reason on its purely formal side can never be satisfied; it can always raise doubts. On its intelligent side, it is rooted in personal certitude; and this can never be doubted. (3) Mystical experiences themselves imply this certitude; they can never be a substitute for it.

(4) Lastly, reason is limited by nothing but its own formal devices. To get at the true significance of rationality, we are taken back to the ground of all thought, namely the self. This is not in any way limited by its knowledge. It limits all limitations.

§ V.

Reason and intuition.

An important point to note in connection with this problem is the distinction of reason and intuition. Intuition is not to be understood here as any special method of knowing, a new epistemological instrument. It only signifies the general fact of awareness,—awareness which is common to all forms of knowing whether sensuous or super-sensuous.

Instability of our rational nature.

It is evident that, as contrasted with intuitiveness, there is no stability in what is called our rational nature There are several factors which have a disturbing influence upon the latter. We lose our power of reasoning by excessive drug-taking or the use of alcohol. In cases of insanity, that power appears to have been destroyed completely and for ever. Our reason is not something very stable; and if "man" is after all to be defined as a rational animal, we shall have to admit that he is at least as often animal as that he is man.

Intuition the unchangeable nature of man.

No such change can be detected in our intuitive nature. From child-hood to old-age, in sanity as well as in insanity, knowing is knowing *in the same sense*. The child cannot reason, but he knows. The mature man reasons, but he does not know in a way different from that in which the child knows. The man of the world may not be supposed to know God, or Brahman, or any Absolute Reality. But he knows something. And although he thinks that he does not know the Absolute, he knows that whatever That might be, It can only be known in the same sense in which he knows the furniture of the earth. In other words, he knows what is knowing, and that there can be no two senses of the word. If there were two senses of knowing, he would be without the means of determining their distinction. The wise then and the divinely-inspired are one with the meanest of creatures so far as their intuitive nature is concerned. And this nature never undergoes any change in any respect whatsoever in the same individual. There can be no ignorance about it, no error or mis-judgment; for these presuppose the self-evidence of one, partitionless being of intuition.

Reason is a "body;" it is not the true self.

Reason is not the true being of the individual. It is amenable to various influences. In sleep and abnormal conditions of the mind, we know its disappearance. On the other hand, the very fact that we can know this disappearance is proof of the stability and the unchangeability

of our intuitive nature. We never do know, or can know, the disappearance of the latter.* We can lose our reason, and still act as individuals, as selfs. The most insane person still retains the sense of the ego. But no man can lose his intuitiveness and claim to be an entity. It is the inmost man, the true self. Reason is to this man something that may be put on or put off,—something like a *body* external to his being.

True enlightenment.

It is true that even the above distinction is arrived at by means of reason. We can have no knowledge, no enlightenment, without reasoning. At the same time it is true that all enlightenment is the outcome of the removal in thought of the problems created by thought. Reason has value only in curing its own diseases,—in resolving its own misconceptions. When this is done however, there is no more any problem, no occasion for the exercise of reason. This is true enlightenment, and not the obtaining of any visions. Reason is a limitation. But we can be free from it, not by refusing to reason, but reasoning to the very point where its limitations become a means of their own dissolution in complete and ultimate satisfaction.

Printed by Bhut Nath Sircar.
at the New Arya Mission Press.
9, Shib Narayan Das Lane, Calcutta.

* The common misconception in regard to this point has to a certain extent been treated in my booklet, The Problem of Nothing.