

## SPINOZISM AND HINDUISM

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**E**VEN the reader of Spinoza's *Ethics* whose acquaintance with Hindu thinking is slight cannot fail to be struck by the number of parallels between the principal tenets of both. The Latin of the *Ethica* is also similar to the Sanskrit in the philosophical portions of the Vedic writings. The directness of both languages is no less amazing than the sincerity and frankness with which the deepest thoughts are expressed.

Hindu philosophy had reached a height of insight when the beginnings of western philosophy were, to all appearance, still lost in speculations about the physical world. But the precocity of India was followed by a long period of slumber, as it were, which continues almost down to the present. The schools that in later years engaged in hot disputes all seem to be below the level which had been attained long ago, while the principles set forth in Vedic times stand unshaken in their Himalayan solitude. In the West there has been a continuous effort to build up idealistic systems, to keep them intact and buttress them. The strong critical tendency characteristic of the western attitude threatened to tear down the noblest structures, the highest ideas, whereas in India debates were meant only for raising the highest to yet loftier peaks. Eternal truths one left untouched in their original formulation with a piety known only to Orientals.

The short, archaic phrases and definitions of the Upanishads and cognate literature, which we here make the basis of our comparison, are still the living heritage of India, and the forms which their highest speculations assumed are even now, after so many centuries, considered adequate and concise. They may be looked upon as Propositions reduced to the lowest terms for mnemonic purposes and, thus, in more than one way suggest a comparison with Spinoza's geometrical treatment of philosophy.

Any explanation of the parallelism on the basis of a direct connection between the cabalistic tradition in Hebraism, to whose influence Spinoza was doubtless very receptive, with an Oriental complex of philosophic ideas to which India may have contributed, must be more than precarious. The historic continuity is lacking, and there are other elements that tend to frustrate any such attempt.

The possibility of such a transmission, of course, remains. But from another angle the parallelism appears in a most interesting light as being grounded in the nature of thought itself. If philosophy is the endeavor to describe adequately reality and has, as such, any objective value at all, identical points of view must lead to identical results in the formulation of their findings. Time has nothing to do with truth, if there is any absolute truth, while language is but an accident and does not influence substantially the meaning it wishes to convey. With such an interpretation we shall find it not difficult to compare the Spinozistic philosophical ideas and ideals with their Indian prototypes.

God is the ultimate for Spinoza, *brahman* that for the Hindus. Both are substances, in Spinoza's sense. Prop. 7, Part I reads: "Existence belongs to the nature of substance." God, thus, exists from all eternity, being the principle of all that is. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad says: "Truly, this world was *brahman* in the beginning" (1. 4. 10). This is not to be understood as implying that it became something different later. "In the beginning" means in principle. In other words, *brahman* exists as world-ground from all eternity. At one time, Spinoza made use of the Scholastic term *causa essendi*, implying that God is the cause and existence of all things (Cor. to Prop. 24, Pt. I). This states excellently the Indian position.

Substance is infinite (Prop. 8, Pt. I), and from its nature follows an infinity of things in infinite modes (Prop. 16). The attributes of God, like everything that expresses the infinite substance, are infinite. Man knows of the infinite attributes of God only these two; extension and thought. God being all in Spinoza as well as in the Brahmanical philosophy we would expect in the latter similar indications as to the nature of this world. Indeed, one of the commonest attributes of *brahman* is that it is endless, *ananta*, that is, limitless, infinite. The negation of all spacial limitation, as we meet it in Maitri Up. 6. 17, can mean nothing else but mathematical infinitude. In the Śvetāśvatara Up. 5. 13 the highest reality is characterized as *anādhyanantam*, without beginning and without end. When Gautama Āruṇi went to Jaibali to receive instruction in the highest metaphysical knowledge and the latter was not immediately disposed to give it to him, he says: "It is well known that I have a full share of gold, of cows and horses, of female slaves, of rugs, of apparel. Be not ungenerous toward me, Sir, in regard

to that which is the abundant, the infinite, the unlimited" (Bṛh. Up. 6. 2. 7, in Hume's translation). In other words, knowledge concerning the topic of the *Ethica* was sought, and if the ensuing discussion is somewhat shrouded and runs along different lines, we must make due allowance for the ritualistic background of the Upanishads. The important thing to note is that *brahman* was conceived by these early Hindus much in the same way as Spinoza conceived his substance.

The infinity of attributes may be latent in another passage of the same Upanishad where *brahman* is spoken of as "tens and thousands, many and endless" (2. 5. 19). At any rate, space and knowledge share with *brahman* the quality of *ananta*. Space, *ākāśa*, is endless in Chāndogya Up. 1. 9. 2. The "great Being," which is just a mass of intelligence (*vijñānaghana*), is infinite and limitless in Bṛh. 2. 4. 12. Yājñavalkya, to whom the statement is ascribed, also regarded mind (*manas*) as infinite (ib. 3. 1. 9).

What appears as well substantiated thought in Spinoza's system we meet in the Upanishads as simple postulates. But as certain as deep reflection must have preceded the almost aphoristic Upanishadic sentences, so certain it is that the finest insights in Spinoza's immortal book were not won by deduction from the axioms and definitions.

Practically every other characteristic of Spinoza's substance may be paralleled by references to the Upanishads. The 27th Proposition asserts that God is constrained by nothing; he, therefore, is independent in the fullest sense, an idea expressed in Sanskrit by many words, but especially by *svatantra*, which conveys complete self-reliance, a term apparently much liked by the Maitri Upanishad. Eternity, infinitude as to time, or the absence of a when, before, and after (Schol. 2 to Prop. 33, Pt. I) is particularly predicated in the 19th Proposition of God and his attributes, and it is also one of the frequent adjectives in Hindu metaphysics. The words are *nitya* and *sanātana*, both in application to *brahman*. Cause and effect do not reach God, he is not and never has been implicated in this relation, having existed from all eternity unproduced, or unborn (*aja*), as the Upanishads have it.

An echo of the eternal verity as which Spinoza designates the existence as well as the essence of substance (Schol. 2 to Prop. 8 and Cor.'s 1 and 2 to Prop. 20, Pt. 1) may be seen in that both, being and truth, are predicated of or identified with *brahman*. That

intense desire on the part of Spinoza to make God the most perfect being which makes itself felt throughout the *Ethics*, is also seen in every line of the Upanishads which deny every quality that may be met in ordinary experience to *brahman*: it is *neti, neti*, not this, not that, so it may not be confused with anything in the perceptual world. *Brahman* must be left in its grandeur and sublimity. And, likewise, Spinoza does not want to abandon himself to anything less consummate. There is no need for him to describe God as beyond good and evil. It follows from the utter transcendency of all that appertains to him directly, and the same position is held by the Indian speculators. Good and evil are human notions formed after a comparison of things with one another (see *Ethica*, preface to Pt. 4). The parallel Indian view in these matters has often enough been commented upon and need not be reiterated here.

It would not concur with the facts if we interpreted Spinoza's God as being pure mind. We would limit him thus decidedly. Nevertheless, he is the ultimate cause, the efficient cause of the existence as well as essence of all things (Pt. I, Prop. 25 etc.). In addition, he is thinking being, while, according to the most important seventh Proposition of the second Part, his power to think is equal to his virtual power to act. There is a double aspect which is also apparent in later Hindu speculation, where the highest being "shines forth" in and through the whole manifestation. The process of creation itself is always described cautiously as a "shining forth" (*prakāśa*). This neutral term is chosen to indicate the subtleness of the development which has both, an apparently logical and an apparently physical aspect which mingle in the significant concept *māyā*. To this also there are parallels in Spinoza. For the moment we call attention only to the circumstance that the Western view differs markedly from the Hindu one if some sort of a dualism is read into it which Spinoza, however, never intended.

The whole creation is God's pleasure, and none of the motives ascribed to God by theology can be predicated of him in the creation of the world. This is a typically Eastern view which, in Spinoza, reaches beyond the Hebraic idea of the absolute power of a despot to that so generally held at all times in India, of Śiva's dance which conveys the utter inconceivability of any ultimate design in creation. Man cannot fathom the purpose of the whole, and Spinoza does not hesitate to stigmatize all final causes as nothing more than human fictions. No thinker ever was fiercer in criticizing an-

thropomorphic tendencies. A seeming exception is the *deus sive natura*, which is the perfect parallel to the Hindu use of the masculine pronoun *sa* for the neuter demonstrative *tat* in application to the ultimate reality. On both sides we look more in the direction of tolerance than of compromise for an explanation. The pure "It," like the forbidding substance, is less satisfying and puts greater obstacles in the way of a mystical realization, which neither the Hindus nor Spinoza rebuked, but rather invited, tacitly.

God, like *brahman*, is one, *eka*, without a second, *advaita*. In a number of ways this is also given expression to throughout the *Ethics*. The problem, however, is how can this One become the many, how can the *eka* be this world-all, *sarvam idam*, or how are the attributes related to the one and only substance. Here Spinoza's answer varies somewhat from that of the Hindus. Spinoza lodges the entire responsibility for the many in God himself from whose omnipotence and infinite nature there follows, according to the 16th Proposition of the first Part, an infinity of things in infinite modes, while the infinity of attributes is, for him, contained already in the definition of God as the absolute being. The Hindu has always inclined to the belief that the One is reality, the many appearance; but again, Eastern and Western thought approach each other, for if *brahman* is everything, the appearance or *māyā* must be bound up inextricably with *brahman* also—not that he too were *māyā*, but that the *māyā* is his *māyā*.

The metaphysical speculation of the Hindus turns around the two poles of *brahman* and *ātman*, the human soul or self as the writ small of *brahman*. Spinoza comes very close to such a conception in the second and the two last parts of the *Ethics*. When the Upanishads are in search of what is abiding, eternal, they teach to find it in the *ātman*, which is identical with *brahman*. The soul, in Spinoza's system, is eternal also, in so far as it is in essence identical with God, and not in so far as it is the soul of a body having a certain duration. That is made plain in the Hindu view likewise where, in order to convey the subtlety of *ātman*, the pupil is made to realize that neither the body nor what we would call the "me," can be the *ātman* that is eternal and may be regarded as connatural with *brahman* (cf., e.g., Chānd. Up. 8. 7 ff.).

Many are the adjectives applied to *ātman*, and we need not be surprised at finding them also in various places of the *Ethics*, inasmuch as a fundamental conception in a metaphysical system in-



evitably admits conclusions with respect to its other characteristics. So, that the soul is not destroyed along with the body at death (Prop. 23, Pt. V), which is paralleled by the Sanskrit *akṣara*, meaning imperishable, in application to *ātman*. The essence of *ātman* is knowledge, realization, *vidyā*, *jñāna*, and thus is identical with *brahman* by this intrinsic relationship. Similarly Spinoza says in the Corollary to the 11th Proposition (Pt. II), that the human soul is part of the infinite intelligence of God. Man conceives through God, and in conceiving and perceiving conceives and perceives nothing but God again. Moreover, inasfar as man so perceives and conceives he has an adequate knowledge of God. The same holds good of *ātman* and *brahman* which is said to be *sarvam idam*, the whole world, as well as *adhyātman*, that is, Emerson's Oversoul.

The three kinds of knowledge distinguished by Spinoza in the second Part of the *Ethics* we find also in the Upanishads. Opinion or imagination, representing the first kind of knowledge, is wholly inadequate. The term applied to such knowledge is *man*, which means to opine and which is never used when the object involved is the higher reality. As to the second kind of knowledge mediated by reason, it is related to that of the third kind, intuition. They are adequate, and *vidyā* and *jñāna* are likewise fully satisfactory with respect to *brahman* in any of its forms. The peculiar quality of uncertainty, doubt, hesitation, and wavering is typical of opinion. Real knowledge is positive and certain: as Spinoza says, certainty is not a mere privation or absence of doubt. Truth is self-evident and precludes all doubt. "As the light makes manifest both itself and the darkness, so does truth reveal both itself and that which is false" (Schol. to 43rd Prop.). With equal depth and assurance the Upanishadic *ya evain veda*, "he who knows this," rings into our ears. Truth is not an extrinsic correspondence between an idea and a thing: it is identical with itself.

But aside from these characteristics of knowledge there are others which are exhibited with striking similarity by the Eastern and Western thinkers. How often do we read in the Upanishads of crossing the fearful stream of knowledge, or successfully reaching the other shore which lies beyond darkness, or surmounting sorrow! Spinoza, too, tells us how truth, as true knowledge, dispels the fear of error and uncertainty. Knowledge is a good, while knowledge of God is the supreme good, according to Proposition 28 of Part IV. And a little farther down we read analogously to

the Hindu desire for *brahmavidyā*, knowledge of *brahman*, that the highest happiness of those who practice virtue is to know God (Demon. to Prop. 36). The *brahma*-knower is definitely beyond evil in virtue of insight, and so Spinoza's ideal thinker has attained the good in the *mentis vita* in which nothing of evil may befall him. His understanding protects him sufficiently and insures him acquiescence and contentment of mind, just as the Hindu sage enjoys *ānanda*, highest bliss and happiness.

Spinoza does not know the concept *māyā* as such which has so frequently been interpreted as deception, delusion, and fraud, but which is in reality appearance or what we, philosophically speaking, designate as phenomenon. The idea, however, is latent in the first kind of knowledge just alluded to, as well as in what Spinoza calls the passion of the soul which produces confused ideas. *Māyā*, like the passions, produces sorrow and suffering and thus makes liberation, *mokṣa*, highly desirable. Having gone that far, the Hindus and Spinoza have to go one more step. They have to find means and ways, not to salvation as such, which would be a religious problem, but to peace of mind. It is obvious what Spinoza demands: reducing the number of inadequate ideas, or, what is equivalent to it, lessening the frequency of our passions and increasing true knowledge. In India practically the identical solutions have been found and recommended for many centuries.

The Hindu sees *kāma*, desire, at the root of sorrow and suffering. In Spinoza's terminology it is pain, grief, and melancholy. Desire, so our philosopher explains in the 57th Proposition (Pt. III), is itself the very essence of passion. And here we perceive a slight difference between the thinkers we are comparing, which resolves, however, into a fine discrimination on the part of each of them. Desire is able to cause both, good and evil. As long as it is guided by reason, it is productive of good. This is paralleled by the insistence in the Upanishads on restraint of the activity of the sensory apparatus. What Spinoza calls ambition has its prototype in *ahaṅkāra*, literally the I-maker, of the Vedic literature. In his definition, Spinoza restricts ambition to immoderate desire of glory, while the Hindus view the whole of individual existence as under the aspect of a self-limiting process. But why is melancholy and sorrow evil? Because they inhibit action, and the power of the body is lessened and restrained (Demon. to Prop. 42, Pt. 4).

And thus we come to the goal of all philosophy which lies in

attaining happiness, *ānanda*. At the close of the second Part Spinoza admits that his doctrine confers entire peace of mind. Joy, *laetitia*, is the object, and in attaining it we attain happiness at the same time. Spinoza does not mean merely the affections of the body, as laughing and the like, but the deeper joys of a spiritual life which increase our power to act. The good is the action, joyous doing. Gayety and cheerfulness (*hilaritas*) are always good, and there may never be an excess of either. In fact, "the more joyfully we feel, the higher is the state of perfection to which we pass,—in other words, the more do we necessarily participate in the Divine nature" (Schol. 2, Prop. 45, Pt. 4). There is no need of adducing examples from Hindu literature to illustrate that the whole of Indian philosophy is permeated by the desire to reach the state of boundless bliss. What links Spinoza so closely to this eastern thought is that he, more fearlessly than other philosophers, insisted that speculation cannot be the end of philosophy, but that it is happiness which communicates itself from the mind to the whole of the personality. What is especially significant is that Spinoza's, as the Hindu's, *ānanda* depends on knowledge in the sense in which it has been explained above. This is brought out especially in the 27th Proposition to Part V. And as the Hindus define the highest reality, *brahman*, in terms of bliss, so Spinoza says that beatitude is not the reward of virtue, but is virtue itself. Happiness needs no justification, and it needs no sacrifice. That action and a positive adjustment to life constitute the source and end of happiness, is also the theme of the Bhagavad Gītā which among the religious books of India is most popular.

It is the philosopher in whom the life of the spirit comes to adequate expression. Spinoza has left us a brief sketch in the *Ethics* which might be taken as a sort of autobiography. In pointing to some of the characteristics of his ideal philosopher it is hardly necessary to parallel them one by one by those predicated of the *saninnyāsin*, the Indian wise man. The one perfectly reflects the other. Spinozism teaches to hate no-one, to despise no-one, to ridicule no-one, to be angry with no-one, to envy no-one (end of Pt. II), in one word to preserve the Stoical calmness. Pity, partiality, and superstition are not marks of the wise man, but a life of reason and thought and action in accordance with one's own nature, *svabhāva*, in Sanskrit (cf. *ib.* and Schol. to Prop.'s 18 and 35 of Pt. IV). The following sentence by Spinoza is the key that unlocks the un-



derstanding to the ancient ideal, be it Eastern or Western, of the wise man: "There is no single thing in nature more useful to man than the man who lives according to the dictates of reason" (Cor. 1 to Prop. 35, Pt. IV). The old prejudice of the impracticality of philosophy is thus dispelled. Contentment, peace of mind, contemplativeness, action, reason and, above all, balance throughout (for which see Prop. 39 of Pt. IV) have a tangible effect not only on the individual possessed of these, but on society as well.

It is important that Spinoza interpreted the attitude of the wise man also religiously as piety (see Schol. to Prop. 37, Pt. 4) which corresponds with the Indian conception of *bhakti*, devotion, inculcated especially by the Bhagavad Gītā. The dictum, to live virtue rather than to expunge evil (see end of Pt. IV), is at once Oriental and modern. The man of reason, Spinoza says, should live in society. This might be considered quite antagonistic to the Eastern ideal; only seemingly so, perhaps, for the wise man of the Upanishadic age, though he may be leaving his family and repairing to the forest, is seen going from place to place, teaching and taking part in philosophical discussions.

The Upanishads are emphatic in drawing a distinction between knowledge, *vidyā*, and ignorance, *avidyā*, the latter leading to disastrous consequences; the Stoics divided mankind in wise men and fools; Spinoza, likewise, stresses more than once that the wise greatly excel the ignorant. And thus, while there are a few points on which Spinoza disagrees with the Eastern thinkers, it is in the fundamental conceptions that he agrees with them. The fact that Spinoza, by race, belonged to an Oriental people accounts for many similarities in the temperamental and intellectual disposition. But what is of far greater practical significance is, that there are conceptions which are above time and place and circumstance, and that they are voiced with undaunted and autochthonic vigor in Orient and Occident alike, at different stages of the history of mankind and in various tongues.