

Advaita Vedānta and Personal Identity with Special Reference to Frege's Distinction between Sense and Reference : Some Reflections

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Abstract

In this paper, I am concerned with how Frege's distinction between sense and reference relates to Advaita concept of identity. To discuss on the same I have to first analyse 'tat tvam asi'. I tried to focus on Saṃkaracarya's view that in 'tat tvam asi' if 'tat' is taken to refer to Brahman and 'tvam' is taken to refer to jiva, then one cannot meaningfully talk of identity between the two. However, if 'tat' is construed as pure consciousness, direct and immediate, and 'tvam' as the pure consciousness that underlies the individual self, then one can begin to talk about identity between the two. In the second section I have analysed the term 'tantology' with reference to the above general idea of the conception of identity. In the third section I have interpreted 'that thou art' with reference to Frege's distinction between sense and reference. The last section discusses on the theory of immediacy of cognition. In the conclusion I have shown that 'That thou art' is not a mere tantology; it gains a cognitive significance by the fact that one removes its differential features to arrive at the identity.

KEYWORDS : Gottlob Frege, Samkara, 'Tat tvam asi', Tautology, X=X.

The question of the nature of identity has perplexed the human mind from time immemorial and has provided the basis for much philosophical investigation in the East and West alike. One finds it in the ancient Hindu Upanishads, Frege's distinction of sense and reference.¹

Before one can reasonably investigate the question of whether two things are identical, one must have a clear understanding of what it means for two things to be identical. If there really are two things, then how could we claim that they are identical, in the sense of numerical identity? If, on the other hand, there is only one thing, then close it make sense to say that it is identical with another thing? As Wittgenstein says : 'Roughly speaking, to say of two things that they are identical is non-sense, and to say of one thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing at all'². In other words, the question is : what exactly is being claimed to be identical in an identity statement? In this paper, however, I am concerned with how Frege's distinction between sense and reference relates to Advaita concept of identity. To discuss on the same I have to first analyse 'tat tvam asi'.

¹ Gottlob Frege, 'Sense and Reference, 'Contemporary Philosophic Logic, edited by I.M. Copi and I.A. Gould (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1978).

² Ludwig J. Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, translated by D.F. Peers and G.F. McGinnis (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), P.105.

In this section I am concerned with the Advaita Vedānta notion of identity. I, am going to analyse the famous mahāvākya ‘tat tvam asi’(That thou art)

- 1) to unpack the implications and ramifications of the notion of identity from the Advaita perspective and
- 2) to implied by it.

To fully understand the meaning and the significance of ‘That thou art’ one must have an accurate knowledge of the constituents that make it up. According to Śāṅkārā, in ‘tat tvam asi’ if ‘tat (that) is taken to refer to Brahman (pure consciousness and tvam (thou) is taken to refer to the jiva (empirical person), then one cannot meaningfully talk of identity between the two. However, if ‘tat’ is construed as pure consciousness, direct and immediate, and ‘tvam’ as the pure consciousness that underlies the individual self, then one can be to talk about identity between the two. Śāṅkārā, adopting the method of jahal-ajahal-lakṣana, argues that ‘that thou art’ asserts absolute identity between Brahman and the individual self. Pure consciousness is the reality underlying individual mind / badly complexes, the products of avidya (ignorance). The self viewed apart from nama-rupa (name-form), apart from the psychophysical organism, is identical with Brahman. In the embodied existence, the empirical self because of ignorance identifies itself with the body, mind, sense organs etc., thereby reinforcing the difference from Brahmān.

In this section I am going to analyse the term ‘tautology’ with reference to the above general idea of the conception of identity. Let us now examine, what might appear to be digression, what is meant by the term ‘tautology’. Is it a mere tautology or is it’s a synthetic, informative statement about Brahmān ? In one sense, a tautology involves the uninformative repetition of the same idea in different words. In the modern sense, the sense in which the term has generally been used by most contemporary philosophers, a tautology is a sentence that is true solely by virtue of its formal structure. Then again, it might be used in a broader sense, to include not only logical truths but also those analytic propositions which are reducible to logical truths by the use of definitions. ‘Bachelors are unmarried men’ would be an instance of identity proposition which is true by virtue of the definition of the term ‘bachelor’ when Śāṅkārā argues that, ‘That thou art’ asserts an identity between Brahmān and the empirical self, he is not using identity in either of the senses explained above. It does not involve the uninformative repetition of the same idea in different words; it cannot be expressed in the form, X=X because what is meant by atman for the individual is different from what is meant by Brahmān (for the individual). Nor is it a tautology in virtue of its formal structure. ‘That thou are’ would be a tautology only if ‘thou’ and ‘that’ were interdefinable like ‘bachelors’ and ‘unmarried men’. This, however, is not the case. The tadātmya (identity) relation that exists between ‘thou’ and ‘that’ or ‘ahaṁ’ and Brahmān is certainly not reciprocal³. Tādātmya literally means ‘the relation of having the same ātmān. The Advaitins argue that ‘that thou art’ asserts that the underlying consciousness, the essence, of the empirical self is Brahmān. When Śāṅkārā argues that self is Brahmān, he is not claiming that the individual self characterized by egoism and so forth is Brahmān, but rather that the self apart from

³ Śāṅkārā declares in no uncertain terms : ‘the effect has atman as its cause, but not the cause in its effect’. Brahm-Śūtra-Bhāṣya (BSB), II.1,9.

these contingent features is identical with Brahman. Thus, 'ātmān is Brahman' is not a tautology, nor is it a superfluous or trivial statements. If atman and Brahman are, infact, words that people use and understand, then it should be as easy to determine that 'ātmān is Brahman' as it is to confirm that 'All bachelors are unmarried men'. People do not disagree over whether bachelors are unmarried men, however, there is a great deal of disagreement over the truth of 'ātmān is Brahman.' And the disagreement does not seem resolvable simply by going to the dictionary. Thus it is safe to conclude, based on our belief discussion that the statement under consideration is not analytic.

Śāṅkārā's interpretation of 'that thou art' reminds me of Frege's distinction between sense and reference. Now let us briefly review this distinction to determine whether it provides any insights into the nature of the identity statement under consideration.

Every linguistic unit, Frege argues, has two mode of meaning : In one mode, the meaning is the thing to which the expression refers : in the second mode, meaning is the sense of the expression. 'Morning Star' and 'Evening Star' for example, refer to the same entity, the planet Venus. They are different ways of picking out the same planet. The Morning Star visible in morning and the Evening Star visible in the sky at a certain time in the evening. Frege argues that this distinction applies not only to substantives with which I am concerned in this analysis, but also to all linguistic units : to names, predicates, or as he calls them 'concept- words' and to complete sentences.

Keeping in mind the conception of sense and reference, let us see what light, if any, it throws on the identity statement under consideration. 'That thou art' is an identity statement like Frege's Statement 'The Morning Star is identical to the Evening Star', i.e., 'that' and 'thou' have the same referent though different senses.

For the Advaitins 'That thou art' categorically affirms the non-dual character of reality. It asserts that the atman is Brahman, that the self is Brahman. The discovery which is propted by 'That thou art' is again like Freges's Morning Star and Evening Star : Two different senses have the same referent. The referent in each case is Brahman; the senses of the expressions vary. Just as it is not obvious from a consideration of the term 'Morning Star' and 'Evening Star' similarly it is not obvious from a consideration of the terms ātmān and Brahman that the atman is Brahman. Thus, in 'That thou art', 'thou' and 'that' have the same referent, but differing meaning.

Thus, when identity is taken to be a matter of meaning, i.e, when sense and reference are taken to be two distinct, although related, modes of meaning, then our notion of identity would vary back and forth contingent upon the modes of meaning under consideration. If the identity is among senses, then the identity is analytic. If the identity is one of reference i.e., when the sense are different, then the identity is synthetic and informative Śāṅkārā's distinction between 'thou' and 'that' refers to his distinction between the level of appearance and the level of reality. It takes one from the apparent world where the plurality of names and forms is manifested to an appreciation of the underlying reality that lies beyond this apparent plurality. It is a movement from our mere conceptualization of the world to the level of Reality – the level which is beyond our thoughts and concepts.

This last section discusses on the theory of immediacy of cognition. The Vivarana tradition⁴ explains the identity relation as a relation that is *bhedasahisnu*, i.e., it is a relation that tolerates difference (*bheda*). Two things are different but they still have the same *ātman*. They argue that in ‘That thou art’ or ‘I am that’, ‘that’ in both the sentences refers to the *ātman* while ‘I’ and ‘thou’ refer to the finite self; however, both have the same *atman*. This two levels are incommensurable; accordingly, they don’t come into conflict. They argue that knowledge which arises from the great upanishadic statement ‘That thou art’ is immediate, because it has for its content a perceptual object like any *visusat* perceptual cognition. That verbal statement ‘That thou art’ can generate an immediate cognition. This is known as the theory of the immediacy of verbal knowledge (*Śabda aparokṣa-vada*). It holds that immediate intuition or knowledge can arise through a sensory experience, in this case, hearing. Words have the capacity to produce immediate knowledge⁵ when an enquire goes to a teacher and asks about the self, the teacher tells him ‘That thou art’ when the student asks ‘what is *Brahmān*?’ The teacher says ‘you are that’, ‘You are he’. So this is what the student hears from the teacher. It is *Śabdajñana*, knowledge by words. What is needed is that he not only hears it, but that he is able to verify it in his own experience. That means that he needs *Śabdajñana aparokṣajñana*, immediate cognition produced by words. When he does that he has a direct verification from his own experience of what he has been told. And the result is that ‘I am that’ or ‘I am *Brahmān*’ fulfills and confirms the intention of the other statement, ‘That thou art’. The first statement tells one verbally the truth; the second is the expression of the direct confirmation in his own case that it is the truth.

This explains why philosophers who commented on the *Vedānta* were very much concerned with the nature of this identity and attached a great importance to the statement under consideration. They repeatedly emphasized the fact that it is by removing all the differential features that the self and *Brahman* becomes identified. Thus ‘That thou art’ is not a mere tautology; it gains a cognitive significance by the fact that one removes its differential features to arrive at the identity. The cognitively significant feature in this context is this removal of differences. Thus, what we have here is an identity statement, which is not a tautology but a synthetic, factual statement about *Brahmān*.

Notes and References

1. Shankara Brithadaranyaka Upanishad Bhashya (BUB), 1.4.7. & Upadeshasahasri, XII.3; XVIII. 176.
2. Shankara declares in no uncertain terms: ‘the effect has *atman* as its cause, but not the cause in its effect.’ *Brahma-Sutra-Bhashya* (BSB), II.1.9.

⁴ *Śaṅkārā*’s youngest student was *Padampada*. He started a tradition of understanding and interpretation of *Śaṅkārā*, which came to be known as the *Vivarana Tradition*.

⁵ *Sarvajnatman* argues that whether a sentence ‘gives rise to mediate knowledge or immediate knowledge depends upon the nature of the object concerned. If the object is mediate, then the sentence would give rise to only a mediate knowledge of the object. If the object is immediate then, knowledge could be immediate. Here *Brahman – Atman* is always immediate and hence the *Upanishadic texts* give rise to the immediate knowledge of it.’ *Sarvajnatman*, *Samkshepas hariraka*, translated and edited by N. Veerhinathan (Modras : Radhakrishnan Institute for Advanced Study in Philosophy, 1972), P.49.

3. Ludwig J. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D.F.Pers and G.F. McGinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p.105.
4. Panayot Butchvarov, *Being Qua Being* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1979). Also see my co-authored article, ‘“Tat Tavm Asi” : An Important Identity Statement or a Mere tautology ?’ *Philosophy East and West*, January, 1984.
5. ‘Sense and Reference,’ p.65.
6. *ibid.*,pp.66-7.
7. Shankara’s youngest student was Padamapada. He started a tradition of understanding and interpretation of Shankara, which came to be known as the Vivarana tradition.
8. Gottlob Frege, ‘Sense and Reference,’ *Contemporary Philosophic Logic*, edited by I.M. CDopi and I. A . Gould (New York : St. Martin’s Press, 1978).