

The Way We Understand the World

In the infinite varieties of the world, nature presents itself as the greatest mystery before man. It is a challenge and a wonder, an allurements and a fulfillment, which man can never escape but has to encounter. Every moment in his life, he has to confront, perceive, conceive, enjoy and even discard the things of the world. Through the scientific methods of observation and experiment, through the philosophical speculations and reasoning, through the empathy and emotions of literature, he tries to understand the things of the world. The more he knows, the more remains incomprehensible. The mystery of the universe is hidden in every object of it. Even if we understand the tiniest particle in its entirety, we can very well comprehend the great universe. But what is meant by understanding the thing in its entirety? It means to comprehend the particular thing with all its possibilities, with its basis, beginning and end. Since the basis of all the things of the world is the same reality, the comprehension of any of them in its entirety, is tantamount to the understanding of the universe. The microcosmic and the macrocosmic are the same. The beginning is itself the end. The entire possibilities of the things of the world, as a whole or as fragments, are due to this underlying ultimate basis, which is the beginning as well as the end of them. That is why the sages of the Upanisads declare -“By the knowledge of a lump of earth, everything that is made of earth is known, the effects are nothing but the cause in different names and forms. The real is the earth.” (Chandogya Upanisad, 6.14) Likewise, the multitudinous things of the world are, in essence nothing other than the self-same Reality, Brahman. According to the sages of the Upanisads, this is the final point of enquiry, the consummation of life, the fulfillment of the world-process, beyond which nothing is there to know. Of course, this is too great a truth to be comprehended in our ordinary states of consciousness. However, we may introspect a little and question the way we look at the things, so that we may be free from the deep-rooted ignorance which springs from our too much familiarity with the way we perceive the things.

There are so many different manners of looking at the world. We perceive the things differently in their multifarious dimensions. Ordinarily, we perceive the things in their face-value. But if we go deeper and analyze the objects either scientifically or philosophically, we have altogether a different perception. For example, we ordinarily perceive an apple as a sweet, round, red and juicy fruit. For our day to day transactions, this much of perception of an apple is sufficient. But to ascertain its physical, chemical and botanical properties, we have to examine it scientifically, which gives us a different understanding of the apple. Likewise, we may conceptually analyze an apple into a substantive having inherent in it attributes such as sweetness, redness, roundness, etc., and we may further doubt the reality of any such substantive at all, holding that the apple is merely a conglomeration of its

attributes. We may go further and say that the so-called attributes (sense-data) are really ideal in character. We may hold that the so-called objects are partly real and partly ideal. Speculations as such may be partly meaningful or totally useless depending on the truth they give us. All these metaphysical speculations, notwithstanding their truth or falsity, show how much man is eager to understand the ultimate nature of the things of the world. Even though we scientifically analyze the thing or philosophically analyze its concept, we cannot explain why such and such physical or chemical properties, or such and such attributes or sense-data are combined together to give rise to such an object that presents itself as a thing. The ultimate “why”, “how” and “what” of the things remain unanswered.

Thanks to modern science; the horizon of human knowledge is expanding day by day. Since the beginning of scientific inquiry, we have been able to understand many mysteries of the universe. From the Copernican understanding of the cosmos till present time, we have been fairly acquainted with the external universe beginning with the “big-bang” to the “black-hole”. From the Newtonian mechanics through Maxwell’s electromagnetism to the Quantum physics, we have been fairly acquainted with the nature of the things and the principles working behind them. With the deciphering of human genetic code, man hopes to play the role of the maker of his destiny. The scientific method of the analysis of the concrete thing itself has a definite precedence over the philosophical method of analyzing the concept of the thing, as the former is more definite and less confusing than the latter. However, the ultimate answer to the most fundamental questions eludes both science and philosophy. All these methods have their inherent limitations. They are tenable within a certain frame-work and to a certain extent. Human eyes can never perceive the spectra of light beyond red and violet. Observation, experiment, speculation and reasoning are applicable within a certain level beyond which they become futile. This is why we find a new paradigm-shift in modern scientific approach. According to Heisenberg, we cannot speak about nature without speaking about the observer who perceives it. It is not only important what we know; it is equally important how we know. Any branch of knowledge, how much objective it may be, must have to refer to epistemology, and thus can never dispense with the observer.

The Vedantic understanding of the world is not really contradictory to the scientific or the philosophical. Scientific observations, experiments and discoveries, as well as sound philosophical speculations regarding the world can be well-maintained and assimilated under the Vedantic way of understanding. The methodological difference is that while other methods fix their attention on the surface, Vedanta directs its attention to the bottom. Nature is to be approached with reverence, says Vedanta, since it is the manifestation of the divine consciousness. Both the Advaita Vedanta and the Advaya Agama schools hold that there is no essential difference between the world and the individual. According to the sages, key to the mystery of the world

does not rest on the objects; it lies hidden in man himself. Here, man does not mean a biological or a social being. Essence of man lies in his spiritual dimension. However, it does not amount to solipsism. The object is as much real as the subject. But for its deeper understanding, understanding of the self is indispensable.

According to Advaita Vedanta, the world is nothing more than a false appearance.

Though it is compared frequently with such false objects as rope- serpent or shell-silver, it does not mean that the world of phenomena is as much false as rope-serpent or shell-silver. This is why the world is said to be vyavaharika or empirically real in contrast to them which are said to be pratibhasika or apparently real. The point is that the world, divorced from its basis, the ultimate reality, cannot be real. So, it is said to be false as such. Unless the basis is understood, its real nature remains unperceived. But how can we perceive the basis? The Advaitins say that by disciplining the mind and entering the immaculate solitude of the self, one can have access to a higher field of understanding. Till then our so-called scientific and philosophical methods are to be tentatively maintained. But, after that, there is no need of any such method. There enquiry comes to an end. Reality lies beyond the duality of causes and effects. It cannot be perceived through the relational modes of understanding. So far as operates the principle of causality, says Gaudapada, there extends samsara, the world of experience, but when the causal link is lost, one cannot find samsara there. How can we grasp the unmanifest, immutable, Reality, either scientifically or philosophically, with the lost link of causality which is so much fundamental to the scientific or philosophical methods? How can, on the other hand, we understand the world without understanding its underlying basis? That which matters is a paradigm-shift in understanding, a non- relational way of understanding which Vedanta advocates. For some, it is possible, though the majority may think to the contrary.

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