

THE TRANSCENDENTAL LOGIC OF AWARENESS

**From Western Logic to
Hindu Religious Propositions**



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2009

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1. Introduction

What could possibly be more logical and philosophically ‘self-evident’ to common sense logic than the truth that “Everything is what it is”, for example that ‘a table is a table’, ‘a man is a man’, ‘I am I’ and ‘you are you’ etc. - in short, that so-called ‘law of identity’ expressed in the formula ‘ $A=A$ ’. In truth, nothing could be *less* self-evident than this so-called ‘law’ in all its general formulations: “Everything is what it is” (Leibnitz) “Whatsoever is, is” (Locke) or “Everything is what it is and not another thing” (Moore citing Butler). And yet it is the foundation of an almost universally held belief that reality consists of countless separable ‘things’ or ‘entities’, each of which necessarily has characteristics that endow them with specific *identities*, thereby making them all self-identical ($A=A$, $B=B$ etc). The assumption here is that without identity, an entity is effectively *nothing*, and with an identity it is necessarily ‘self-identical’. Yet to simply posit the existence of any identifiable thing or entity, necessarily assumes an *awareness* of that thing – an awareness which is not *itself* any thing, and in that sense has reality even whilst being, quite literally ‘no-thing’.

Historically the ‘law of identity’ goes along with the belief that reality is nothing *but* a collection of identifiable entities or ‘identities’. This law and belief has been questioned from a number of points of view. In this essay I first of all question the law of identity from the perspective of what I term ‘The Awareness Principle’. This is an apodictic or a priori principle, based on the recognition that the very ‘being’ or ‘is-ness’ of any thing or ‘identity’ assumes an *awareness* of that thing. Since it is the precondition for identifying any thing or being, this awareness cannot - *in principle* - be reduced to a property or product of any identifiable entity, thing or being (whether an ‘object’ such as the brain or an individual ‘subject’ in the form of an individual mind, ego or ‘I’).

I go on to compare purely *logical* propositions and propositional logics of the sort formalised in Western philosophical thought, to Indian understandings of ‘identity’ expressed in the form of *religious propositions* with a substantive meaning – propositions which not only ‘assert’ some logical law or principle, but *say* something meaningful to the reader or hearer. To do so I introduce an entirely new understanding of ‘similarity-in-difference’ or ‘simference’ as a way of transcending fixed Western concepts of *logical* identity and difference and instead explore what might be termed the ‘inner logic’ of Eastern and specifically Indian *religious* propositions – understood as high level thoughts expressing deeply felt religious experiences of unity-in-diversity, similarity-in-difference and the nature of the self in relation to the divine. Finally I argue for a crucial turn in Indian religious thought and propositions from an ‘onto-theology’ of Being deriving from the Vedas and Vedanta to a tantric ‘epistemo-theology’ of the Godhead as Awareness.

1. The formula ‘A=A’

First of all let us explore more closely the presuppositions that lie behind the seemingly simple law of identity, as expressed in the formula $A=A$, using the proposition ‘a spade is a spade’ as example. Propositions of the form ‘a spade is a spade’ presuppose all of the following:

- (a) an *awareness* of some entity.
- (b) an *identification* of that thing or entity *as* ‘a spade’.
- (c) an understanding of *what* it is that constitutes ‘a spade’ or its ‘spade-ness’.
- (d) an understanding of what constitutes the being or ‘is-ness’ of ‘a spade’ or of ‘spade-ness’.

Heidegger recognised that an object such as a spade can be perceived and identified *as* a spade only in the context of its specifically human *use* as a spade. Using Heidegger’s terms, no such ‘thing’ as ‘a spade’ simply ‘is’ or ‘exists’ by virtue of just being ‘there’ and ‘present to hand’. Instead ‘a spade is a spade’ only by virtue of being ‘ready to hand’ for a specific human use. Thus the very *existence* of the spade as an identifiable entity,

identity or ‘thing’ presupposes not only an awareness of it, but a perceptual *identification* of what constitutes its ‘spade-ness’ that is dependent on our practical, human relation to it. The very material construction and ‘reality’ of ‘a spade’ is nothing but a realisation of this potentiality for a practical and specifically human use. For an earthworm or fly therefore, what we call ‘a spade’ is *not* ‘a spade’ in any sense at all. And given the huge differences that exist between the sensory organs and modes of perception of humans and other species, it is unlikely even to be *perceived*, let alone conceived, in the same way that humans perceive and conceive it - as ‘a spade’. Since what constitutes the essential being or identity *of* a spade lies in its being perceived *as* a spade Berkeley was right – to ‘be’ is ‘to be perceived’ (*esse est percipi*). More specifically, for an entity to ‘be’ is for it to be perceived and identified *as* something by virtue of (a) an a priori *awareness* of it and (b) a perception of it that is *species-specific* or even specific to a given individual or group. Thus when, as speakers of a particular language or members of a particular lingual group or community, we listen to someone speaking in a foreign tongue, it is difficult for us even to identify what particular phonic segments of their diction constitute separable *words*. For us, as opposed to the speaker therefore, ‘a word *is not* a word’. Even if they were ‘calling a spade a spade’ we would not even *hear* them doing so. Instead we experience the *reality* of an unintelligible ‘counter-diction’, one that stands in direct logical ‘contradiction’ to the formula ‘A=A’ and can even be designated through a formula that asserts contradiction: ‘A= -A’.

In addition however, we can go further and argue that ‘a spade’ is a ‘*a spade*’ only by virtue of being ‘*a spade*’ – different in one way or another, however major or minor, from other spades even of the same type or construction. From this point of view when we say ‘a spade is a spade’ the copula ‘is’ does not imply logical or existential identity but is a form of predication or attribution. For what we are saying through the word ‘is’ is that this spade – ‘a spade’ - *has* certain generic or class attributes characteristic of ‘*a spade*’ or of ‘spade-ness’. In doing so however, we ignore precisely those differences to other spades that define *this* spade – that characterise it as *a* spade and not just as a *spade*. The formula ‘A=A’ is thus tantamount to an unconditional *identification* of one member of a set with the set as such – with a generic class or category of things. In this light, the

formula 'A=A' now reads: 'the particular *is* the universal' or 'the specific *is* the generic'. What first appeared as an assertion of identity ('A=A') now reveals itself as an identity or equivalence of two different things that has the general form (A=B). Indeed in essence it reveals itself as an assertion of contradiction, implying as it does '*the different (a spade) 'is' the same* (the same as *all* spades).

2. The formula 'A=B'

If two things (for example two spades) were literally 'identical' - similar in *all* respects - they would not be two things but one. On the other hand if they were absolutely different - different in all respects - there would be no way in which any relationship could exist or be established between them. Here Wittgenstein's use of the term 'family resemblances' says more than he himself understood by it. He coined the term in recognition of the fact that certain generic categories or classes of things (games for example) cannot simply be defined by one or more common feature (for example being played on a board or a field). If we think about family resemblances *as such* however, what is most notable about them is precisely that as similarities they are inseparable from differences. Thus whilst Joe's nose or eyes may be similar to his dad's they not identical in all respects. Nor are they simply similar in certain respects and different in others. Instead any close examination will reveal Joe's features to be *similar* to his dad's precisely *in those respects* that they are *also different*. In no respect are they absolutely identical or absolutely different and *nor* are they merely different in some respects but not in others. The essence of family resemblance then, is neither identity nor difference but similarity-in-difference - what I term 'simference'. The notion of simference - as exemplified by actual family resemblances - transcends logical concepts of absolute identity or difference. It also transcends Wittgenstein's own philosophical notion of these resemblances as mere criss-crossing elements of similarity 'and' difference.

The formula 'A=A' expressed in propositions such as 'a spade is a spade' therefore, is not only a covert disguise for a formula of the type 'A=B' ('this spade is the same as all spades' or 'the different is the same') but, and more essentially, a substitute for an

understanding of the copula ‘is’ as a relation of *simference* – one which does not assert the identity of two different things, but recognises their similarity-in-difference and difference-in-similarity. This understanding was sensed and hinted at but not fully or clearly explicated by Heidegger when he wrote of how the ‘is’ serves to “gather difference into sameness”. For no such ‘gathering’ is required if things are understood as ‘simferent’ - similar or the ‘same’ *precisely in those respects* in which they are *also and at the same time* different. The identification of an entity *as* ‘this’ or ‘that’, and thus as ‘self-same’ or ‘self-identical’ (‘A=A’) and/or identical with other entities (‘A=B’) ignores the dimension of *difference* precisely where it belongs most truly - *in and not apart from* aspects and dimensions of identity or sameness – just as it ignores sameness where it belongs most essentially, in and not apart from dimensions of *difference*. From this point of view, Wittgenstein is wrong in declaring ‘A=A’ to be tautological and ‘A=B’ to be contradictory: for both logical tautology and contradiction are rooted in false notions of absolute identity and difference, ignoring the nature and reality of *simference*.

3. Identity in Indian Thought

If we look at the language of the Vedas, we find evidence of a different understanding of identity, one closer to the notion of *simference*. For as Axel Michaels¹ observes in his exposition of what he calls the ‘Identificatory Habitus’ of Hindu thought, proposition such as ‘Indra is a bull’ or ‘Brahman is Atman’ do not posit any form of *absolute* identity between two entities. Instead they point to a hidden ‘third’ element in a triad or ‘Trika’. Yet far from being a logically excluded ‘middle’ or ‘third’ of the sort ruled out by the logic of ‘either/or’ (*either* Socrates is a man *or* he is not – there is no third way) this third is the very unity or identity of ‘A’ and ‘B’ understood as similarity-in-difference or *simference*. Michaels sees that what unites ‘Indra’ and ‘a bull’ is not a relation of absolute logical identity but an implicit third. This is a similar quality of *strength* expressed by both – albeit, and significantly, in *different* ways. Indra is *not* a bull and nor is a bull, any or all bulls, the same as or identical with Indra. Yet since the proposition that ‘Indra is a bull’ is a *religious* and not a purely logical proposition, it makes no difference to the validity of its essential meaning and message that it ‘logically’

contradicts the opposite assertion, namely that ‘Indra is not a bull’. To think that it does so and therefore lacks propositional truth by virtue of logical contradiction is to insult the intelligence of those who voiced and heard Hindu religious propositions of this sort – implying that they understood them in a simplistically literal, logical or ‘empirical’ way. In contrast, we see how many of the religious propositions central to Christianity - for example that ‘Jesus is the Son of God’ – need, precisely by virtue of being central to its credo or dogma, to at least be presented as if they *were* literal statements of fact, and thus are often taken as such - irrespective of any questions as to how a human biological ‘son’ can, in any other sense than a metaphorical one, be ‘conceived’ of as fathered by trans-human divinity. Returning to the language of the Vedas, the point is that a religious proposition of the form ‘Agni is fire’ is essentially a way of suggesting the common essence of both Agni *and* fire. The meaning is not that Agni is the god ‘of’ fire or a divine ‘father’ or creator of fire. Nor is it implied that Agni is reducible to fire or that fire is a mere symbol of Agni. Instead what is suggested is that the qualities that find expression as fire are precisely those ‘supernatural’ qualities that constitute Agni. The god is the *essence* of the natural phenomenon, just as the natural phenomenon is that which *reveals* the essential nature of the god itself – what it essentially *is*.

4. From the Vedas to Vedanta and Advaita

The philosophy of Vedanta – literally the ‘end of the Vedas’ in the sense of their culmination as expressions of its truth – found its highest expression in the non-dual or ‘Advaita’ Vedanta of Adi Shankara. Here the central affirmation of identity is between the essential self of the human being (*Atman*) and the divine (*Brahman*). Thus the equation takes the form ‘A=B’ or ‘A is B’ - specifically that ‘the Atman is Brahman’. The copula ‘is’ does not imply that God or Brahman is reducible to the Self or Atman (as if the Atman were a *lesser* entity than Brahman). Rather the aim of the religious proposition is to suggest that the Atman and Brahman are not *separable* entities in the first place. Rather their very identity *as* entities is constituted by their mutual *inseparability* or ‘non-duality’ (*a-dvaita*). The message again is that the ‘identity’ of the two entities (in both senses of the term, their distinctness *and* their unity or equivalence)

is determined by their sharing a common essence. The deeper question that remains in the context of Vedanta Advaita is what that common essence itself 'is'. The most profound term used to name it in Hindu thought is *satchitananda*, this being a nominal compound of the word 'being/existence' (*Sat*), pure consciousness/awareness (*Chit*) and bliss (*Ananda*). Yes this term also poses its own questions:

- how is the relation between its three elements to be conceived?
- which of these elements, if any holds a place of relative priority or primordially?
- can such a compound be conceptualised in the form of a religious proposition or propositions, and if so how?

Before addressing these key questions let us return first of all to the Advaita Vedanta of Adi Shankara. For whilst asserting the identity of *Atman* and *Brahman* he also clearly rejects any more limited identification of the 'I' of the form 'I am this' or 'this is mine'. Though it is conventionally understood that Shankara is simply distinguishing a limited 'I' or 'ego' (*Ahamkara*) from the divine 'I' or 'Self' (*Atman*) his position could be formulated as a rejection of the proposition 'I = X', unless 'X' is understood as a divine absolute (*Brahman*) beyond and transcending any finite identity. The formula is a rejection of all limiting identification of the Self as *Atman* with anything finite. Thus it need not be taken as postulating an independently existing but limited or 'egoic' self or 'I' but rather seen as emphasising the way in which, in the proposition 'I am this' the copula 'am' is not a statement of identity but a performative act of identification - one which in and of itself limits the identity of the 'I' that is equated with any finite 'this'. The formula 'I am this' is rejected in other words, precisely because in identifying the 'I' with 'this' it limits and confines the identity of the *Atman* itself, in this way actively reducing it to the status of *Ahamkara* - the limited and limiting identity, self or 'I'. Paradoxically therefore, Shankara presents two seemingly contradictory propositions. For the propositions that 'Atman is Brahman' and 'Brahman is Atman' take the form 'A=B', whereas his rejection of the proposition 'I am this' is an unconditional statement of non-identity of the 'A ≠ B' – unless 'B' itself is taken as identical with the unconditioned or unconditional absolute that is 'Brahman'.

In also rejecting propositions of the form ‘This is mine’, Shankara alerts us to and rejects any interpretation of the copula ‘is’ as a *possessive* form equivalent to ‘has’. Thus there is also no sense in which he accepts any form of predication that would reduce a statement of identity (‘I am this’) to a form of possession implying that this ‘I’ is one that ‘has’ or ‘owns’ some particular and finite identity or attribute that is its private property – that is ‘mine’ or ‘my own’. These considerations are all important in exploring the three above-mentioned questions in relation to the fundamental compound *sat-chit-ananda*. For they raise the question of whether or not the compound can be interpreted, propositionally as (a) a statement of ontological *identity* between its three elements (b) an assertion of equiprimordiality in a sense distinct from logical or ontological identity (c) expressive of some sort of a possessive or genitive relation between its elements and/or (d) expressive of a dialectical relation of ‘being’ (*Sat*) and ‘awareness’ (*Chit*) in which the unifying ‘third’ element is both named and *experienced* as ‘bliss’ (*Ananda*).

5. From Vedanta to Shaiva Advaita

What I call ‘The Awareness Principle’ is an apodictic principle based on the recognition that whilst being and awareness are inseparable - and in *this* sense equiprimordial - since being as such is inconceivable without an a priori *awareness* of being, it follows that the very ‘being’ of awareness itself can be conceived as nothing other than this primordial awareness of being in the form of countless actual or potential beings – all of which are in turn individual portions and expressions of that singular and universal awareness which the *tantras* of Shaiva Advaita understood as the very essence of the divine, and not an awareness which is ‘yours’ or ‘mine’. Similarly, whilst awareness as such or ‘pure awareness’ (*Chit*) is inseparable from any thing or being we are aware of, it is also absolutely *distinct* from the latter – in the same way that the emptiness of space is distinct from any body within it (despite being inseparable from the latter). Understanding *Chit* as pure awareness or awareness *as such* - rather than its actual or potential contents - is what distinguishes it from ‘consciousness’ understood simply as awareness *of* such contents (*Chitti*).

The Awareness Principle is also an understanding of *Advaita* or ‘non-duality’ as a relation of *inseparable distinction* – one that cannot be reduced either to a state of undifferentiated unity lacking all internal *distinction*, nor contrast to a state of non-relational *separation* between distinct entities. The ‘non-duality’ of being and awareness implied by the compound *sat-chit* can therefore be understood as a relation of non-duality in the specific sense of *inseparable distinction* – in contrast to either logical identity or non-identity. With these precepts of The Awareness Principle in mind, Awareness (*Chit*) can in no way be considered as either secondary to Being, or as a mere genitive property ‘of’ or ‘belonging’ to Being (*Sat*). As for ‘bliss’ (*Ananda*) this can be taken as identical with a pure *awareness* of being that in turn constitutes the very essence of the *self*.

This recognition takes us from the Advaitic Vedanta of Shankara to the ‘Shaiva Advaita’ of Abhinavagupata, rooted in the *Shiva Sutras*. These begin with another compound term – ‘Chaitanyatman’. In the light of The Awareness Principle, I take this compound as implying the identity of the Self with a pure *awareness* of being, and thus essentially with awareness as such (*chit*).

“*The being of all things recognised in awareness in turn depends on awareness.*”

This key statement by Abhinavagupta is one I see as articulating a decisive turn – away from a Vedantic ‘onto-theology’ of Being (*Brahman*) and towards a radical ‘epistemology’ of Awareness (*Shiva*). The soteriology of tantric theology in the form of ‘Kashmir Shaivism’ or ‘Shaiva Advaita’ is toward recognition of a supreme identity of the individual self or *jiva* with *Shiva* – that is to say, with the light of a pure and singular awareness inseparable and yet distinct from all its embodied forms and reflections in consciousness (*chitti*). That recognition of relational identity (understood as a relation not of merger but of non-duality or *a-dvaita* in the specific sense of ‘inseparable distinction’) can be used to shed new light on the central compound *satchitananda* – that which underlies the common essence of Atman and Brahman. For now we can take being (*Sat*) not simply as a noun but as a verbal noun or *gerund*. Being is thus understood not as a generic term for any set of beings, entities or identities, nor even as their ‘being-ness’ or

‘is-ness’ but as activity – an activity of identification. Thus the compound that names the common essence of Atman and Brahman – *satchitananda* – now reads: “*being* [identifying with] pure *awareness* is *bliss*” or “to *be* [identified with] pure *awareness* is *bliss*.” The only grammatico-logical copula that then remains is the ‘is’ preceding ‘bliss’. Yet reading *sat-chit* as *being awareness* also allows us to recognise identity with pure awareness *as* the very ‘is-ness’ of ‘bliss’ itself. I see this interpretation of Hindu *religious propositions* as bringing to a head the ever-more explicit primacy of epistemo-theology - ‘The Awareness Principle’ - in the history of Hindu religious understandings and experiences of the Godhead itself. This culminates in the recognition that it is not any Self or ‘I’ but the Godhead itself (understood as awareness or consciousness *as such*) that individualises itself in the form of individual beings or identities - and in this sense both identifies with and is identical with them. Yet just as “Being is not a being” (Heidegger) neither is this ‘Consciousness’ reducible to ‘*a* consciousness’ - let alone a consciousness ‘of’ or belonging to any body or being, entity or identity human or divine.

For Abhinavagupta, the use of logical reasoning in the formulation of higher-level religious thoughts and propositions had a primarily ethical function – that of “inference for the sake of others”. I understand the deeper logic *of* this function as that of passing from propositions of the sort that presume to represent the logical relation or experiences of pre-given identities (things or beings) to propositions which reflected, recognised and communicated dialectically or *dia-logos* – ‘through the word’ - the *pure awareness* of being and experiencing. For it was this awareness that was recognised in the Shaiva Tantra and Shaiva Advaita as constituting the common essence of both the Self and the Divine - an awareness both immanent in and pervading all things and all beings, and yet at the same time transcending, logically and theologically, identity and identities as such - not least that of God and of the Self. For neither God nor Self are essentially entities or identities ‘with’ or in possession of awareness or ‘consciousness’ but *are* awareness – for it is Awareness alone and as such that both constitutes their essential Being and is the *dev-ine* or ‘shining’ source of all manifest things and beings, including the gods. Hence the key religious proposition of Kshemaraja: “*Every appearance owes its existence to the light of awareness. Nothing can have its own being without the light of awareness.*”

1. Michaels, Axel *Hinduism, Past and Present* Orient Longman 2006