

MEANING AND MYSTERY OF REALITY

My Search for Wisdom 'In' and 'Beyond' Reason

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1. Introduction

Śvetaketu was young and energetic. He had just returned home after his training in the *Vedas*. Proud and puffed up, he developed a tendency to look down upon others and considered himself as educated with better reasoning, not subject to superstitions and idiosyncrasies. His father, Uddhalaka Āruṇi, a venerable master, very much admired by the seekers of sacred wisdom, noticed this unhealthy orientation in his son, called him to give him a lesson. He asked: "Do you know that 'by which the unheard becomes heard, unperceivable becomes perceived, the unknowable becomes known?'" (Chāṇḍ. Up. VI.1.3). Śvetaketu was totally surprised because he had no idea about it. Then, his father told him: "Just as, my dear, by one clod of clay all that is made of clay becomes known, the modification being only a name arising from speech, while the truth is that it is just clay" (Chāṇḍ. Up. VI.1.4). What Uddhalaka Āruṇi was in mind was that whatever Śvetaketu thinks to know is only the name and form of the One from whom everything has come. It was meant to be an eye opener to the student that the real wisdom begins only when we reach "That One" from whom everything proceeds, in whom everything rests, towards whom everything moves. The amazing student responded: "Verily, those venerable men did not know this; for if they had known it, why would they not have told it to me? Venerable sir, please tell me that." "So be it, my dear," said Uddhalaka Aruni.

Thus begins Uddhalaka his instruction about Reality to his son, which ends up saying: "That which is the subtle essence, this whole world has for its self. That is true. That is the Self. That are thou" (Chāṇḍ. Up.VI.13.3). The ultimate Reality is not what we see with our physical

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eyes, not even by our mental eye. It is still far beyond. It is to be touched and experienced. What the physical and mental eyes do is help us provide a 'logia' about that one Theos. Thus, we have what we call *theo-logia* or theology. But the Reality as such eludes our understanding. Reason does seek and search for reality. At its best, it is *śāstra* or science, even science about God. Reason, therefore, demands us to be scientific, methodic, rigorous, logical and argumentative. This is good, as it helps us ward off superstition, presumption, hallucinations and unholy assertion in the name of reality. Yet, reason has its own limitation in encountering God directly.

2. Human Reason and Search for the Meaning of Reality

When Aristotle divided sciences he divided them as theoretical, practical, and poetical. Then, he divided the theoretical again as mathematical, physical, and theological. The theological he called meta-physical, that is, beyond physics. His method was logical and methodological, in which reason had a predominant role. On all what we see here in this world we can have science. He called it physics. But the human mind can abstract from the concrete reality of things, and can think in terms of numbers and extension. This he named mathematics. Then what about the Reality of God or religion? This, he thought, is beyond the realm of physics and named it metaphysics and identified it with theology. But the human mind can search the meaning of beings, without so quickly and directly ending up in God. Thus, in course of time, the Aristotelian identification of metaphysics and theology was given up by the rational mind of the secular world.

Reason is a faculty of truth, not of falsehood and confusion, and as such should be accepted and admired. Reason goes ahead of itself in search of truth. But human reason has nothing in itself except what the senses bring to it. Reason does not touch reality directly. Senses do help reason. Hence, to the question what is truth, reason cannot give us a direct answer immediately. The Sanskrit word for truth is *satya*, a word derived from the noun *sat*, which literally means 'being'. Truth is the claim of being over us. A being, whatever it be, if it exists, it has a claim over me. I cannot deny its existence. I cannot bring it to non-existence. Even if I apparently destroy it, it would continue to exist in some other form. If I want to live peacefully I have to reconcile myself with it in some way. That is, I have to accept the reality of this being. This claim emanating from any being (*sat*) we call truth (*satya*). Truth is, therefore, reality that

illuminates reason. But reason has its own limitations. First of all, reason cannot come in touch with reality except through senses. As Thomas Aquinas says, reason has nothing in itself, except what is given to it by senses. Hence, the quest for truth, which, in other words, is the quest for meaning of things, is heavily dependent on the senses. Senses are blind carriers of data for the mind's reasoning. But mind, with the power of reason, can process the data and create what we call 'ideas' of reality based on the sense data brought to it. In this respect mind is like a computer, a great and fast word-processor that quickly categorizes different things with the help of ideas it has formed. Mind can also create new files for each of the newly discovered categories and keep them in the 'mental space' of memory allocated for that. All this is wonderful. Thus, human beings, once endowed with reason, came out as 'rational', a different kind of animal who can make judgment. In making judgments over beings reason rose up far above senses which can hardly separate itself from the concrete sense objects.

But making judgments was both a blessing and a curse of reason. Judgment was classically defined as "conformation of one's mind to the thing." Well said! But, in course of time, the judgments stored in the mind build up a 'pattern of thinking', which controls our thinking dynamics. We become victims of these patterns. Each tradition or people may develop its own pattern of thinking, all of which are important factors to be understood and admired, when we come to the problem of inculturation and indigenous ways of philosophizing and theologizing. Patterns are structures of limitations. The revelation of reality can at certain moments exceed the framework of our mental patterns and our minds should be open to that. Reason may refuse this because of the ready made patterns kept in the mind.

3. Search for Mystery in Reality

Reality can come down to us as meaning and mystery. Reality has several dimensions of mysteries which reason cannot penetrate. Therefore, the *Upaniṣads* rightly assert that what we can rightly say about the ultimate Reality is "not this, not this." "By what should one know him by whom all this is known? This Self is to be described as 'not this, not this' (*neti, neti*)" (Br. Up. IV.5.15). To say anything more than this, would lead us into some sort of distortion, because this Reality, which is being as such, which is self-illumination, which by its very nature refuses all articulation

or objectification, transcends all our attempts of 'grasping' it or bringing it under the purview or orbit of our so-called 'understanding'. Rather it transcends, leaves us in wonder and in an amazing gaze, not so much understanding it, but bending our head reverently to 'stand under' its all powerful and commanding spell. Yes, the really Real, as Śāṅkara calls it, *satyasya satyam*, is never the object of our mind, but always subject by nature, and dwells in us deeper than the level of reason, as subject, as consciousness and not as object of our idea which is a product of our mind. If this is true or makes some sense to us, then the most pertinent question about knowing the Reality is this. "He is incomprehensible, for he cannot be comprehended. He is indestructible, for he cannot be destroyed. He is unattached, for he does not attach himself. He is unfettered, for he does not suffer, he is not injured. Indeed, by what would one know the knower" (Br. Up. IV.5.15b).

How can we know the Reality who is by nature consciousness and, therefore, also subject by nature, without making him the object of our mind, or without getting satisfied with a caricature of this ineffable Reality produced in the mind, which we very proudly call 'my idea'. Unfortunately this idea is, however, not the Reality as such. Hence, to know the knower, we have to give up our desire to know by the mind which does not know anything without objectifying. In other words, we have to know the knower as knower as such. The only way for this is that we participate in him as subject with him. The human soul is also subject by nature. God and soul, both of them are endowed with consciousness which make them subjects and persons. The subject which is soul can participate in the absolute subject which is God, abiding in the soul as divine consciousness. Consciousness meets consciousness. They meet and merge, both participating in the consciousness of the other, both remaining as subjects. In other words, they both become one, transcending the dichotomy of object-subject opposition which is a stigma of our mental understanding. In the subjective level, both the absolute and the finite, God and soul, make their journey together, not to find out the meaning of Reality, but to relish the mysteries of Reality, being unveiled to the soul which participates more and more in the actions of the divine Self within it.

The modern world has lost the sense of mystery. Hence, this secularized world misses the mysterious dimensions of the Reality as well. The ancient mind was much more mystery-bound. It was easy for

Aristotle to identify metaphysics and theology. Faith in religion and in the absolute was natural, taken for granted. All were born and brought up in a culture where religion and mystery cults were very central to human life. Thus, in the cool shade of religions the ancient cultures grew up and spread. Cultures produced their own philosophies which were, of course, reason centred, but reason was ready to submit itself to that which is beyond reason.

Therefore, Uddhalaka instructed his son saying, "In the beginning, my dear, this was being alone, one only without a second" (Chand. Up. VI.2.1). The absolute was well recognized, accepted more by faith rather than by philosophical arguments for the existence of that absolute. Hence, *Brahmasūtra* begins saying, "Now, therefore, the enquiry into Brahman from whom the origin of all these things: *atātho brahma jijñāsa janmadyāsya yataḥ*" (*Brahmasūtra*, 1-2). That primeval Being is not proved to be there, but is presented as already existing, both in the world and in the depth of one's own consciousness. If that is accepted, the world is understandable as originating from it. This approach is different from the strictly Aristotelian or Scholastic approach of our journey from effect to cause. Later, the Indian philosopher Udayana, belonging to *Nyāya* school, presented arguments for such an approach which were very similar to what was proposed by St. Thomas Aquinas, though both of them were uninfluenced by the other.

After the era of scientism and domination of rational verification, contemporary philosophers began to show a renewed tendency towards the mystery of Being. Among them Martin Heidegger is a prominent one. Here comes a secular philosopher as a shepherd of the folk of being. He speaks to them and his sheep listen to his philosophical whisperings and respond to his voice. The philosopher, in return, elevates what the sheep offer to the level of logos and language, born from the creativity of the human thinking.¹ This conversation between the sheep and the shepherd, beings and philosopher, goes on and on. The being discloses itself more and more, and the philosopher is struck with wonder, contemplating the 'ever more', time and again being unveiled by the beings he encounters. His lovely sheep are so faithful, extremely dependent on him, and he, the philosopher loves them, builds tender tents for them. This is what thinking

¹Heidegger, *Brief ueber den Humanismus (Letter on Humanism)*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1951, 19.

does.² Here thinking has a contemplative dimension. Indeed, a philosopher can very well be a contemplative.

But unfortunately the being of these beings brings Heidegger, the philosopher before us, to the earth again and again and leaves him always on the earth, always wondering, always admiring the Being in time. For Heidegger, time is the golden thread to which the inquiry into being is tied. Therefore, for him, there is nothing beyond time. But the mysteries of beings, as they reveal themselves to us in time, can also raise us beyond time. When Jesus said, "I am the shepherd and you are the sheep" (Jn. 10: 5), he draws our attention to an earthly reality of sheep and shepherd. But he uses this as a symbol to draw our attention beyond what is in front of our eyes to the relationship between God and his people. From the frame work of time the soul is invited to go beyond time. The same could be said about other references of Jesus to the lilies in the field or the birds in the air (Mt. 6:26-28). Jesus the Shepherd not only builds tent for his sheep but also lays down his life for their deliverance. The entire dynamics of thinking is to relate time and eternity. "Your heavenly father knows that you need them all" (Mt. 6:32).

But there are other philosophers who think that the boundary of time should be overcome. Why not? Śāṅkara is a very good example for this. Heidegger and Śāṅkara both went in search of Being. Heidegger stopped with the Being in time. Śāṅkara went beyond time, beyond finitude, beyond names and forms and that which is finally declared to be the Reality is the incomprehensible, the immortal, the Atman (the Self) within us. Both of them even agree in expounding the dynamics of revelation of being. Being always reveals and conceals. Śāṅkara calls this *āvaraṇa-vikṣepa*, that is, the infinite being projects itself (*vikṣepa*) for our understanding, but because what is projected is no more the absolute as such, the very projection becomes its own veil (*āvaraṇa*). Hence, the human being has always to go beyond what is seen in time. Heidegger also speaks about the same dynamics of revealing and concealing, but refuses to go beyond the horizon of time. Though there is a faint vision of being revealing in mystery, the search never transcends the ambit of time. This may be because reason, left to itself, cannot rise beyond the horizon of time. It is faith that takes one beyond the limitations of time into the

²Heidegger, *Brief ueber den Humanismus*, 5.

world of eternity where one meets divine consciousness through the eye of faith.

4. Search for Wisdom through Faith

Wisdom is seen not only in erudite search for meaning, but also in the intuitive reading of mysteries that are being revealed. Mind may go after the meaning; but it is faith that continues the search into the untold dimensions of reality. Faith is a different way of knowing. It is neither the work nor the product of the mind. Faith is a response emerging from the depth of the human seeker of wisdom, whose soul, being touched by the self-revealing light of God, now turns to the source of this light, abandons reason at least for the time being, allows itself to be carried away by the super luminosity of this divine light. Faith is, thus, knowing by God's light, opting for what is known, by God's power, and surrendering oneself to it by God's grace. This light touches the soul gently, awakens it lovingly, invites it personally and beatifies it pleasantly. All these happen in the depth of the human soul. This does not mean a life of faith in search of divine wisdom is all rosy and glamorous to the standard of the world. Not at all! It can be a life of bitter purification through trials and tribulations, with continued demand on sacrifices. But in the heart of heart the soul is happy because it sees what has never been seen before, hears what is never heard and is blessed with a new wisdom. St. Paul presents this wisdom to those who are spiritually mature:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, 'what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of men conceived, what God has prepared for those love him' (1Cor. 2:6-9).

This wisdom is not the work of human mind. This is a free gift, given only to those who are well disposed, spiritually mature, selfless and purified. It is God's spirit who is the source of this wisdom and it is the same Spirit who leads the soul through the same wisdom. St. Paul continues: "The Spirit searches everything, even the hidden depths of God's purposes" (1Cor. 2:10). How can the human mind, left to itself, search the hidden purposes of God? Only God's Spirit can guide us into

the depth of the divine mysteries. This is the studentship of sacred wisdom. The *Chāṇḍokya Upaniṣad* has its own lovely version about this kind of studentship:

Now, what people call sacrifice is really the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge. Only by the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge does he who knows obtain that world. Now what people call 'what has been sacrificed' is really the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge, for only by sacrificing with the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge does one obtain the Self (Chāṇḍ. Up. VIII.5.1).

Search for wisdom is a search with discipline and austerity, neither in worldly comforts nor in the rational debates. In the spiritually mature people, here reason gives way to faith. Thomas Aquinas speaks of two kinds of wisdom, one emerging from reason and the other coming from the Holy Spirit.

The wisdom named among the gifts of the Holy Spirit is distinct from the wisdom found among the intellectual virtues. This second is acquired through study, but the first 'comes from on high'.³

The late Pope John Paul II quotes this text in his encyclical *Faith and Reason (Fides et Ratio)* and says:

Yet the priority accorded to this wisdom does not lead the angelic doctor to overlook the presence of two other complementary forms of wisdom – philosophical wisdom, which is based upon the capacity of the intellect, for all its natural limitations, to explore reality, and the theological wisdom, which is based upon Revelation and which explores the content of faith, entering the very mystery of God (*Faith and Reason*, 44).

However, one wonders how much our present form of Christian theological training helps one to grow in divine faith rather than growing in the study of the same. Real faith is not in the rational level of investigation, but in the unconditional surrender to the Word of God. Here the level of understanding or consciousness is superior to reason, by which we participate in the consciousness of God.

What has been said so far makes it very clear that there are two kinds of understanding, by reason and by faith. This is because what the soul seeks in the divine wisdom is totally different from that which is sought by

³Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1,6; II-II, 45, 1, ad 2.

the mind. *Kena Upanishad* says: "That which is not thought by the mind but by which, they say, the mind is thought; that, verily, know thou, is Brahman and not what (people) hear adore" (*Kena Up.* I.6.). People may adore here the visible mediums through which the supreme is communicated. The question is not about that; instead, what really the Absolute is? The text continues:

If you think that you have understood Brahman well, you know it but slightly, whether it refers to you (the individual self) or to the gods. So then is it to be investigated by you (the pupil who thinks) that Brahman is now understood by me (*Kena Up.* II.1).

The student of wisdom may think that Brahman is now understood by him. This is not a good sign of a searching student, because the not-yet-known always exceeds what is already known. The soul, while on earth, always remains in a deep thirst for the not-yet-revealed, though it does not die because of this desire. As a *bhakta*, he may humbly sing with St. John of the Cross:

Reveal your presence

And the vision of your beauty be my death.⁴

These lines are understandable only through faith. It is the unwavering faith, which is never an idea in the abstract, but a personal encounter with the self-revealing God that prompts the soul to sing its longing for and joy in union with him. The soul surrenders in faith. Reason is neither abandoned, nor opposed; but is pleasantly integrated into faith and is always at the disposal of faith, the new wisdom the soul has received from God.

Gabriel Marcel, the renowned French philosopher, makes three oppositions between the authentic and the inauthentic person. The authentic person is of Being-attitude, who rejoices in the presence of the other being. The inauthentic person, on the contrary, is a person of Having-attitude, who rejoices only in the possession of that being. The person of being is prone to mystery and finds his delight in the revelation of the same, because he understands Reality is much more than what he can ever comprehend. But the inauthentic person tends to reject mystery from his life and looks at everything what he fails to understand as 'problem', something to be got rid of immediately. His life is a life of

⁴John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 11, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Trivandrum: Carmel Publishing Centre, 1996, 411.

problem-solving and he thinks that reason has an answer for everything. Unfortunately, this is not true. Reason does not have answer for everything, simply because Reality transcends reason.

The authentic person who loves mystery now has recourse to faith, when the inauthentic one turns back to his own views and opinions and tries to impose them on all others. Here inauthentic person uses reason to assert himself over others, whereas the authentic person gently waits for the revelation of Being that the mystery be revealed and Reality be embraced by all of us together. Faith in Reality is also faith in one another, faith in religion and faith in God.

5. Wisdom is Given to the Little Ones

I remember a Malayalam proverb the meaning of which runs as follows: "Water flows only to the lower ground." I got this from my home when I was a young boy. When my mother finds any of her children proud and boasting, she used to tell: "My child, water flows only to the lower ground." This is a deep insight and a beautiful lesson from nature. The same is literally true with regard to the Holy Spirit whose symbol is water. Just like water flows down to the lower ground, so does the Spirit stoop down to the meek and the humble of heart. So, Mary our Mother rejoiced in the Lord and sang: "He has remembered me his lowly servant" (Lk. 1:48). The Holy Spirit condescended on her and the Word, the supreme Wisdom of God, became flesh in her. No higher or greater human form of divine Wisdom is ever imaginable. Jesus is the Wisdom Incarnate. As a human child of his mother and a divine child of his own Father in heaven, one day he raised his heart to heaven and said: "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will" (Mt. 11:25-26). It is clear that higher wisdom is not a matter of academic erudition, but a matter of divine revelation to the little ones, to the lowly and the simple. They are open and nothing impedes the flow of divine water. They are humble and, therefore, there is no blockade made by ego-consciousness. They are well disposed, because they have already surrendered their hearts and souls to the Lord of all hearts. Hence, Wisdom naturally flows to them.

Little Flower, St. Therese of Lisieux, is a brilliant example of this, a young woman of twenty-four who has written no academic works, but had authored only her wonderful autobiography, *Story of a Soul*. This

autobiography is literally the story of a soul, in the sense that what is written is what really happened in a simple soul who loved God, her beloved Jesus, unconditionally. There are profound spiritual insights presenting un-arbitrarily, as if spontaneously flowing from the real context of life, which are very powerfully impressive as well as instructive. The theology here is an unsophisticated theology of lived faith. Yes, Therese teaches us that the age-old Indian dictum is true: "Knowledge is becoming." Her autobiography is the theological text for us. This young woman is declared the Doctor of the Church and is greatly honoured all over the world by the Catholic Church. Quoting the words of Jesus already cited above, she wrote in her autobiography: "Ah! Had the learned who spent their life in study come to me, undoubtedly they would have been astonished to see a child of fourteen understand perfection's secret, secrets all their knowledge cannot reveal because to possess them one has to be poor in spirit!"⁵ She also gives us the reason for this: "Because I was little and weak, He lowered himself to me, and he instructed me secretly in the *things* of His love." To the lower ground water flows! To the little ones wisdom is freely given.

6. Conclusion

My search for wisdom is an incessant journey. Of course, I love reason. Reason as a faculty of truth is wonderful. Reason should, however, give way to faith. Faith, once awakened, is an everlasting source of eternal light which can lead us across all frontiers of life to the hidden mysteries of God, the Divine Reality we encounter. We will find ourselves and the Divine Reality on the verge of blissful comprehension, serene and peace-emanaing, than in the midst of a loud debate which leaves the mind tired and sometimes even fettered by one's own ideas.

The ultimate Reality, which is God transcends all and may stoop down to us to reveal Himself. Are we ready to accept Him, even if it questions the pattern of our thinking and accustomed ways of life? Or, do we oppose the new revelation of being/truth to us? To say 'yes' to this revealing light of Reality or God, we need another type of intelligence in us, which is not a product of reason but a gift we receive from the self-revealing God. We call this faith. Faith has a different source, namely the one who is the source of everything, whose light enlightens us and abides

⁵St. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, Philippines: New Manila, 2005, 105.

in us as the eye of God. People sometimes call it the 'third eye' or the 'luminous eye'. When this eye is open we see everything differently. We begin not to understand God, but to participate in His consciousness. Thus, faith is the way to touch God, to experience God as he is in Himself who, as pure consciousness, can never become the object of our mind, but can be the innermost subject of our being. Bliss is his nature, peace is his gift. But one has to become free and unencumbered to relish him, moving through the unfathomable mysteries of God, rather than ideas about Him.