

RAMANUJA'S CONCEPT OF THE INDIVIDUAL SOUL AND HUMAN FREEDOM

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THE INDIVIDUAL SOUL

Ramanuja declares that the individual soul is a representation of the power of the *Brahman* (*vibhūti*). He does this on the basis of several scriptural texts. Just as the souls and matter form a part (*aṁṣa*), body (*tanu*), or form (*rūpa*) of the *Brahman*, in the same way they also constitute his *vibhūti*. These souls exist in their own essential nature, and also through their association with matter, as inhabitants of bodies (*kṣetrajña*). The essential nature of these individual souls is knowledge, but this nature is clouded by nescience in the form of good and evil actions, and consequently the souls do not recognize their true nature, but consider themselves simply as material entities. We know that it is nescience that differentiates the individual souls into the souls of gods, men, and other creatures from the *Brahman*, because such distinctions are not due to the essential nature of the souls themselves. The world we see around us has been created by *Brahman* as an object of fruition for the individual souls, in coordination with their good and evil deserts. *Brahman* is the Self of these souls, who being attributes or modes of *Brahman* are also infinite like him, but this qualification of infinity excludes all those souls whose essential nature and attributes are limited, and who are distinct from the Released souls and the souls in *Samsāra*. The souls are not identical with each other since they inhabit different bodies, and the term individual soul or *Jīva*, can also denote *Brahman*, in as much as he is the Self of these intelligent entities which constitute his body. When a person is in the state of deep sleep, the soul is then free from all name and form and it is invested by intelligence alone. All those words which denote the intelligent souls can also designate the *Brahman*, because he has these intelligent souls for his body, he alone constituting the Self.¹⁾

The souls which are in the state of *Samsāra* and which are bound by matter, enter into different states of existence (just like non-intelligent matter) and hence they do not enjoy unconditioned existence. A man who is aware of all the infinite number of exalted qualities which belong to the *Brahman*, is also aware of the fact that not a shadow of these qualities can possibly belong to the individual soul. This individual soul is as contemptible a being as a glow worm, and because of its connection with matter it is liable to attacks of

unending sorrow. Everything that is different from *Brahman*, right up from ether down to the self of food, constitutes his body, and indeed, the Self of the self of food too is nothing else but the *Brahman* himself. Words such as "I", "You", and so on which are different ways of referring to the individual soul, all denote the *Brahman* alone, and a man of wisdom who is able to perceive the intelligent self, and whose mind is purified by devotion, sees this entire universe with its multitude of bodies as the body of the *Brahman*.²⁾

This Supreme *Brahman* is the goal to be reached and the individual soul is the one who strives after that goal. A person who attempts to attain the *Brahman* by means of devout meditation is certain of attaining this goal, for the individual soul finds its fulfillment only in the *Brahman*. The true nature of the individual soul is endowed with qualities such as freedom from evil and so on. In the state of *Samsāra* this true nature is hidden, but when the soul has freed itself from the shackles of *Karman*, renounced the body and approached the *Brahman*, then it reveals itself in its true form with all the accompanying auspicious qualities. However, even when it has transcended *Karman* the soul cannot be said to become *Brahman* himself, for it only imitates or attains equality with *Brahman*. This is because certain qualities of the *Brahman* are such, that they cannot possibly belong to the individual soul even when its true nature has revealed itself. Such qualities are for example, being the bank and sustainer of all the worlds, and the director of all sentient and non-sentient entities ("setuvat sarvaloka vidharaṇatva; cetanacetanayorniyantṛtvam").³⁾

Ramanuja has described the individual soul as having a size equal to the point of a goad ("ārāgamatratva"), and also of being atomic in size (*aṇu*). This individual soul is an agent (*kartā*), but the fact that it experiences pleasures and pains arising from the diverse conditions of the body is not due to the fact that it has a body, but due to its *Karman* in the form of good and evil actions. This *Karman* is also responsible for the variegated creation that we see around us. When *Brahman* changes from the state of a cause to the state of an effect, non-sentient realities which were formerly devoid of name and form, now become possessed of name and form, owing to the change of nature that they undergo, and thus become suitable objects of fruition for sentient beings. The individual souls too undergo a change, but this change is merely an expansion of intelligence or consciousness, which enables them to experience the different rewards or punishments, for deeds they have done in the past ("cidamśasya ca karma phala viśeṣa bhokṛtvāya tad anurūpajñānavikāsarūpa vikāro bhavati"). Before creation the individual souls existed in a highly subtle condition devoid of name and form, and in that state it was impossible to designate them as something separate from *Brahman*, though even in that highly subtle state they were nothing other than *Brahman's* body.⁴⁾

On the basis of the fact that intelligence is the essential nature of all souls ("*Jñānasvarūpa*"), we may say that they are all similar, and the consciousness of the self that exists within the heart is spread over the entire body. Consciousness, intelligence, or knowledge, is referred to by the terms *anubhūti*, *jñāna*, *avagati*, and *samvid*. It is an attribute of the knowing self and it is related to an object. The basic character of this consciousness or knowledge is the fact, that by its very existence it makes things capable of becoming objects to its own substrate of thinking and speech. This consciousness is known to everyone on the testimony of his own self, and we realize this from ordinary judgments such as "I know the jar". This "I" which is the knowing subject is not simply consciousness, but is the inner *Ātman*. It is basically intelligent (*cidrūpa*), it has intelligence for its quality (*caitanya*), and it is self-enlightening (*svyam prakāśa*). This self-enlightening entity is a knower, that is to say, it is not just non-personal abstract intelligence but a knowing subject. Indeed, there is no contradiction in saying that an entity whose primary nature is knowledge is also the substrate of the quality of knowledge.⁵⁾

The individual self is basically an immutable entity. Even during the state of sleep it was a subject of knowledge and it was conscious of pleasure and sorrow, but in the state of deep sleep and in similar states the self which reveals itself does so as the "I". The "I" so revealed is not to be understood as a mere attribute of the self, because it constitutes the very nature of the self, and it continues even in the state of Final Release. This consciousness of the "I" when it is not sublated by anything else has the *Ātman* for its object, but the consciousness of the "I" that has the body for its object is mere *Avidyā*.⁶⁾

Referring to a passage from the *Upaniṣads*, "You may not see the seer of seeing; you may not think the thinker of thinking" (*Brh. Up. III, v, 2*), Ramanuja concludes that this passage refers to the person who has acquired the mistaken idea that the quality of consciousness or knowledge is not the essential nature of the knowing subject, but belongs to it merely as an accidental attribute, and he declares that the teaching of the passage is that one should consider the activity of *seeing* and *thinking* to be the essential nature of the seeing and thinking subject. The text may also mean that one should not meditate on the embodied self which is the subject of seeing and thinking, but one should meditate on the Supreme *Brahman*, who forms the inner Self of all beings.⁷⁾

The individual soul is not liable to increase and decrease, it is exceedingly subtle on account of its possessing a pervasive nature, it is incapable of destruction, and it is not the object but the subject of knowledge or consciousness. While in the *Śrī-Bhāṣya* Ramanuja affirms that the self is sometimes designated as knowledge on account of its possessing the essential quality of knowledge, in his *Vedārthasaṅgraha* he notes that the self is

characterized by knowledge and bliss ("*Jñānānandāikaguṇam*").⁸⁾

The difference we notice in the outward appearances of entities such as divine, human, and so on, does not mean that there is also a corresponding difference in their souls. The manner in which the bodies are related to the self, is more or less the same way in which class characteristics and qualities are related to the substances in which they inhere. The self alone is their substrate and their final cause (*prayojana*) and they are all attributes of the self.⁹⁾

As stated earlier, the individual soul is a representation of the power of the *Brahman* and it is slated for immortality. However, though the knowledge of the true nature of the individual soul is helpful towards attaining the knowledge of the *Brahman* who confers Release, it does not mean that this knowledge of the true nature of this individual soul is *by itself* instrumental in attaining the knowledge of the *Brahman*. In *Kathā Upaniṣad III,i*, we come across the word *ṛta*. This refers to actions intended to honour the *Brahman* and thereby enable the worshiper to attain him, while the word *anṛta* refers to actions that are intended to obtain worldly results, and which consequently prevent the soul from reaching the *Brahman*. When *Avidyā* is destroyed, the souls attain their natural state which is characterized by the intuition of the *Brahman*, and this is the state of Release. An individual who practices *Yoga* is capable of directly intuiting the *Brahman*.¹⁰⁾

Karman is responsible for clouding the essentially intelligising nature of the individual soul. An individual who devotes himself to obtaining worldly results in his works will have to return over and over again into *Samsāra*, while works performed by a man of true knowledge who is oblivious to worldly results, will serve to attain the *Brahman*. A man who has transcended *Samsāra* has transcended good and evil works. He is free from passion and from name and form. The deeds of these individual souls are said to be responsible for the world we see around us, still the souls do not by themselves originate the means of their own retribution, but experience only what *Brahman* has created for them with that purpose in view, in correspondence with their just and unjust actions.¹¹⁾

We know from scripture that the souls are without beginning. Whether in the state of bondage or the state of Release, these souls are owned, directed, and governed by the *Brahman*, who is the object of an absolute and unending love of the individual soul. Although the *Brahman* while abiding within the soul as its Inner Director and True Self confers on it the power of knowledge, still the soul is by itself incapable of comprehending him fully. The essence of the soul is its subservience to another entity. When the soul is absolutely and completely subservient to *Brahman*, this subservience itself is absolute and incomparable happiness, for when it is realized that the souls stand in a relation of subservience to *Brahman*, then *Brahman* himself draws the soul to

himself. When an individual performs the required actions such as honoring the *Brahman* (actions which presuppose true knowledge of him), then through the grace of *Brahman* he attains security (*abhaya*) in accordance with his merit, and happiness which consists in the attainment of the *Brahman*. But an individual who refuses to perform the required actions such as honoring the *Brahman* and other similar acts of subservience (which presuppose true knowledge of him), but who instead performs forbidden actions, will acquire tremendous suffering and insecurity, and he will fail in his attainment of the *Brahman*.¹²⁾

Owing to its connection with *Prakṛti* the individual soul encounters pleasure, pain, and other similar experiences, which are the effects of the *Guṇas*, although its experience of itself by itself consists purely of happiness. Where the body is concerned, the self is regarded as the "great lord", because it rules over it and supports it and has the body totally under its control. This refers not only to the body, but also to the senses and the mind. By devoting its attention to the *Brahman*, the self begins to sever its attachment to the *Guṇas*, and it eventually realizes its true nature. The individual self which is immortal and immutable finds its sole support in the *Brahman*, when it serves him with a devotion that is firm and single-minded.¹³⁾

It is observed here that just as the universe is directly under the control of the *Brahman*, the human body too is directly under the control of the self. As pointed out earlier, Ramanuja defines a body as any entity which a conscious entity completely controls and supports for its own purposes, and which stands to that entity in an entirely subordinate relationship. Such a definition could serve for all reality when looked upon as the body of the *Brahman*, but it could hardly serve to define the human body, because as we well know there do exist certain aspects of this body that are beyond the control of the self. The human soul and the body do not constitute a single unity, because the same soul can inhabit several bodies in the process of *Samsāra*. The relationship between these two entities can be likened to a man wearing a suit. The man's relationship to the suit he wears is similar to the soul's relationship to the body it inhabits. We notice also that Ramanuja takes great care to preserve the purity of the *Brahman* by attributing all the evil and imperfection in this world to the actions of the *Jīva*, but at times he has not been too clear as to who is the real agent of actions, the individual self, or the *Brahman* who constitutes the Inner Self of all beings. Sen gupta points out four characteristics that are commonly shared by the *Jīva* and *Brahman*. These are *pratyakṭva* or inwardliness, *cetanatva* (consciousness), *ātmatva* (spirituality), and *karṭṛtva* (agency), while the characteristics peculiar to the *Jīva* alone are *aṇutva*, *śeṣatva* (as accessory), *adheyatva* (supportedness), and *vidheyatva* (dependence), besides certain others.¹⁴⁾ Ramanuja uses several terms such as *Jīva*, *Cetana*, *Ātman*, *Puruṣa*, and so on in his works, but as

already stated, he has at times not been too precise as to whether he refers to the individual soul or the Inner Controller of all, the *Ātman* or the *Antaryāmin*.

THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN FREEDOM

Where human freedom is concerned, Ramanuja makes statements in different places, which appear to be of a somewhat contradictory nature. All reality which comprises sentient beings and non-sentient things are said to be completely controlled and governed by the *Brahman*, and they are all said to be subservient to him. He himself has decided the distinction between works that are good and works that are bad, and he has endowed the individual souls with bodies and sense organs so that they may enter upon such works, and he himself has also given them control over these bodies and sense organs. The *Brahman* is truly present within these souls. He abides within them and controls them as an Inner Ruler. The souls however in accordance with their own inclinations and desires apply themselves to works either good or evil. The activities of all beings are said to depend on the will of the *Brahman*. Even the meditation of the worshiper is said to be brought about by him, since he alone is the Universal Ruler and Inner Controller. *Kathā Upaniṣad I,iii,1*, speaks of two selves drinking their reward, while actually only the individual self does so. Ramanuja explains this passage in two ways, one of which is that both the selves are agents. That is to say, the drinking self is the individual self, while the other self is the *Brahman* who causes the individual self to drink, that is, the Supreme Self.¹⁵⁾

In particular passages of his *Śrī-Bhāṣya*, Ramanuja states that the self alone is the agent, and that he acts or does not act as and when he wishes to do so. However, he also appears to make statements contradictory to the above when he says that the activity of the soul proceeds from *Brahman* who is its cause, that as an agent the individual self is dependent upon the *Brahman*, and that the control the individual soul has over its organs also depends upon the *Brahman* alone. In his *Vedārthasaṅgraha* he clearly states that the soul is totally under the control of the *Brahman*, and that any ideas the soul may have of independence are all mistaken notions caused by *Karman*.¹⁶⁾

In his *Gītā-Bhāṣya*, Ramanuja appears to attribute agency to *Karman* when he notes, that when the *Ātman* exists in its natural condition where it is free from *Karman* and bondage, it is not responsible for the agency of gods, men, and other creaturely agents, neither is it responsible for their acts, or even the experiences these agents have of the results of their acts. These are all said to be brought about by the *vāsāna* of *Prakṛti*, which is the effect of the mistaken notion that these different agents like gods and others constitute the *Ātman*. This erroneous notion itself is the effect of the *Ātman*'s union with the bodies

of gods and other such agents, and this union can be traced back to beginningless *Karman*. In other words, *Karman* is the agent that brings about the agency of gods, men, and so on, the acts of these different agents, and the experiences these agents have of the results of their acts.¹⁷⁾

The individual self is said to be the source and the originator of all activities, and *Prakṛti* is said to be merely an instrument in his hands. Although he is an agent and a knower, his agency is said to be supported by the *Brahman*. The senses, the body, and other such instruments that he possesses have all been given to him by the *Brahman*, and *Brahman* himself is the support of all these instruments since they all derive their strength from him. By means of all these instruments, the individual soul of his own free will embarks upon the effort to engage in activities, which may be either just or unjust actions as far as the *Brahman* is concerned. The individual soul of his own free will is said to be the cause of this work, for once the soul has undertaken the effort to do so, the *Brahman* too causes him to act by granting him his permission. In other words, the agency of the individual soul is said to be futile without the previous assent of the *Brahman*.¹⁸⁾

However, Ramanuja also appears to make statements of a different nature attributing all agency to *Brahman*, and little or no agency to the individual self, for he says that *Brahman* alone is the agent of all actions, using as his instruments the body, the senses, the life-sustaining forces (*prāṇa*), and the individual self. He is said to be engaged in all ways in directing the organs of men (both internal and external) and he alone is said to set the self in motion. Since the individual souls with all their organs, bodies, and life-sustaining forces belong to him, and he undertakes activities through them all, even basic activities such as the satisfaction of hunger and other subsidiary actions are all said to be the actions of *Brahman* alone. The life-sustaining forces or *Prāṇas* belong to the individual soul. Whatever control divinities such as *Agni* and others may exercise over these *Prāṇas* (together with the individual souls to whom the *Prāṇas* belong), this control proceeds from the will of the *Brahman* alone, for Ramanuja quoting scripture declares, that the activities of the organs, of the deities that guide them, and of the individual soul, arise from the thinking of the *Brahman*.¹⁹⁾

The role of the *Brahman* concerning the activities of the soul may be visualized as follows: *Brahman* initiates action in so far as he regards in the case of any activity the effort made by the soul through its own free will, and then he supports that effort by granting his favor or permission (*anumati*). The soul is said to be incapable of acting without the previous assent of the *Brahman*. For example, the case is similar to certain property which two people jointly own. If one of the owners is interested in transferring this property to another person, he cannot do this without the prior assent of his partner. However, the fact that the permission is given is due to his own

actions, and so the fruit of the action also should go to him alone. Sometimes an individual may allow evil actions to be performed when he is fully aware of the fact that he is able to stop them, but Ramanuja asserts that this need not necessarily indicate hard-heartedness on the part of the individual. When an individual decides to act in such a manner as to please the *Brahman*, then the *Brahman* too as an act of favor to the individual, develops in him a tendency towards just and virtuous actions, actions that are conducive towards the attainment of himself, but if the individual on the other hand acts in a manner displeasing to the *Brahman*, then the *Brahman* too as a punishment, develops in the individual a tendency towards actions which are obstacles and impediments in the way of attainment of himself. In other words, when an individual voluntarily chooses the right way, the *Brahman* as a reward will encourage and support him along the way, but if he were to voluntarily choose the wrong way, here again as a punishment he will be hastened along that way by the *Brahman*. Ramanuja asserts that *Brahman* has bestowed equally on all souls, all that they may need for activity or inactivity. He is their Substratum, he is the Principal to which they are accessory, and while he may direct them by consenting, he is impartial in the sense that he takes no sides. He merely observes the soul in all its actions, while the soul whose capacities are dependent upon the *Brahman*, acts or does not act of its own accord.²⁰⁾

In *Gītā-Bhāṣya* 11.32, we have passages where all agency is transferred to the *Brahman* completely, and the individual appears to be allotted the role of a mere instrument in his hands. Here Ramanuja quotes *Kṛṣṇa* speaking of the sons of *Dhritarāṣṭra* and saying to *Arjuna*, that he was going to bring about their destruction, and that all of them would perish solely by his (*Kṛṣṇa*'s) own will, and without any effort on the part of *Arjuna*. In 11.33 he is quoted as requesting *Arjuna* to be a mere instrument in slaying the transgressors, since in any case all of them have been assigned to destruction already. We notice here a somewhat ambiguous role of *Kṛṣṇa* concerning human freedom.²¹⁾

It is obvious to any Reader that there does exist a tension between the agency of *Brahman* and that of the individual soul. Ramanuja has not provided us with a satisfactory answer to the question as to who is the real agent of actions, and whether the human person is really and truly free. He appears to be caught between his desire to preserve the purity of the *Brahman*, and the responsibility of the human person for his acts. There are scholars who believe that the real subject of every judgment is *Brahman*. That is to say, in the judgment, "I think," the subject "I" would be none other than the *Brahman* himself, but there are others who assert that although the *Brahman* dwells within the *Jīva* as its Self and Inner Controller, he merely cooperates in the activity of the *Jīva* by granting his assent, and does not

deprive it of its autonomy or freedom. This would be a kind of occasionalism where in every action that is performed, the agent is dependent upon the will of God. However, it must be stated that this antimony between human freedom and the prerogative of the divine has always been a problem in philosophy.²²⁾

ABBREVIATIONS

S.B. : Śrī-Bhāṣya

Ved. Sang., Van Buit. : Vedārthasaṅgraha translated by Van Buitenen

G.B. : Gītā-Bhāṣya

NOTES

- 1) S.B. 1.1.1, 1.1.2, 1.2.1, 1.1.10, 1.1.13. By the term "infinite", Ramanuja understands that which has a nature free from all limitation of space, time, and particular substantial nature. This infinity belongs to *Brahman's* essential nature and also to his attributes. Cf. Ramanuja's understanding of the *Mahāvākya*, *Tat Tvam Asi*.
- 2) S.B. 1.1.2
- 3) S.B. 1.2.4, 1.2.7, 1.3.8, 1.3.18, 1.3.21
- 4) S.B. 1.3.24, 2.1.14, 2.1.35, 2.1.35, 2.3.18, 2.3.20, 2.3.33
- 5) S.B. 1.1.1, 2.3.43, 2.3.26
- 6) S.B. 1.1.1
- 7) S.B. 1.1.1
- 8) S.B. 2.3.29; G.B. 2. (17-18); Ved. Sang., Van Buit., no.5.
- 9) S.B. 1.1.1
- 10) S.B. 1.1.1, 1.2.12, 1.2.14, 1.4.19
- 11) S.B. 1.2.19, 1.2.23, 1.4.16
- 12) S.B. 2.1.35, 1.4.19, 1.4.22; G.B. 15.11; Ved. Sang., Van Buit., nos. 126, 142, 143.
- 13) G.B. 13.21, 13.22, 14.27, 15.
- 14) Sen gupta, pp.102-1-3. Srinivasachari describes as the supreme merit of *Viśiṣṭādvāita*, the fact that it stresses the philosophy of the self, and insists on *Ātma-darśana* as a prelude to the philosophy of Religion. Cf. Srinivasachari, THE PHILOSOPHY OF VISISTADVAITA, p.340.
- 15) S.B. 1.4.1, 1.2.11, 2.1.9, 2.2.3
- 16) S.B. 2.3. (38-39), 2.3.40, 2.3.42, 2.4.17
Ved. Sang., Van Buit., no.143
- 17) G.B. 5.14
- 18) G.B. 13.20, 18. (14-15), 18.16
- 19) G.B. 18.13, 1. (21-23), 3.32, 18.12; S.B. 2.4.13
- 20) S.B. 2.3.41; Ved. Sang., Van Buit., no.90
- 21) G.B. 11. (32-33)
- 22) Lester is of the opinion that it is not *Karman* itself which binds, rather it is the will of the *Brahman*. The *Ātman* acts to please or displease the *Brahman*. When pleased he bestows rewards, and when displeased he punishes. The individual souls and *Prakṛti* constitute the body of *Brahman* and are thereby activated by him, hence both the agency in action and the act belong to *Brahman*. The *Ātman* is merely an instrument in the hands of the *Brahman* who even offers worship to himself, but such a statement must be tempered by Ramanuja's denial of complete determination. Cf. Lester, pp.41, 80-81.

Srinivasachari asserts that the real subject of every judgment is *Brahman*. Cf. Srinivasachari, THE PHILOSOPHY OF VISISTADVAITA, p.26.

Radhakrishnan is of the view that the *Brahman* does not deprive the *Jīva* of its freedom but merely cooperates with it. Action is not possible for the *Jīva* through its own effort and without the cooperation of the *Brahman*. Cf. Radhakrishnan, pp. 692-693.

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