

## Reality-Shift: A Dialogue between Modern Science And Advaita Philosophy

Our perception of some thing as real necessarily refers to our conception of what a real is and the way our perception corroborates it within a certain frame of reference. The difficulties are quite obvious. In different systems of thought reality is conceived differently. Functional reality, arthakriyakari sattva, is not the same as reality in the sense of unsubstatability in all the times, trikalavadhyatva. Our conception of reality and our epistemic framework may fall short of reality as it is. There may be inherent limitations in human mechanism of knowledge. We may be living within a closed system so that we are permanently debarred from grasping what lies beyond it. Philosophical speculations are endless. We need something more than mere arm-chair speculation so that we can attain the summum bonum of life.

Both science and philosophy search for the eternal verities. Both science and philosophy try to find out the consistent meaning of life and its experiences. While philosophy primarily employs speculation and reasoning as its method of inquiry, science relies more on observation and experiment. It is imperative to combine both these approaches to arrive at the truth. In view of the recent developments in modern theoretical physics, the ancient philosophy of Advaita seems to be more relevant. A scientific understanding of Advaita philosophy seems to be the beginning of a new-age thinking which can bring about a revolution in human thought and can shape its destiny for eternity.

In common sense, something which is capable of fruitful usage is said to be real. The things of the world being useful are accepted as real. But in the scientific and philosophic usage, in the sense of search for the absolute truths and eternal verities or the first principles, we use 'real' in a different sense. Physics search for the first principles, the simplest things, out of which the universe has evolved and also for the laws working behind them. In other branches of science, such as chemistry and biology, the objects are quite complicated. But the search for the simplest first principles is prominent in both physics and philosophy. The parallelism between them may not lead us to the same conclusion immediately, but certainly they point to the same direction.

There has been a great leap in understanding the physical phenomena in modern physics within a couple of centuries. In the ancient times the five elements were thought to be the basic material principles from which the material things came into existence. But the physicists really discovered nearly hundred elements to be the building blocks of the universe. It is further discovered that the difference among the

solid, liquid and gas is not a qualitative one, it is due to the difference in their atomic arrangement. Thus, with the atoms sparsely scattered they represent a gas, little more densely ordered they make a liquid, heavily dense they form a solid, arranged in lattices they form a crystal and in chains they represent a polymer. They can exist as singles or molecules. Even diamond is not essentially different from graphite in so far as both of them are allotropes of the same material.

The elemental particles could no longer hold the fancy of the scientists as the building blocks. They broke and were replaced by the sub-atomic particles. It was discovered that the qualitative difference is really quantitative in nature. All the elements consist of electrons around the protons glued to the nucleus in certain configurations. The lightest element, hydrogen, differs from one of the heaviest elements, plutonium in so far as it contains only one proton whereas the latter contains in its atom 94 protons with a different electronic configuration in the orbitals. Like the particles, the waves also form an interesting content of study in Physics. In classical Physics, the waves are said to be traveling vibratory disturbances different from the particles in so far as they interfere whereas the later collide when come together.

After the working out of the atomic model, the discovery of electromagnetism is one of the greatest achievements of modern science. It was discovered that electromagnetism unlike other waves do not need a medium to propagate. Visible light is just a form of electromagnetic wave like radio waves, infrared, ultraviolet, x-rays, etc. We only perceive the visible light beyond which the other spectra remain unperceived for ever. Electricity is the flow of electrons whereas light is nothing but photons, vibrating in different frequencies and wavelengths. The interesting point about these sub-atomic particles is that they behave both as particles and waves. So the classical difference between waves and particles is obliterated. Another property is that we cannot measure their position and momentum at the same time. They are more energy packets than solid things. There is some sort of uncertainty inherent in their nature. The quantum particles removed the difference between things and energies. The final equation is Einstein's  $E=mc^2$ . In these phases of development, we clearly mark a paradigm shift.

With reference to motion, time and space, there has been a lot of change from the classical view. Space and time are no longer accepted as absolute. Relativistic changes being infused into such concepts, the importance of the observing consciousness becomes conspicuous. The new world view arising out of a shift in paradigm replaced the certainties of classical Physics with probabilities. The search for the absolute eternal first principles of the world is a scientific metaquestion, it arises out of the compulsion of the scientific search for the absolute truth but it transcends the scope of science since science is limited to the empirical framework only. With the recognition of the role of the observer, modern science has become

more epistemic than mere objective. The integral and unified conception of reality has been the most spectacular achievement of the new age scientific thinking. Science, in a short, has stumbled upon a reality-shift, which necessitates a re-evaluation of the scientific understanding in the light of the ancient wisdom of Advaita.

The philosophy of Advaita begins with a reality-shift which is natural to its world-view. The method it employs does not consist of mere observation and experiment, unlike that in science. Instead, it puts the mechanism of experience itself to scrutiny and examines the ontological status of the objects of experience. It evaluates the world of phenomena vis-à-vis the field of consciousness and tries to comprehend the place of the individual in it. The logical scrutiny is again substantiated by the experience of a higher ontological order. In this, Advaita resembles the pure sciences in so far as it accepts direct experience as the final source of knowledge, *anubhavavasanatvat brahmavijnanasya*. The search begins with the things of experience and culminates in self-realization. Vedanta declares that the entire epistemic mechanism with its framework of *pramana*, *prama* and *prameya*, is only a functional reality or *vyavaharika satta*. What is taken to be knowledge in the empirical level is based on a deep-rooted cosmic ignorance which is ineradicable in relative state of existence (*tam etam avidyakhya atma-natmanor itaretaradhyasam adhikrtya sarve pramana-prameya- vyavahara*, etc).

New paradigms necessarily give rise to a reality-shift. In a certain level of consciousness what seems to be real appears false in a different level. With new discoveries in science, new realities come to forefront. Science has not yet reached its final goal. It is still in the making, undergoing rapid changes. But Advaita is not an uncertain quest for some unknown reality. It is the absolute knowledge of the ultimate reality manifesting in different levels of existence. Thus, in different strata of existence, the same ultimate reality assumes different shapes. The three strata of reality advocated by Advaita are the *vyavaharika*, *pratibhasika* and *paramarthika*. Though from the ultimate standpoint reality is one without second, *ekam ava advitiam*, for logical convenience the *satta-traya-vada* is devised. Apparent reality is sublated by empirical reality and the latter is negated by the realization of the ultimate reality. Till a dream continues, it appears to be real. Only when one wakes up, he realizes the non-reality of his dreaming experience. Disillusionment comes with a reality-shift in understanding. In fact, any system of knowledge, scientific or philosophic, which tries to go beyond the immediate functional reality, has to encounter a reality-shift.

Parallelism in modern science and Advaita makes it imperative to reorient our search for the ultimate reality for a new-age understanding which may give new meaning to life and its experiences. The scientific quest may, in the future, reveal the real purpose of life in agreement with what the great Advaita-teacher, Gaudapada says,

“When the jiva sleeping under the spell of beginning-less illusion wakes up, only then he realizes the birth-less, dream-less and the sleep-less non-dual reality.”

(This paper was presented in the All India Oriental Conference 2002, held at Puri.)

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