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THE ASYMMETRIC DIALECTICS IN ISKCON TRADITION

The Vedic tradition includes the developed philosophy of Vedanta. It functions not only as philosophy but also as theology. In European tradition philosophy and theology are strictly secluded even though they

are both of a rational type of knowledge and can have similar instruments of reflection over a person's spiritual experience, namely – general terminology system and general theoretical methods. The rational type of knowledge presupposes critical perception and asking new questions. Whereas philosopher theoretically develops knowledge system based on intuitive foundations, theologian develops knowledge system based on foundations verifiable by revelation implying whole church collective experience. Revelation can manifest itself in sacred texts and in traditions that are authoritative and shouldn't be doubted. The philosopher can be critical, while theologian should not be critical to religious revelation and collective church experience but only to their expression forms. Here we can draw a parallel between theology and science, which is also a rational type of knowledge and developing by asking new questions. Science preconditions, such as axioms, postulates, and primary concepts are not objects of doubt, because any change in them will lead to the emergence of new alternative science.

A critical attitude to knowledge ensures the possibility of a dialog, however, the circle of that dialog is limited to those people, who use the same knowledge preconditions and don't doubt them. For example, the scientific dialog is possible if scientists are using the same postulates. And if postulates differ from each other, then scientists are working in different scientific paradigms and their dialog is problematic. To make it possible one should step outside concrete sciences. This is something achievable through the philosophy which problematizes science's preconditions and by doing so creates a new basis for dialog. The same thing could be said about theology. Theology discussions are limited to those people who accept the authority of the same revelation, sacred texts, or religious tradition. That is why the debate between members of different religious traditions is problematic. But it is quite possible to make a philosophical debate, as philosophy implies a critical attitude to any knowledge and experience. That is why in Indian tradition disputes between different schools could be conducted by philosophical means. That circumstance stimulated philosophy development but due to specifics of Indian thought development, there was no strict seclusion between philosophy and theology as it was in Europe.

Vedic tradition is based on Veda's authority, which is recognized as sacral. Although they could not be changed, they can be commented on. Commentator could become Acharya-founder of a new tradition himself, and then his commentaries will also be recognized as authoritative and sacral for his followers but could be ignored in other traditions. As Ravi Gupta believes: «Laying a secure foundation for devotional practice is a task common to all schools of Vaishnavism, and the materials for such an enterprise usually come from the realm of Vedanta philosophy» [Gupta 2007, 2]. In practice, adepts mostly read works of Acharya-founder and rarely – works of his predecessors. So the philosophy of Vedanta and Veda's themselves are known mostly through the works of Acharya-founder. That limits the dialog between members of different Hinduism branches, while simple adepts don't even see value in such dialog.

For the last half-century one of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism branches founded by Shrila Prabhupada namely ISKCON became the most prominent among Hindu movements outside India. ISKCON adepts «perceive their tradition as integral and self-sufficient, not needing any additional justification in Western culture. But they also cannot completely ignore the rational criticism and scientific knowledge that they use in practice. Among modern Vaishnavas, some believe that all rational knowledge that is not derived from the scriptures is useless. But some believe that it is necessary to strive for mutual understanding in interreligious and intercultural dialogue, taking into account modern knowledge and rational methods of cognition» [Fil 2021, 71].

In modern ISKCON movements the trends denying not only philosophy but also a rational way of learning in religion are quite strong. Vaishnava Kala Chandra Das (Moscow) in polemic with the author of this article said: «The main thing for *bhakti* is faith (*shraddha*), while intellectuals measure everything by logic. This is the difference in approaches. Logic is powerless in obtaining a transcendental experience, which can only be obtained through proper communication with truly exalted Vaishnavas» [Fil 2021, 72]. However, as Ravi M. Gupta shows, such attitude toward rational knowledge had its place also at the beginning of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism history: «Despite its foundational role in the Hindu theistic traditions, Vedanta found itself on uncertain ground during

the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, due largely to the rise of influential devotional movements across North India. Some of these movements established their influence by deliberately set themselves apart from the Vedantic pursuits of earlier Vaishnava schools. They saw the emphasis on Vedanta as the hallmark of knowledge-oriented systems, in contrast to their exclusive absorption in devotion (*bhakti*). Indeed, some traditions rejected any kind of intellectual engagement as a diversion on the path of pure devotion» [Gupta 2007, 3].

Moreover, R.M. Gupta is a scientist and representative of the intellectual movement in Gaudiya Vaishnavism himself. He studies the philosophical basis for Vaishnava practice as a philosophy historian. His goal is to explain Vaishnava's teaching to the modern reader, which is an authoritative knowledge for himself. And indeed, among scientific approaches one most suited to reach that goal is a philosophy-historical approach. Nowadays many ISKCON adepts conduct philosophy-historical researches of Vedanta and the history of Gaudiya Vaishnava thought.

However, contradictions inevitably arise in a process of interaction between scientists and adepts.

«The academic approach implies a critical attitude to the scriptures, the authority of which is absolute for Vaishnavas, and this imposes restrictions on cooperation between secular and Vaishnava researchers of the Vedic tradition. To reach a new level of mutual understanding and cooperation, we need our philosophy of the ISKCON tradition with its own system of concepts, methods, and principles of critical thinking, which would not only allow other people to have meaningful discussions with Vaishnavas and adequately understand the Vaishnava tradition, but also rethink it not as something imported from outside, but as an integral part of the multifaceted culture of their own country. The first such purely philosophical book in Russian in the ISKCON tradition was *The Code of the Absolute* by Bhaktivedanta Sadhu Swami, published in 2012. It is possible to discuss these or other ideas of the book, but the author has proposed a language and a method of Asymmetric Dialectics, thanks to which such a discussion becomes generally possible» [Fil 2021, 71–72].

Bhaktivedanta Sadhu Swami in his book offers the result of his reflection on Vedic logic, based on more than twenty years long apprenticeship in

Vedic tradition – *parampara*. The book aims to give the way of learning that allows overcoming both skepticism and dogmatism.

The sensual way of learning gives knowledge about specific facts. This way of learning is called *pratyaksha* in the Vedic tradition. There were attempts to build a system of knowledge based only on empiric experience in European philosophy. However, as it turned out such a system of knowledge is easy to doubt. Empiric experience gives us only fragmentary knowledge about objects, so it is unreliable. To avoid skepticism we need to base our knowledge either on rational principles or authority-based principles.

In the Vedic tradition, the way of learning based on the authority of the scriptures is called *shabda*. And the way of learning based on this logic is called *anumana*. «*Pratyaksha* allows us to perceive the external, visible aspect of objects and phenomena, and *shabda* informs us of their inner essence, an invisible background. Ignorance means judging things superficially, not knowing what they are in reality. *Shabda*, from wherever we have received such knowledge, either from the ancient scriptures or as revelation during prayer, means contact with God, and *pratyaksha* is contact with material nature» [Бхактиведента Садху Свами 2012, 26].

In European philosophy the place of the scripture's authority is taken by intuition-based premises of mind that are the basement for a theoretical way of learning, which is a system of logical conclusions based on those premises by its nature. However, there is still a danger of substitution of true knowledge by random forms of reasoning. How can we make sure that our forms of reasoning are not abstractions of intellectual fantasy, but a basement for true knowledge? «As for *anumana*, the logic of our intellect is determined by the type of contact we have had. Since we have been subject to the material nature for a long time, material logic is firmly rooted in our intellect and does not allow us to understand the true nature of things. This book attempts to explain a different form of logic based on *shabda*. We call it Asymmetric Dialectics, or simply Vedic Logic» [Бхактиведента Садху Свами 2012, 26].

There is an answer to these doubts in Vedic tradition: one must base their reasoning on the authority of the Vedas – *shabda*. In the basement of *shabda* lies intuitive knowledge that is revealed in Vedic tradition. However, a person can easily approach this authority as a formality, and in that case,

shabda will be viewed as dogma. But how can we make the authority of the past live in the present? To overcome the danger of dogmatism, the author of this book develops a special way of learning – «asymmetric dialectic». This way of learning allows us to re-examine authority in the way that we can see intuitive knowledge that is a base for this authority and has its root in a living experience of communicating with the Ultimate Being.

Spiritual experience is infinite in its diversity, and it cannot be captured in some specific form, so there is a need in such a strict way of understanding that can compensate for the ambiguity of spiritual experience. Bhaktivedanta Sadhu Swami, in line with Vedic tradition, managed to formulate a new kind of dialectic that is based on *shabda*. This method consists of harmonizing two types of knowledge: those which is getting from practice and those which is based on spiritual experience. That allows the author to overcome both skepticism and dogmatism.

Firstly author formulates a thesis resting on authority-based knowledge and puts it versus another thesis that was formulated on the basis of practical knowledge. Then two kinds of knowledge are to be harmonized: one based on *shabda* and another based on *pratyaksha*. However, these two theses are not equal. *Shabda*-based thesis gives a foundation of understanding and *pratyaksha*-based – of critical re-examination. However, the critical analysis leads not to negation, but rather to find a deeper kind of knowledge that is based on authority, and so the formal side of authority had been overcoming. Thanks to that, based on that knowledge, the depth of spiritual life is revealed.

In Hegel's dialectic, thesis and antithesis are sublated, or in other words, two equal contradictory claims are overcoming in favor of some new way of understanding. But in an Asymmetric Dialectic of Sadhu Maharaj thesis based on *shabda* is not sublated, but rather purified from its dogmatic form. As a result of such purification, intuitive living knowledge that is based on religious experience is revealed.

So, the author of this book managed to connect Vedic tradition and the modern philosophical way of thinking. In «Code of Absolute» we encounter not just another way of thinking or another kind of dialectic, but spiritual experience that was acquired in a connection with spiritual tradition – an uninterrupted lineage of guru-apprentice succession – *parampara*.

Sadhu Maharaj starts his philosophy with dialectical consideration. The first thesis is based on *shabda*, that is authoritative knowledge – «object exists». The second thesis is based on sensibly perceived *pratyaksha* – «object doesn't exist». In case we are talking about the theological concept, firstly we should deal with the first thesis and only then start to analyze the second one based on undoubted truth reveling in it. However, Sadhu Maharaj in his book builds not a theological but exactly philosophical system, so he starts with a less reliable thesis demanding critical review and then corrects understanding under the second thesis based on *shabda*. Thanks to such a dialectic way of understanding statement which is based on *shabda* is offered not as formal truth that denies any alternative understanding, but as a principle that corrects the process of philosophical understanding itself. And so, Sadhu Maharaj states that external experience leads us to the conclusion that object doesn't exist. That means that our empirical knowledge is variable and unreliable, and should we be consistent, we naturally end up either with D. Hume skepticism, or Buddhism concept of *shunya*. Most of the people are not so consistent of course, so their position implies that empiric learning should be corrected. And Sadhu Maharaj includes opposing, based on *shabda*, thesis for that purpose. In accordance to *shabda* «Being or existence is primary and absolute, and non-being or non-existence is dependent on existence, so it is relative. Let us explore the following example: while looking into a room, a child may say «there are no mum and dad». However, the child means that mum and dad are not at home, not that they do not exist at all. The assertion «there are no» relates to the absence of the parents from the home» [Бхактиведанта Садху Свами, 34]. He reveals dialectic of others antinomies in a similar way, by going from consideration of less reliable thesis to more reliable one: «The Object is Unity» / «The Third Thesis: The Object is Distinguishable»; «The Object is Multiple» / «The Object is Singular»; «The Object Changes» / «The Object is Unchanged».

Asymmetric dialectic becomes an instrument of conceptualization not only of Vedic knowledge but of all modern people's life aspects. Concepts that we use to comprehend life could be reduced to basic philosophy categories that could be systemized differently. Sadhu Maharaj considers categories by pairs in such a way that one would rely on absolute content, while the other relies on relative one.

Absolute Concepts/Relative Concepts: Spirit / Body, Mind, Intelligence, Ego; Consciousness / Unconsciousness (Subconsciousness); Cause / Consequence; Means / Goal; Faith / Doubt; Whole / Parts; Male / Female; Disciple / Teacher; Contents / External Form; Light (energy) / Shadow (matter); Form / Formlessness; Duty / Right; Hear / Listen; Abundance / Deficit; Devotion / Love; Revelation / Sense Perception.

So Sadhu Maharaj proposes an instrument of philosophical conceptualization that allows the critical review of any knowledge including Sadhu's Maharaj own position. For example, he claims that duties are primary and rights are secondary. In my opinion, Sadhu Maharaj mistakenly connects rights and the concept of self-profit while a person's rights are results of existence, and so their content is absolute, while duties – are relative. However, I can express my disagreement in categories and logic that were proposed by Sadhu Maharaj himself, which opens a possibility for discussion of different positions, and in a broader context – the possibility of dialog between people of different religious and cultural traditions and beliefs. That is the main advantage of his philosophical system.

Sadhu Maharaj substantiates that asymmetric dialectic naturally leads to an understanding of an Absolute. The new thing about this conclusion is that asymmetric dialectic allows understanding how exactly absolute reveals itself to a person, which makes it possible to substantiate religious experience and Gaudiya Vaishnavism practice:

«Since the Absolute is the unity of *shabda* and *pratyaksha*, He is *pratyaksha* as unity is the definition of *pratyaksha*. But since He is different from both *shabda* and *pratyaksha*, He is the Super Consciousness as far as discernibility is the property of consciousness» [Бхактиведанта Садху Свами, 127–128]. From that Sadhu Maharaj concludes: «The Vedic logic of *pratyaksha* leads us to the conclusion that the Absolute has certain attributes, precisely, His Names and His External Forms. Yet, one should treat them as a revelation. In contrast to the material, spiritual *pratyaksha* is not a denial, but rather the expression of *shabda*, Spirit. For the perception of God in Image and Sound, in addition to the eyes and ears, conscious devotion to Him known as *bhakti* is needed» [Бхактиведанта Садху Свами, 131].

However, it was not clear enough for many ISKCON devotees why philosophical substantiation for the religious revelation opening itself in

religious practice is needed. ISKCON Russian department leader Bhakti Vijnana Goswami in his preface for the «Code of Absolute» book wrote that he was troubled with such free Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophical terms usage, for example, *pratyaksha* and *shabda*: «It was absolutely unclear why it was necessary to reassign and extend the meaning of simple and concrete words, to transform them into some kind of universal explanation categories. Such an approach, as I see it, had a threat to our graceful, consistent and at the same time disarmingly rational spiritual philosophy, lacking any shadow of a hint for mystical fog». Nevertheless, he supported Sadhu Maharaj and gave a positive recommendation to his book.

However, Sadhu Maharaj not just substantiate Vaishnava's religious experience, but also reveals such broad understanding of an Absolute, that this opens possibilities for interreligious dialog: «The Truth is not just one of teachings that are well known to the mankind at present because the Truth is a Complete Whole, the Absolute. The Absolute is manifested in different teachings to varying degrees, but the Absolute does not belong to any of them. The *sadhu* is devoted to the Truth, not religiosity. The general masses of people identify themselves with their mundane religion or modern science, i. e., they identify with their social institutions, rituals, and teachers» [Бхактиведанта Садху Свами, 175]. In 2011 in Tomsk Sadhu Maharaj, following such understanding of the truth, initiated Interreligious dialog with the involvement of members from nearly every confession in Siberia, and also scientists – philosophers, culture researchers, religion researchers, sociologists, and historians. Soon after the trial over Shрила Prabhupada's book «Bhagavad-Gita as it is» has begun in Tomsk. If the court acknowledged the book as an extremist ISKCON practice on Russian territory would be prosecuted. Scientists as well as members of different confessions gathered at interreligious meetings stood in a book's defense. The victory in this trial delayed the start of religious persecution in Russia. So, one must admit that theoretical conclusion about the truth Sadhu Maharaj substantiate with asymmetric dialectic method became an ideological basis not only for communication between people of different believes but also for cooperative activity in defense of religious freedom, that substantially influenced the situation in the whole country.

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НАЦІОНАЛЬНА АКАДЕМІЯ НАУК УКРАЇНИ
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