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Comment and Discussion

THE CONCEPT OF AVAKTAVYA IN JAINISM

R. K. TRIPATHI

JAINISM IS A realistic system. It not only holds that reality is pluralistic, but also that reality is many-faced (*anantadharmātmakam vastu*). In order to sustain this position Jainism develops a logic of sevenfold predication (*saptabhaṅginaya* or *syādvāda*). The development of this logic, in turn, depends principally on the concept of *avaktavya* (the unspeakable). As Satkari Mookerjee notes: "It is the concept of *avaktavya* . . . which gives the Jaina philosophy its distinctive character and individuality."¹

In spite of the great importance of this concept, it is surprising that the accounts of it given in most books on Indian philosophy are rather scanty, and what is worse, the accounts are contradictory. According to Hiriyanna, the concept of *avaktavya* "must be expressible as neither."² Another author seems to follow him when he says, "If we deny both existence and non-existence, if we negate the two different aspects of being and non-being together, the thing baffles all description. It becomes indescribable i.e. neither real or unreal."³ It may be pointed out at once that this seems to be quite a wrong interpretation of *avaktavya*. Apart from the fact that the Jaina texts do not support this view, it is possible to show that it is incorrect on purely logical grounds.⁴ To say that a thing neither exists (*asti*) nor does not exist (*nāsti*) is sheer skepticism, and the Jaina would never accept it as a *bhaṅga* (predicate), and as one of the *mūlabhaṅgas* (primary predicates) at that. Further, if *avaktavya* means "neither," it cannot be combined with the first three *bhaṅgas* and so

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¹ Satkari Mookerjee, *The Jaina Philosophy of Non-Absolutism* (Calcutta: Bharati Jain Parishad, 1944), p. 317.

² M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1951), p. 165.

³ C. D. Sharma, *Indian Philosophy* (Varanasi: Nand Kishore & Brothers, 1952), p. 65.

⁴ A. B. Dhruva, ed., *Syādvādamañjari* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933), p. 143. *Syāt avaktavyam eveti yugapat vidhiniṣedhakalpanayā caturthaḥ*. (The word *yugapat* [simultaneous] is to be noted here.)

cannot give rise to the other *bhaṅgas*. This is nothing short of sabotaging the *saptabhaṅgīnaya* itself. What is worse, the interpretation of *avaktavya* as “neither” would make it indistinguishable from the fourth *koṭi* (alternative viewpoint) of the *Mādhyamika catuṣkoṭi*, as also from the *anirvacanīya* (in-describable as either being or non-being) of the Vedānta.

An interpretation which is quite contrary to the above is found in the *Sarvadarśana Saṁgraha*, which says, “When you wish to establish both at once, let it be declared ‘indescribable’ from the impossibility to describe it.”⁵ Dr. Satkari Mookerjee agrees with this view and regards the *avaktavya* as the compresence of the two, *asti* and *nāsti*. But his remark that in the *avaktavya* “the two attributes are dissolved into one”⁶ is rather confusing, because the Jaina does not believe in any dissolution. Dr. Mookerjee seems to regard the *avaktavya* as a kind of synthesis of *asti* and *nāsti*.⁷ A quite serious objection to this view would be that it does not allow the *avaktavya* to remain a *mūlabhaṅga* but one dependent on or derived from *asti* and *nāsti*. The *mūlabhaṅgas* of the Jaina are different from those of the *Mādhyamika*. If the Jaina has to start with two *bhaṅgas* they would be *vaktavya* and *avaktavya*, and the former would be subdivided into *asti* and *nāsti*; otherwise the Jaina would have three *mūlabhaṅgas*. Either way *avaktavya* remains primary. So a correct view would emphasize the primary character of *avaktavya*. The other difficulty is that the interpretation which regards the *avaktavya* as a synthesis of two contradictories would throw us directly into self-contradiction.⁸ The third *bhaṅga*, namely, *asti ca nāsti ca* (is and is not) does not involve us in self-contradiction as the two contradictory predicates are asserted successively (*kramārpaṇa*) and not simultaneously. But in the *avaktavya* the two contradictories are asserted simultaneously (*sahārpaṇa*) and hence the question as to what the Jaina does to avoid this self-contradiction arises.

Does the Jaina blatantly accept self-contradiction or does he avoid it by inventing some device? No system of philosophy can afford to accept self-contradiction as valid, because if self-contradiction is accepted as valid without any qualifications, then there remains no weapon for criticism; anything which is said will have to be accepted, because even self-contradiction is valid. It is certain that the Jaina does not take leave of logic and consistency; he does criticize others by pointing out self-contradiction. Every system of philosophy has its contradictory which is regarded as false. This is why when a system has to accept a synthesis of contradictories as valid, it has to invent one device or

⁵ E. B. Cowell, trans., *Sarvadarśana Saṁgraha of Madhavāchārya* (6th ed.; Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1961), p. 60.

⁶ Mookerjee, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁸ Hiriyanna, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

another which at least seems to take off the edge from the contradictories. Hegel, who is the most outstanding believer in the synthesis of contradictories, has a saving device which works as a pinch of salt with which the contradictories are taken. According to him the contradictories are synthesized not as they are; there is a transformation which takes place in the moment of synthesis and this makes the thesis and antithesis harmonious. The problem that Hegel has to face regards the identity of the contradictories in the two states, namely, before and after the synthesis. If the contradictories are transformed they do not remain the same; if not, there is no harmony.

The Jaina too has to avoid self-contradiction, but not in the manner in which Hegel does, for the simple reason that the Jaina is not an idealist but a realist. It appears therefore that Mookerjee comes dangerously near Hegelianism when, in trying to meet the difficulty regarding the concept of *avaktavya*, he says, "The concrete unification of being and non-being is not a mere mechanical juxtaposition but a transformation of the two with their individualities unannulled. The Jaina does not find a logical contradiction in this act of synthesis, since he does not take it to be a logical process but an ontological fact which can be realised by intuition alone."⁹ The Hegelian influence is obvious, but it is also obvious that the Jaina cannot accept this view of *avaktavya*. Being a hard realist, the Jaina cannot regard knowledge as a transforming process; an idealist like Hegel could do that. Mookerjee makes the *avaktavya* an extra-logical thing or an object of intuition, and yet he calls it a synthesis. The point we have to note is that the *avaktavya* is not a synthesis of opposites. If it were a synthesis there would be no point in again combining it with *asti* and *nāsti*. The Jaina introduces this concept because there is something which is not brought out either by *asti* or *nāsti* or by their successive combination; this is why this something is once again combined with *asti*, *nāsti*, and their combination.

The only view of *avaktavya* which is free from the above difficulties seems to be that of K. C. Bhattacharyya; for him the *avaktavya* is the non-distinction of being and negation. "The given indefinite—the unspeakable or *avaktavya* as it has been called, as distinct from the definite existent, presents something other than consecutive togetherness; it implies *sahārpaṇa* or copresentation which amounts to nondistinction or indeterminate distinction of being and negation in the above sense."¹⁰ Mookerjee quotes Bhattacharyya with approval and yet regards *avaktavya* as a synthesis; there seems to be an obvious confusion between non-distinction and synthesis. While non-distinction is

⁹ Mookerjee, *op cit.*, p. 114.

¹⁰ K. C. Bhattacharyya, ed., *Studies in Philosophy* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1958), Vol. I, p. 341.

prior to distinction, synthesis is posterior to it; while the former is a kind of potentiality, the latter is a kind of achievement. If there is no contradiction in the *avaktavya* it is not because the contradictories have been transformed or opposition overcome, but because there is no distinction of the contradictories.¹¹ Therefore *avaktavya* is not a synthesis of contradictories, but their inexpressible non-distinction. The implication is that *only what is expressible can be self-contradictory and not what is inexpressible or indescribable*. It is this view of *avaktavya* alone which can enable us to have the following: (1) the distinction of the *avaktavya* from skepticism or the fourth *koṭi* of the Mādhyamika, (2) the distinction of the *avaktavya* from the Hegelian synthesis, (3) the freedom of the *avaktavya* from self-contradiction, and (4) the preservation of *avaktavya* as a *mūla* or underived *bhaṅga*. The Jaina is not guilty of accepting blatantly the validity of self-contradiction or contradictories. If the *avaktavya* has to be rejected, it must be pointed out that there lurks a kind of inconsistency in accepting this concept even in the sense of non-distinction, just as we have shown that there remains an inconsistency in Hegel even after the synthesis of the contradictories is accepted.

All the systems of Indian philosophy have criticized the concept of *avaktavya* because it is uncomfortable for them. But the concept is especially dangerous for the Mādhyamika, because the admission of *avaktavya* threatens the very structure of the dialectic. As is well known, the Mādhyamika thinks of four and only four—neither more nor less—alternative standpoints or *dr̥ṣṭi*s not reducible to each other.¹² But *avaktavya* opens the possibility of there being more alternatives than four. Probably this is not a very serious difficulty. The more serious point is that it is a concept which is impregnable to dialectical criticism.¹³ The Mādhyamika therefore rejects *avaktavya* as a possible *dr̥ṣṭi*, even as the Jaina rejects the fourth *koṭi* of the Mādhyamika as mere skepticism. Now the question is: Is the Mādhyamika justified in rejecting *avaktavya*?

The Mādhyamika and the Jaina both agree that many views of reality are possible, but the difference between the two is that for the former these views are just views and not truths about reality, while for the latter these views are

¹¹ The orthodox Jaina view is that there is no contradiction in the *avaktavya* because the contradictories are not absolute but relative to conditions. Cf. *Syādvādamañjari*, stanza 24, *upādhibhedopahitaṃ viruddham*. But the point is that even if the contradictories are relative, they are simultaneous and hence there will be at least relative contradiction.

¹² T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1955), p. 129.

¹³ Cf. Th. Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), Vol. I, p. 17. "This method looks like an answer to the Mādhyamika method of proving the 'inexpressible' character of absolute reality by reducing its every possible predicate *ad absurdum* and thus reducing empirical reality to a mirage."

acceptable truths about reality. For the Jaina, thought represents reality¹⁴; for the Mādhyamika, thought misrepresents reality. But we are not concerned here with the question of whether thought represents or misrepresents reality. Our problem is: in how many possible ways can thought do so? The Mādhyamika begins with two *mūladṛṣṭis* and comes to have four in all. The Jaina begins with three *mūlabhaṅgas* and comes to have seven types of predication in all. The difference is obviously due to *avaktavya*.

We have drawn some distinctions about *avaktavya* above; additional distinctions must be drawn before the question of the legitimacy of the concept of *avaktavya* is taken up, because some other systems too seem to accept something like *avaktavya* or the inexpressible. On the face of it, the Advaitic conception of *Brahman* and the Mādhyamika conception of *śūnya* seem to be *avaktavya* or inexpressible inasmuch as they are beyond all thought and speech. But the *avaktavya* is undoubtedly different from *Brahman* or *śūnya* for the obvious reason that no claim is made for its being transcendent; the Jaina *avaktavya* is not inaccessible to thought but only to speech. If so, can it be compared to the misperception of a rope as a snake or the *prātibhāsika* (empirical illusion) which is said to be *anirvacanīya* or indescribable? The rope-snake is said to be indescribable because though it appears in consciousness, it is not real; it can be characterized neither as *sat* nor as *asat*, nor as both. We have already rejected the view of *avaktavya* as “neither *sat* nor *asat*”; *avaktavya* is both *sat* and *asat*, and so it is clear that it cannot be compared with the rope-snake which is *sad-asad vilakṣaṇa* or neither and hence *anirvacanīya*; it is not only a case of non-distinction, but an admission of another category different from both. Moreover, the rope-snake is cancelled when the error is recognized, but the *avaktavya* is not. Like the *anirvacanīya*, the *avaktavya* is different from both *sat* and *asat*, but unlike that category, it is a copresentation or nondistinction of the two terms. Like the fourth *koṭi* of the Mādhyamika, it is different from a synthesis of *sat* and *asat*, but unlike that, it is not a denial of *sat* and *asat*, but mere non-distinction. How is this non-distinction different from the concept of non-distinction (*akhyāti*) of the Prābhākaras? The difference is that in *akhyāti* the terms are distinct, but there is no consciousness of the distinction; but in the *avaktavya* the terms are non-distinct. Again, the terms of *akhyāti* are not necessarily contradictories, as is the case with *avaktavya*.

Having made the above distinctions clear, let us now proceed to see whether *avaktavya* can legitimately be accepted in philosophy. We are here reminded of the famous words of Wittgenstein: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof

¹⁴ Murti, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

one must be silent." To this Gellner retorts, "That which one would insinuate, thereof one must speak."¹⁵ The inexpressible has been insinuated both by mystics and critical philosophers, but they have chosen to be silent. Plato held that the highest truth could not be really written, as it is a communion between two souls. Plotinus and Eckhart thought in the same manner. Kant was silent about the thing-in-itself and so was Buddha. The *ṛsis* of the Upaniṣads too advise silence.¹⁶ But it must be clearly noted that the inexpressible in these cases is quite different from the *avaktavya*. The inexpressible in the above-mentioned systems is transcendent to thought and not to speech only, and is therefore merely hinted at; the transcendent is not an alternative thought or view, and in this sense the Mādhyamika too accepts the inexpressible. But the peculiarity of the Jaina is that he wants to admit the inexpressible even on the empirical level,¹⁷ that is, as a view of reality. The inexpressible of the Jaina is neither transcendent nor a mere postulate, but something thinkable and knowable but not expressible. The transcendentalist's inexpressible is beyond thought and is unthinkable. Can we accept something which is thinkable, but not expressible?

K. C. Bhattacharyya says, "The commonsense principle implied in its recognition is that what is *given* cannot be rejected simply because it is inexpressible by a single positive concept."¹⁸ Now the point is whether the inexpressible is really *given*. Probably Bhattacharyya takes *avaktavya* as a continuum like the *avidyā* of Advaita Vedānta, but for obvious reasons the Jaina cannot take *avaktavya* as a continuum or background, because for him *avaktavya* is a *particular* view or aspect of reality like *asti* and *nāsti*. The Jaina takes *avaktavya* as thinkable, but not expressible. Can thought accept it without making it expressible in the process? Is it merely a handicap of language that the *avaktavya* cannot be expressed?¹⁹ If so, can the inexpressible be at least thought, if not actually expressed? The dilemma is this: if it can be thought it can also be expressed; if it cannot even be thought, it cannot be regarded as a view or aspect of reality. The Mādhyamika rejected the Jaina *avaktavya* as it cannot even be thought. The unthinkable cannot be accepted in philosophy as a viewpoint; it can be accepted only as transcendent. The Jaina does not insinuate it or hint at it; he takes it as a viewpoint and regards it as thinkable but not expressible, and that is the contradiction or impossibility in his posi-

¹⁵ E. Gellner, *The Words and Things* (London: Victor Gollanz Ltd., 1959), p. 265.

¹⁶ Cf., *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II. 4: *yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha.*

¹⁷ The *viśeṣas* of the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* and the *svalakṣaṇas* of the Buddhist are also inexpressible because they are absolutely particular and unique, but they are not empirical entities.

¹⁸ Bhattacharyya, *op. cit.*, p. 341-342.

¹⁹ Dhruva, *op. cit.*, p. 127. *tādṛśāsya śabdasya asambhavāt avaktavyam.*

tion. The inexpressible or the *avaktavya* cannot be equated with *asti* and *nāsti* as a position; thought must be thoughtless here. It may be asked whether this criticism applies to the *anirvacanīya* of the Vedānta. Can anything which is not transcendent be regarded as *anirvacanīya* (inexpressible)? The Vedāntin would say that there is no harm in accepting the *anirvacanīya* as a concept describing the unreal because the worst that can be said against it is that it is unreal, and the Vedāntin would jump with joy to see that you have caught the point. The difficulty arises only when the *anirvacanīya* or the inexpressible is taken as real; and not only real, but even as *empirically* real. This is what the Jaina does. Hence the *avaktavya* should either be given up by the Jaina, or he should be a transcendentalist.