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On consciousness. An Outline of Abhinavagupta's soteriology in the *Mālinīvijaya-vārttika*, 2

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“for those who are afflicted by incessant birth and death”
and “who as objects of compassion, should be helped”.¹
Abhinavagupta

Abstract

This paper is to simply outline an approach to Abhinavagupta's soteriology, interprets the concept of consciousness as the theoretical framework to understand his soteriological project.²

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyse how Abhinavagupta's concept of consciousness plays a central role to articulate both, the theoretical congruence and the plausibility of Trika śaiva soteriological project; as it is expressed in Abhinavagupta's works. In the most general sense I use the word soteriology in this context as the path or liberative method to the highest goal in life and the sudden arousal of the highest goodness called liberation (mokṣa). This method and its goal stand for “the benefit of humanity” (*jana*),³ without restriction of caste or gender. My proposal will be based on the three following claims:

1. Given that this śaiva soteriological project has a more systematic theological and philosophical bases, and hence it is to be thought as a consequence of the non-

¹ *Īśvarapratyabhijñānākārikā of Utpaladeva* (IPV 1.1). I am quoting this translated verse from D. Peter Lawrence (1999:39)

² Abhinavagupta was a philosopher and theologian who lived in Kāśmīr between the middle of 10th century and the beginning of 11th. He is considered the mastermind of Trika philosophy of Kāśmīr Śaivism, this philosophy flourished between the 9th and the 12th centuries in the north of India.

³ IPV 1.1 on IPK benedictory verse 1:33.

dualist model of Abhinavagupta. Then, I argue that the highest goodness (liberation) is the purpose (*prayojana*) for making sense of his non-dualist model.

2. The outline of what consciousness is in Abhinavagupta's philosophy is the key to understand the śaiva non-dualist philosophical model; consequently consciousness should be considered as the theoretical basis to articulate the soteriological project.

3. Thus, then, to understand such soteriological project, the analysis of what does consciousness actually means in Abhinavagupta's philosophy; theoretically precedes the intellectual congruence and possibility of the highest goodness.

I hope that the purpose of this paper will gain plausibility in the light of these three claims. At the end of this paper I hope to show how the three ideas combine to encompass a systematic theological and philosophical programme that could be attractive for contemporary studies on soteriology, tantra tradition and consciousness studies in Indian Philosophy.

The picture of this presentation is divided in three parts. The first is an account of the concept of consciousness as a key to articulate the non-dualist philosophy, and the philosophical scenario to postulate the soteriological project. The second part is an account of the soteriological project in a context of the relationship between universal and individual consciousness. Finally, the third part is a brief conclusion along with the reading of some quotes of Abhinavagupta's works. I will do so by narrowing the analysis to specific verses of one text Abhinavagupta's *Mālinīvijaya-vārttika* (MVV)²,⁴ wherein he uses consciousness (*saṃvid*) in different ways related with soteriology.⁵

1. On Consciousness: the non-dualist philosophy as a context for soteriology

Let us start with the first section. At the heart of this initial approach to outline the non-dualist basis of this model resides a metaphysical problem of Abhinavagupta's

⁴ We must mention the outstanding and pioneering work of edition and translation of the first *kāṇḍaḥ*, verses 1-399 of *Mālinīvijaya-vārttika* made by Jürgen Hanneder 1998.

⁵ Also *Tantrāloka* specifically with Chapters 3, 4 and 5: *śāmbhavopāya*, *śaktopāya* and *aṇavopāya* sections respectively.

philosophy; which is the key for this account. For Abhinavagupta the metaphysical question, about the ultimate nature of everything, is essentially the starting point to think about the very plausibility of a path and accomplishment of so called *summum bonum*; because that (the metaphysical question) is at the same time a quest about what the ultimate nature of a human being is; the nature of his bondage and the means to the highest goodness. I consider this problem one which encompasses the theological and philosophical bases for such soteriological project. For the sake of clarity, I will briefly outline the metaphysical problem in one question. The problem can be stated as follows: how does Abhinavagupta argue for the existence of the universe without considering it as a different entity from Śiva, ⁶ but as Śiva himself?⁷

The problem as it is formulated above is not new, as far as we can see is the problem of any philosophical system, eastern or western, that claims for non-duality. However, I hope to show that the approach to the problem as well as the ways to solve it represents an original argumentation made by śaivas like Abhinavagupta; and then to give light on the meaning of consciousness as the key to understand śaiva non-dualist philosophical model.

Let us revisit the problem in more detail. How does Abhinavagupta argue for the existence of the universe without considering it as a different entity from Śiva but as Śiva himself? The question raises centrality on the investigation about the ultimate nature of everything; however, the question itself highlights an inherent paradox; namely how can multiplicity-impermanence and unity-eternity be reconciled in one single model. If every entity that constitutes the universe is in movement and thus in constant change, and Śiva never transforms his essential nature nor is ever determined by the universe. How can Abhinavagupta reconcile both claims? The study of that paradox in this philosophy is one problem that demands a deeper insight. I have no claim for such an exhaustive analysis in this

⁶MVV 2, 1: *evaṃ maheśvaro devo viśvātmatvena saṃsthitaḥ* / Thus the Lord Maheśvara is one with the universe. Translations from Sanskrit to English are mine; otherwise I will indicate the source.

⁷ For instance we read in MVV 2, 23: *parame bhagavatparātmani sphuritaṃ viśvaṃ idaṃ cidātmakaṃ / śaktitrayaśūlaḡaṃ tataḥ śāmbhavabhūmivisargivartmanā* // See also TĀ 3, 280: *matt evoditamidaṃ mayyeva pratibimbītam / madabhinnamidaṃ ceti tridhopāyaḥ sa śāmbhavaḥ* // Thus, then this proceeds from me, it is reflected on me and is not different of me, this is the threefold way which is [called] the *śāmbhavopāya*.

paper. However, I must start by addressing a brief answer to that problem in regard with one of its consequences, that which is our concern here, namely: the theoretical congruence and plausibility of liberation (mokṣa). Accord to Abhinavagupta the articulation of an answer shows consequently a systematic investigation about the **origin** and nature of that which appears as universe (*viśvam*). Then, I will contend that Abhinavagupta's concept of consciousness is the key to approach to that metaphysical problem; mainly because consciousness is seen as the ultimate and irreducible reality of everything remaining present at the universe (*viśvam*). As he states in the following verse:

*parame bhagavatparātmani sphuritaṃ viśvam idaṃ cidātmakaṃ /
śaktitrayaśūlagaṃ tataḥ śāmbhavabhūmivisargivartmanā //*⁸

Following the previous verse, and the series of reasons stated in his MVV and other works, we can see that Abhinavagupta's ontology is built on the concept of consciousness; he understands consciousness as the ultimate and irreducible nature of everything. More specifically Abhinavagupta finds support for his claim that non-duality is articulated on cosmogony which is the basis for the ontological status of the universe and the human being. Cosmogony and ontology are the reasons to state that the highest goal in life is plausible for any human being. Such cosmogony and ontology might be summarized in the following lines: the universe (*viśvam*) exists as an emission (*visarga*) and expansion (*spanda*) of consciousness (*hṛdayasaṃvid*) which is the ultimate and irreducible nature of everything (*prakāśa-vimarśa*, i.e. luminosity and reflective awareness); because it (the universe) is understood as an emission from consciousness into consciousness and by consciousness; consequently the universe and the specific individualization, that is, the human being does not exist independently of its own nature (i.e. Śiva as the supreme consciousness). This claim is a direct consequence of one theoretical point of departure, which argues that the ultimate nature of everything is one infinite and blissful consciousness (*parāsaṃvid*); that is, an ontological principle which is the source, the scenario, the emission and all that is emitted as multiplicity of subjects

⁸ MVV 2, 23

and objects. This thesis is the basis for a non-dual philosophy that we can refer as *saṃvidadvayavādaḥ*, i.e. the doctrine of non-duality of consciousness.⁹

Phenomenical multiplicity could be understood by one single principle that itself pervades completely the universe and is one with the universe. In the texts of non-dual Śaivism of Kāśmīr as well as in Abhinavagupta's work, the ultimate and irreducible consciousness, as the essential nature of everything, has been referred to by the name Śiva. A fact that probably highlights a theistic tendency that can be tracked in different texts with different names, for instance: Śaṅkara¹⁰, Maheśvara¹¹, Bhairava¹², etc. To conclude this part I would like to point out the following idea: consciousness as the ultimate nature of everything; ontologically is one single principle and phenomenologically appears as the multiplicity. This concept and the different words to refer it can be tracked through different texts of this school, we will find for instance Sanskrit terms like: *caitanya*¹³, *citi*¹⁴, *saṃvid*¹⁵, *hṛdaya*. Let us turn to the second section.

2. The soteriological project in context: universal and individual consciousness

One of the most outstanding consequences of the former non-dualist position is this. Individuated consciousness is essentially universal consciousness. That consequence is the context to understand the śaiva path for liberation. Accord to Abhinavagupta the śaiva path claims that there is nothing to obtain; because the highest goal in life is already in the subject. The divinity resides inside not outside. The supreme and universal consciousness is inwardly rooted in individual consciousness and rests in a contracted way but never is different of universal consciousness. Encompassing this statement the method of non-dualist śaiva tradition is simply stated as “recognition” (*pratyabhijñā*) of that non-duality

⁹ Jayaratha call the philosophy of Abhinavagupta in this way in his commentary on *Tantrāloka* (-*viveka*, TĀV), see especially Chapter 9, or in MVV 2, 18 we read: “(...) the supreme non-dual vision or *paramādvayadr̥ṣṭau*”. The arguments for *saṃvidadvayavādaḥ* resides structurally mainly in a sequence of statements that we can trace at/through the texts of trika śaiva tradition of Kāśmīr. See also Sanderson (1992:287) fn. 28

¹⁰ SPK 1,1

¹¹ IPK I,1 & MVV 2, 1

¹² MVV 2, 6,13,22, etc

¹³ ŚS 1,1

¹⁴ IPK I 5, 12, etc

¹⁵ IPV I 3, 2 etc. MVV 2, 11,12, etc

between individual and universal consciousness. Non-duality between universal and individual consciousness works conceptually in two ways. On the one hand **to understand** the soteriological project, and on the other **to ascertain the purpose** of the non-dualist model, that is, the non-dualist philosophies can consider this, individual and universal consciousness, as the basic relationship to ascertain non-duality. That is correct but incomplete without considering the first reason that we saw before, that is, non-duality between universal consciousness and the universe (*viśvam*). Both encompass the understanding and the purpose of this philosophy.

As we saw in the previous section our analysis was originated in a metaphysical problem but this study must continue at the phenomenological level. So, this second part will be narrowed by considering individual consciousness¹⁶ as the *loci* wherein the non-dualist model makes sense to articulate the aim of liberation. At this point we must consider the next question. How can universal consciousness be individual consciousness? For Abhinavagupta, individuated consciousness is a **contraction** (*saṃkoca*) of the universal consciousness. So the key idea here is that the individuated consciousness is ultimately “a contracted state” of the universal consciousness, not a creation *ex-nihilo*. In other words, contracted consciousness means an embodied consciousness, that is, it appears as individuated, it is an embodiment of, but is not different from universal consciousness (i.e. Śiva). Accord to Abhinavagupta when the human being accomplishes the highest goodness; it does not means that individuated consciousness “becomes” a universal consciousness, it does not means that individuated consciousness “attains” a different state. To accomplish the highest goodness means that the contracted state is reverting back into the complete expansion. That “expanded state” arises suddenly as universal consciousness; it is plausible because individuated consciousness is essentially universal consciousness. The highest goodness is here and now.

In this sense non-dualist śaiva soteriology claims that the highest goal in life is for all, and continuing in this vein Abhinavagupta argues that this project is for the benefit of humanity. Following our argumentation we can say that the

¹⁶ See a parallel approach to this relationship in other schools of Indian philosophy such the case of the systematic analysis on it into Advaita Vedanta context in Ram-Prasad (2001:189)

plausibility of this project is grounded in the previous philosophical and theoretical basis. As the following verses state:

*evaṃ maheśvaro devo viśvātmatvena saṃsthitaḥ /
kramikajñānayogābhyāṃ dhāraṇābhirupāsyate //*¹⁷
*sphuraṇaṃ hṛdayasya yat kila prakāṣaṃ viśvam idaṃ visargadhāmaṇḥ /
sad iti pratibhāti yāvatā trikaśaktau viśatīha tāvatā //*¹⁸

Both verses claim that universal consciousness can be many because it appears as the universe. At the same time, this consciousness appears to us as something phenomenologically individuated which means “differentiated” from the other individuals. Nevertheless individual consciousness is ontologically identical to the others and to the supreme consciousness as well.¹⁹

3. Conclusion: Remarks on consciousness and the articulation of soteriology

Let us start with an outline of our conclusion. First the theoretical coherence between both levels of analysis, cosmogony and ontology, is the basis for ascertainment of non-dual claims; moreover each one is interconnected and articulated as theoretical condition to claim for the accomplishment of *mokṣa*. Conceptually *mokṣa* can be understood as the articulated consequence of the non-dual claims between the universal consciousness and individual consciousness. Following this statement, the highest goal in life is the experience of uninterrupted non-duality; a de-individuated consciousness “experienced” itself as universal consciousness. We are not claiming that a non-dual understanding of the universe and the accomplishment of the soteriological project is a radical change of the space-time objects (i.e. externality), that is, the world of everyday life is there. A de-individuated understanding is itself the re-cognition which works as ultimate “cognition” wherein the duality subject-object does not work. Accord to Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta the path to the highest goodness is a sort of reverting back process until the final re-cognition of the ultimate nature of individuated

¹⁷ MVV 2, 1

¹⁸ MVV 2, 21

¹⁹ Abhinavagupta gives the basic conditions to approach to the questions in the following two verses. Both can be seen as introductory verses of second *kaṇḍaḥ* as well as a continuation and conclusion of the first *kaṇḍaḥ* and finally both introduce the philosophical thesis that will be revisited in two major works: the *Tantrāloka* and the *Íśvarapratyabhijñā-vimarśinī*.

consciousness and *viśvam*.²⁰ That highest knowledge is indeed not following the pattern of subject-object relationship, so in some sense it is not cognition in the common understanding; it is more or less an expanded self-reflection of consciousness into itself; that is a pure non-relational consciousness non contracted and without reference of something else; called the state of the bliss of consciousness as the following verses state:

*pramāṇāc carvaṇāyogān mahānanda iti sthitiḥ/
samastamānameyaughakalanāgrāsakovidāḥ //*²¹

*yadā viśrāntim abhyeti nirupādhisunirbharām /
tadā khalu cidānando yo jaḍānupabrṃhitāḥ //*²²

Let us turn to see the second concluding point. This soteriology can be outlined as a path to the highest goodness, which stands for “the benefit of humanity” (*jana*).²³ As we said above the highest goal of life (*mokṣa* i.e. liberation) can be outlined as that which arise suddenly without any determination by mental or body activity, that is a gradual recognition of the ultimate, perfect and blissful Supreme Lord (*Maheśvara*) which already exists in the subject. So, there is nothing different to attain or become something else, or enter into a relationship with something different. The picture is simple the highest goodness is already in the subject as that which the subject essentially is. The experience of recognition is the experience of expansion of consciousness; it finally ends as an irreversible, pristine, non-relational and unexpected identity with the Supreme Lord. As Abhinavagupta says:

*unmeṣamātrarūḍasya sā nīrmūlā na saṃbhavet /
itthaṃ kiṃ bahunoktena naye'nuttaranāmani //*²⁴

The third conclusion is this. Abhinavagupta acknowledges four methods (*upāya*) to the highest goal. I will briefly list the four in ascending order and because

²⁰ As Utpaladeva claims in IPK I 1,1-3

²¹ MVV 2, 37

²² MVV 2, 38

²³ IPV 1.1 on IPK benedictory verse 1:33. See also D.P. Lawrence (1999:39)

²⁴ MVV 2, 105

the time I will highlight just some comments on the first method. The first is called the individual means (*āṇavopāya*); the second the means of śakti or path of knowledge (*śaktopāya*); the third called the means of Śambhu (i.e. Śiva) (*śāmbhavopāya*). Finally, the fourth is *anupāya* or means without means; that is to say non-means, by virtue of absence of ritualistic practices or control of mental activity²⁵.

The first method *āṇavopaya* (or *āṇava yoga*) is considered the lower; it encompasses techniques like concentration (*dhāraṇā*), intense contemplation (*dhyana*); support of the ritual practices, breath control, external postures, and the like. It is associated in general with body practices. However, accord to Abhinavagupta all these practices are not a direct path to the highest goal; mainly because there is nothing to attain because the *summum bonum* resides inwardly rooted in consciousness and cannot be transmitted by bodily means. As the following verse says:

*antaḥ saṃvidi yannirūḍham abhitas tat prāṇadhīvigrahe saṃcāryeta kathaṃ
tatheti ghaṭatām abhyāsayogakramaḥ /
ye tvabhyāsapathena saṃvidam imāṃ saṃskartumabhyudyatās
te kiṃ kutra kutaḥ kathaṃ vidadhatām ityatra saṃdidmahe //*²⁶

As far as we can see, Abhinavagupta encompasses different methods of yoga that he knew at his time and systematizes all these practices in four methods that we have mentioned above. I would like to highlight two key facts of his systematization. First, the different methods are congruent with the non-dualist philosophical model, mainly because they were articulated on the following theoretical basis: consciousness is the ultimate nature which appears contracted, as individual consciousness, but is essentially universal consciousness.

The second fact is the role of yoga practices like breath control, external postures, and so forth, those are for the purpose of purification of mental fluctuations and sense organs. Nevertheless they should be performed with the understanding of the

²⁵ MVV 2, 107

²⁶ MVV 2,4:

non-dualist vision; the basic understanding that individuated consciousness is essentially universal consciousness. As we read in the following verse:

*etallīngajñānapraviyuktahṛdā vṛthaiva hi bhajante /
bāhyasthaliṅgapūjāṃ prayāsamātraṃ phalāya na hi tat syāt // 66*²⁷

To conclude this presentation I would like to read the following verses, which encompasses the different currents of our argumentation in a single coherent paragraph:

*ahāsāhasasaṃyogavilīnākhilavṛttikaḥ/
puñjībhūtasvaraśmyogha-nirbharībhūtamānasaḥ //86
akiñciccintakaḥ spaṣṭadrṣṭabhedojjhitasthitīḥ /
yāvadaśīta tāvattu pūrvoktā eva bhūtayaḥ //87
sāṃmukhyaṃ yānti saṃsārasadmadāhakahetavaḥ /
yaśca divyo'kṣasaṃghāto bhedarūḍhitirohitaḥ //88*²⁸

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²⁷ MVV 2, 66. Alexis Sanderson's translation of this verse runs as follows: "It is in vain that men resort to the worship of external idols, if their awareness lacks the knowledge of this (internal) idol. Their action is nothing more than physical exertion. It can have not effect." (Sanderson 1992:293)

²⁸ MVV 2, 86-88:

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