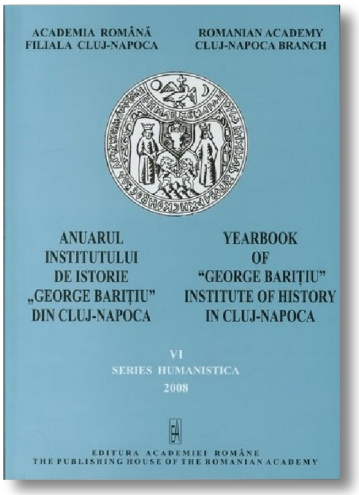

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KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE IN INDIAN THOUGHT

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Résumé. *La connaissance constitue le mystère de l'existence humaine, le moyen de dépasser toutes les limites qui essaient de restreindre l'être dans son intégrité pure. Le chemin vers le centre inclut, comme montée initiatique vers le devenir, l'épreuve de la connaissance. Pour l'Occident, la philosophie signifiait naguère plutôt une quête errante de la vérité, être en permanence sur un chemin dont on ne pouvait presque jamais connaître la destination. La réflexion philosophique, souvent dissociée d'une façon aléatoire de la réflexion religieuse, signifiait plutôt une manière d'exercer les capacités intellectuelles et de langage. L'Orient, pour lequel la dimension philosophique était toujours solidaire avec la dimension religieuse (allant jusqu'à leur identification), attache à la connaissance une importance plutôt sotériologique qu'ontologique. La perfection de la réflexion philosophico-religieuse signifiait essentiellement posséder le chemin existentiel ayant une destination beaucoup plus précise : atteindre la réalité dernière, l'Absolu ; ainsi peut-on affirmer que le dicton cartésien «cogito ergo sum» devient, dans le contexte de la pensée hindoue, «sum ergo cogito». Cela signifie en fait la solution unique pour obtenir la perfection noétique et ontologique de l'homme. Dans ce qui suit, nous essaierons de faire une brève analyse du rapport entre la connaissance et la non connaissance (l'ignorance), placé dans le contexte final de la conception sur la libération, identifiable dans la philosophie indienne. Certains chercheurs ont établi des similarités entre le gnosticisme ancien et les systèmes philosophico-religieux indiens, fondés sur le salut par la connaissance. En ce qui concerne la conception sur la libération, en étroite liaison avec l'acte de la connaissance, une différence fondamentale apparaît entre la pensée religieuse hindoue, panthéiste, et la conception chrétienne, qui fait une distinction claire entre l'être humain doué de raison, appelé à une communion avec Dieu par l'intermédiaire de la Grâce.*

Knowledge constitutes the mystery of the human existence, the means of surpassing all the limitations which try to bind the being in its pure integrity. The way to the center includes, as an initiatory ascent towards becoming, the challenge of knowledge. For the West, philosophy meant rather a chaotic search for truth, being permanently on a way whose destination could almost never be known.

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Philosophical reflection, several times hazardously dissociated from the religious one, has been a way of practicing the intellectual and linguistic abilities. The East, for which the philosophical dimension was always solidary with the religious one (almost identical with it[1]), gave not only an ontological importance to knowledge but a more soteriological one. The totality of philosophico-religious reflection comprised, essentially speaking, the possession of the existential way with a more precise destination: touching the Ultimate Reality, the Absolute, so that, we may say, Descartes' classical assertion *cogito ergo sum* becomes, within the Hindu thought, *sum ergo cogito*. This was in fact the unique solution for the attainment of man's noetical and ontological becoming. We propose to analyze briefly below the connection between knowledge and ignorance (non-knowledge), placed in the final context of liberation perspective, identifiable in Hindu philosophy.

The central idea prevailing almost like an obsession in the whole Hindu philosophic literature is that lack of proper knowledge, designated with the term *avidyā*, associated with ignorance, could endanger the human soul's condition towards the future life's perspective, by subjecting it to a long cycle of several reincarnations. Avidyā represents the basis and object of the spiritual illusion, the human condition in itself. In earlier literature *śruti*, *avidyā* used to mean a mere absence of knowledge, which could have distracted man from fulfilling his religious and moral obligations prescribed so rigorously by authority and tradition. For example, there was a deep belief that ignorance regarding the funeral rites might have caused an unhappy rebirth for the dead one. Transcending this obstacle has always been a special concern of the Brahmins, as the good knowledge of the Vedas constituted the very essence of their role in the universe's revivification and perpetuation by performing and supervising the rites, important for their lives too. The necessity of an adequate knowledge in carrying out the rites is expressed in this way: "*If, without knowing this, one offers an Agnihotra, it would be as if a man were to remove the live coals and pour his libation on dead ashes*"[2]. Later on, the meaning of sacrifice's necessity will not be perceived as a mere formal office of rites any longer, but more and more interiorized, acquiring an ascetic shade, this view having been expressed in the Āranyakas texts, as a reaction against official Brahmanism.

[1] Contrary to what happened in both Christianity and Islam, two religious traditions which made clear distinction between philosophy and theology. Besides, knowledge is intimately connected to the experience of a unique and personal God. (See Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Knowledge and Ignorance*, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., Lindsay Jones Editor in Chief, MacMillan, New York, 2005, vol. 8, p. 5200.

[2] *Chāndogya-Upanishad*, V, 24,1, in vol. *Cele mai vechi Upanisade*, tr., introductory study, notes and commentaries by Radu Bercea, Bucureşti, Edit. Ştiinţifică, 1993; parallel text in *The Upanishads*, tr. by Max Müller, Part 1, in *The Sacred Books of the East*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1879, vol. 1, p. 91.

(Non-) knowledge appears as a speculative problem in the Upanishads[3] and the reference to it will offer a great authority to the future orthodox visions, especially those of Advaita Vedānta. The Upanishadic thinkers' great discovery seems to have been, according to the majority of researchers, that soul was immortal and its true being remained outside of space and time, that its link to the material, empirical world of *samsāra*, should be transient and someway illusory[4]. Certain Upanishadic passages suggest that *avidyā* does not mean just a simple lack of necessary knowledge, but mostly an ontological state which darkens the human mind, depriving it of liberation. Of certain persons, the sage says: "*Dwelling in the darkness of their ignorance, fools, imagining themselves as wise and learned, go round and round, like blind men led by the blind*"[5]. Caught in *āvidya*, being unaware of their own ignorance, these people become like dreamers who, simply, imagine their goals already fulfilled, when actually each act which denotes ignorance chains them more and more in *samsara*.

In order to avoid the ill-fated consequences produced by non-knowledge or, in a better form, *nescience*[6] there has to be made its distinction from *vidyā,* so that the one who knows both of them shall cross death through avidyā and reach immortality through *vidyā*. This conception, recognizing that ignorance is not sufficient in itself and doesn't culminate directly in *moksha* (the soul's state of liberation)[7], relevates its value and, in the same time, its connection with *vidyā* towards the attainment of immortality. The next statement places both types of knowledge in the nature of the Supreme Being (Brahman): "*In the imperishable, supreme and infinite Brahman, the two, knowledge and ignorance, are hidden. Ignorance is perishable; knowledge is immortal indeed. He who masters both knowledge and ignorance is another*"[8]. The one (Brahman) is another as a transcendental being, surpassing (non-)knowledge, being himself at the same time

[3] The term *upa-ni-shad* has a Sanskrit origin. It comprises two main meanings: 1. the idea of one's sitting down near the spiritual teacher, listening to his teachings; 2. secret doctrine (as Paul Deussen suggests, *Filosofia Upanişadelor*, tr. by Cornel Sterian, Bucureşti, Edit. Tehnică, 1997, p. 25). Usually, it refers to the philosophical treatises which form *jñānakānda*, the knowledge section, opposed to *karmakānda* section, containing ritual and ceremonial precepts, as integrative parts of the Veda. The principal idea is that of extinguishing passion and ignorance by apprehending the divine revelation. Thus, the knowledge of Brahman comes through the light of Upanishads. This is the way by which the eternal bliss of being comes to man.

[4] R. C. Zaehner, *At Sundry Times*, Faber and Faber, London, 1958, p. 61.

[5] *Katha-Upanisad*, I, 2, 5, tr. and notes by Swami Lokeswarananda, Ed. Ritam, Bucureşti, 1998; see parallel text in M. Müller, *The Upanishads*, Part 2, in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 15, 1884, p. 8.

[6] Purushottama Bilimoria, *Avidyā*, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, …, vol. 2, p. 710.

[7] For the Indian philosophico-religious thought, *moksha*, as liberation from the Samsaric universe, was the final und fundamental goal yet before the Upanishadic period.

[8] *Śvetāśvatara-Upanisad*, V, 1, in vol. *Upanisad*, tr. from Sanskrit, introductory notes and commentaries by Ovidiu Cristian Nedu, Bucureşti, Edit. Herald; parallel text in M. Müller, *The Upanishads*, Part 2, *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 15, 1884, p. 255.

the source of knowledge. Behind of all things and phenomena there exists a unity which transcends the present multiplicity of the physical world.

This unity and order lives even beyond and above all deities (*devas*). It is really Brahman, the supreme conscience which works in creation and maintains the world in its being. It supports the whole structure of the universe living unsupported. Therefore, from the fragment above follows so clearly the paradoxical aspect of the Hindu epistemology and its tendency towards a negative speculative theology (*apavāda*) which is going to signify for *Śānkara* a step of man's encounter with the ultimate Reality[9]. Besides, the Upanishadic momentum signifies the very point in which the negative descriptions concerning the attributes of Brahman acquire their highest expression. The decisive affirmation for the true comprehension of the Ultimate – neti, neti: "*it is neither this, nor the other*" – goes without saying. This emphasizes world's illusory condition, whose deluding power comes from the senses[10]. Having knowledge of Brahman and knowing that he is unique, the whole phenomenal existence is transcended, all oppositions become abolished, the good deeds and the bad ones don't interfere any more and the self-perfected one enters the uncreated world of Brahman, from there is no way to return.

The post-Vedic period completed the evolution of the term-concept *avidyā,* so that it has come to mean not a mere absence of knowledge concerning the realization of a good social and religious state any longer, but holding the meaning of an illusory power, spiritually and intellectually speaking, comprising a negative, omnipresent and cosmic character. So that *avidyā* shall become the concept of the *Advaita Vedānta* system of thought, which developed during the 8th century A. D. Śānkara, the principal thinker of Advaita (considered by many western scholars the most important orthodox representative of the fundamental treble corpus of scriptures formed by the Upanishads, the *Bhagavat Gītā* and *Brahma Sūtra*)[11] thought that all forms of knowledge based on distinctions (e.g., between subject and object, man and world, *ātman* and *Brahman*) as *avidyā* and illusory. Briefly, the supposed knowledge which doesn't aim at the union of the individual

[9] Liviu Bordaş, *Individuaţie şi realitate în Advaita Vedānta. Încercare asupra filosofiei lui Şankara (I)*, „Origini. Caiete silvane", Zalău, nr.1(5), 2000, p. 23. For Śānkara, Brahman is identical with every human soul. See, also, R. C. Zaehner, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

[10] There is a similar idea concerning the senses, especially the sense-organs, in Buddhist tradition: "*When it is said that the means of valid knowledge is true knowledge, things such as sense-organs which are by nature insentient are by implication (sāmarthyāt) denied to be the means of valid knowledge, because they are incapable of ascertaining [the object]. Determining operation (paricchedakatva) is the function of a knower (boddhrtva), and this is innate only in knowledge. How then can it be the nature of such things as sense-organs which are by nature deprived of consciousness?*" (see Moksākaragupta, *The Tarkabhāsā*, I, 2.6, in Yuichi Kajiyama, *An Introduction to Buddhist Philosophy. An Annotated Translation of the Tarkabhāsā of Moksākaragupta*, „Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde", Herausgegeben von Ernst Steinkellner, Heft 42, Wien, 1998, p. 28.

[11] David Lorenzen, *Śānkara*, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, …, vol. 12, p. 8104–8106.

soul with Brahman was, from a spiritual point of view, nonsense and nescience. One may say that the foundation of human, empirical knowledge is ignorance, its object is also ignorance and it is pure illusion that follows too.

Śānkara's view of the human condition as having a natural tendency toward *avidyā* produced real metaphysical-theological controversies and various traditions among the Vedāntins, but their impact on the Hindu spirituality was almost unperceivable. Except for Baladeva[12], none of the great personalities who followed after Śānkara accepted his conviction that only *vidyā* would be a sufficient premise for liberation.

The concept of Brahman as nondeterminate being, without attributes (*nirguna Brahman*) and the one of the non-distinction between ātman and Brahman, yet identifiable in the Upanishads, has been well developed thanks to Śānkara, who gave them a philosophical and dialectical expression. The unity ātman-Brahman as a basic concern for Śānkara's reflection shows him not only as a simple philosopher or theologian, but mostly as a metaphysician, in the real meaning proper to the Indian context, having in view the individual's salvation from the painful and transmigratory existence. For him, the fatal mistake committed by some people was that of identifying the self with the body or mind, which was supposed to lead irreversibly to ignorance. This follows from his very words: "*He who knows the self (ātman), who knows that the body is not the self (ātman) and who is so firmly staying in knowledge as the common idea that the body is the self, becomes free even without desiring this*"[13]. A first source of this ignorance is mistaking the empirical dimension for the ultimate Real. *Moksha* becomes accessible to those having a special spiritual training and possessing the ability of concentrating intensely and meditate upon the meaning of the Upanishadic texts. This is the way of the people who gave up world and are ready to follow the way of discipline (*yoga*) or the way of knowledge (*jñāna*).

Śānkara's intention was to prove the self's existence and sustain the Upanishadic argument for an inner entity within the human being related to Brahman. The human self, *ātman*, is independent of the physical body and any mental or psychic aspect of man. From the error of those who identified the self with the body or psyche there results the source of all the human problems, *avidyā,* and from this, rebirth and future death. Samsāra and the world's grieves become, therefore, the consequence of the lack of knowledge. Without self-conscience, man would be deprived of liberation. Nevertheless, paradoxically, reintegration in Brahman doesn't mean anything else but a dissolution of the individual self into the infinite ocean of the Supreme Conscience, in a continuous process of depersonalization: "*As the flowing rivers disappear in the ocean, losing their name*

[12] J. Helfer, *Avidyā*, in *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions*, g.e. Keith Grim, Nashville, 1981, p. 84.

[13] Śānkara, *Upadeśasāhasrī (Cartea celor o mie de învăţături)*, IV, 5, tr. into Romanian and presentation by L. Bordaş, in „Origini. Caiete silvane", Zalău, nr. 1–2, 2003, p. 140.

(nāman) and their form (rūpa), thus the wise man, freed from name and form, goes to Purusha [the divine Person], the greater (para) than the great, the divine (divya) one"[14]. This is the end of the individual existence.

The Upanishadic period proved to the full the preoccupation of Indian thinkers with the existence's fundamental dilemmas and their genius in the matter of metaphysical speculation. To them, there is a clear interdependence link between the doctrine of *Karman* (deed, act), *samsāra* (soul's transmigrations cycle), as a logic and necessary consequence of the deeds, and *moksha* (self's liberation). We shall see that the three of them form the characteristic formula of the Indian philosophico-religious reflection, a visible fact from the following paragraph: "*There goes he who acts together with his deed (karman)/Where his sign, his thought is caught/Solving the act/Which he commits here on earth/From that world he returns again/To this world, in action. So much for the one who desires. But as to the one who does not desire, without desire, freed from desire, with his desire fulfilled, with his desire in the self (ātman), his vital spirits (prana) do not leave him, being Brahman himself, he goes to Brahman*"[15]. Man becomes what he does. If his desire is the self, then he shall share the liberation in Brahman, becoming consubstantial with him, in a mystic dissolution. Giving up desire means giving up any negative element and able to bond man more and more in the transmigration chaos. *Jñāna-marga* brings together with itself the possibility of attaining a fabulous knowledge which surpasses the world and individual's condition.

Man lives between science and nescience, knowledge and ignorance. This duality is one of the main features of human life. It depends on man's choice for the good way or the evil one. The question of knowledge and the necessary means, by which he can gain access to this, in order to establish a harmonious connection with the indefinite being, is essential for discovering the dialectics of any religious-philosophical system. If we refer to the Upanishadic corpus, then we have to mention that the central idea which wanders it is Brahman as object and ontological source of the perfect knowledge. Thus, on the one hand, as the great specialist in oriental studies Paul Deussen stated, *avidyā (jñāna)* comprises a negative meaning[16]. On the other, one can notice a positive meaning thanks to man's ability to become aware of the fact that mere empirical knowledge could stop or shade the discovery of Brahman. From this point of view, there are conceptual similarities between Śānkara (who developed the Upanishadic concept in his commentaries) and Plato, Parmenides or Immanuel Kant. In a word, the sensual world is pure illusion (*māyā*), only a phenomenon, but not the noumen in itself, or *das Ding-an-Sich*, as Kant would say.

[14] *Mundaka-Upanisad*, III, 2, 8, in *Upanishad*, tr. by O. C. Nedu; parallel text in M. Müller, *The Upanishads*, Part 2, *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 15, 1884, p. 41.

[15] *Brihadāranyaka-Upanisad*, IV, 4, 6, in *Cele mai vechi Upanişade*, tr. by R. Bercea; parallel text in M. Müller, *The Upanishads*, Part 2, in *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 15, p. 176.

[16] P. Deussen, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

As a concluding remark, we can be sure that the epistemic element is conspicuous in Indian thought. Moreover, it is an integral part of the soteriological process. The true knowledge not being the intellectual or experiential one, it implies a deep transformation, of the individual. We can speak rather of a knowledge as power of mastering all the aspects of the existence in an eternal perspective, a knowledge-power, extremely important for liberation as a final goal, a self-knowledge which is to demand a psycho-somatic *katharsis*, accessible by ascetism and meditation only. The Upanishads, without being analysed through a too traditional or scholastic perspective, as mere treatises of metaphysics, mystic or philosophy, are based on a *magic philosophy*[17], on the super spatial and super temporal abilities of the human self. We have to distinguish, beyond the simple abstract research of knowledge, the obvious inherent magic power of this knowledge, able to satisfy any desire, opening man's certainty of controlling his own destiny. In fact, this is a special problem of deeds, by which time and space, could be conquered, pain and ignorance could be defeated.

[17] Corrado Pensa, *Some Internal and Comparative Problems in the Field of Indian Religions*, "Studies in the History of Religions", Supplements to NVMEN, XIX, *Problems and Methods in the History of Religions*, Proceedings of the Study Conference organized by the Italian Society for the History of Religions on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the death of Raffaele Pettazzoni, Rome, 6th to 8th December 1969, ed. by U. Bianchi, C. J. Bleeker and A. Bausani, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1972, p. 114.