The Philosophical Theology of Jaiva Dharma

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The Philosophical Theology of Jaiva-Dharma

The Eternal Nature of the Soul

Part I: The Nature of Dharma

The Sanskrit word dharma can be understood variously, but it mainly pertains to that which sustains one’s connection with one’s eternal nature. This is the gist of Bhaktivinoda Thākura’s book Jaiva Dharma. To talk about one’s eternal nature implies that one also has a temporary nature. In his book, Bhativinoda attempts to explain, by its very title, the dharma of a living entity, the jīva. In other words, it attempts to explain what is that of the jīva that sustains its connection with its eternal nature. A jīva is a living entity suitable to live across both spiritual and material realms. It can have both a noumenal and a phenomenal nature.

In this series of articles, I will systematically present the philosophy of religion and the philosophical theology of Bhaktivinoda’s Jaiva Dharma. I will follow the book’s themes and analytically present its arguments for its thematic claims. As a starting point, the very nature of dharma is at issue. Bhaktivinoda will ultimately claim that the eternal nature of the individual soul is its eternal dharma and that this eternal nature is that of an eternal guidee of Kṛṣṇa, the supreme divinity of Vedāntic Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, the theological and philosophical school of which Bhaktivinoda is an adherent, and which revolves around the philosophy of the Upaniṣads, Brahma Sūtras, and Bhagavad-Gītā. Meanwhile, the initial argument revolves around an object's eternal and temporary nature. I will provide Bhaktivinoda’s thesis for the argument, a reconstruction of his view, and conclude with an upshot.

Bhaktivinoda’s conclusion for the argument concerning the nature of an object is that its changed nature is not the same as its real nature. His conclusion relies on the following premises: when an object manifests, a constant quality accompanies its manifestation. This continuous quality is the eternal dharma of the object. If this object associates with another, it undergoes a transformation resulting in the quality of the initial object being distorted and changed by the second object. This changed nature remains for a while and is often mistakenly perceived as the
eternal nature of this object. Nevertheless, Bhaktivinoda says this changed nature is not the object's real nature.\(^1\)

Bhaktivinoda provides an argument by analogy to exemplify his claim. The nature of water, he claims, is not its changed nature of solidity when it has become ice. In other words, when water manifests, liquidity accompanies its manifestation. Liquidity is the real nature of water. If the water becomes cold by circumstance, it undergoes a transformation resulting in its liquid nature being distorted and changed to solid. Solidity remains for a while and can be mistakenly perceived as the real nature of water. Solidity, nevertheless, is not the water’s real nature.\(^2\)

It is essential to mention the distinction between what Bhaktivinoda calls an object's eternal dharma and a Jīva's eternal dharma. By claiming that liquidity is analogically the eternal dharma of water, Bhaktivinoda claims that the everlasting nature of the material substance called water is liquidity. The eternal dharma of water is the lasting nature accompanying its primal manifestation. This is good to remember because when Bhaktivinoda mentions the eternal dharma of the Jīva, he is talking about a substance that is neither entirely material, like water, but also spiritual. The eternal dharma of the Jīva has to do more with its spirit than with its matter. Thus, the eternal dharma of the Jīva is not only a continuing nature that accompanies its primal spiritual and material manifestation but is intrinsically related to the spiritual side of its manifestation. This will become clearer shortly as Bhaktivinoda talks about the nature of the Jīva.

Bhaktivinoda argues that only those who know how to distinguish an object’s real and false natures truly know. He reasons that because the changed nature of an object arises from some cause, such as an association with another object, the changed nature disappears as soon as its cause is eliminated. Even though it changes the object, the changed nature disappears because the object’s real nature follows it all along. Being able to discern an object’s continuing real nature, one can then distinguish it from its false one. One then realizes that the real nature of an object is its eternal dharma since it is continually present even as the changed nature has changed.

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1 Bhaktivinoda, *Jaiva Dharma*, 15
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the object. The false nature of an object is temporary dharma only. Bhaktivinoda concludes by saying that one truly knows when one knows how to distinguish so.³

So far, Bhaktivinoda has talked a lot about the real and changed natures of objects, but he still needs to explain the ontology of an object as he sees it. For Bhaktivinoda, an object is an entity that exists. There are two types of objects: real and false. Real objects have spirit as their nature. False objects have matter as their nature. Bhaktivinoda explains that while a real object exists, a false object is only perceived to exist.⁴ In my view, this is not to say that the object is an illusion: it is real while it lasts but ultimately false because it only temporarily exists. He means this when he claims that what is perceived is sometimes real and false. When one sees the spiritual nature of the object, the object is perceived to really exist. When one perceives an object's material nature, although perceiving it, its existence is false but not illusional: it only temporarily exists. For Bhaktivinoda, a real object is spiritual; the spirit is only what really exists.

Again, Bhaktivinoda will employ an argument by analogy to exemplify his ontology of objects. For Bhaktivinoda, Bhagavān - a term denoting an ultimate divinity - is the only real object. It is the ultimate spirit. The Jīva - a spiritual soul dwelling inside a material body - is a portion of Bhagavān sharing in Bhagavān’s spiritual nature. Māyā - which allows for the spiritual soul’s misidentification with the material body through ego - is an energy of Bhagavān that dominates Jīvas while they live in a material realm. For Bhaktivinoda, the ontology of objects as a category can be reduced to these three factors: Bhagavān, Jīva, and Māyā. Just like he mentioned that one truly knows about objects when distinguishing their real and false natures, one has pure knowledge of objects when understanding the preceding relationship between Bhagavān, Jīva, and Māyā.⁵

More precisely, for Bhaktivinoda, the real and eternal nature of the Jīva is to be Kṛṣṇa’s eternal guidee - Kṛṣṇa being the ultimate personal manifestation of Bhagavān. The nature of the Jīva results from its manifestation of Tatāstha energy. This energy causes the Jīva to be different and simultaneously non-different from Kṛṣṇa. In other words, it is qualitatively one with Kṛṣṇa since it is a portion of him sharing his spiritual nature. Still, it is also quantitatively not one with

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Kṛṣṇa since the Jīva is a portion of Kṛṣṇa. Forgetting its non-difference with Kṛṣṇa, the Jīva becomes averse to Kṛṣṇa. Māyā gives the Jīva the suffering of Samsāra - repeated cycles of birth, death, old age, and disease in a material realm. For Bhaktivinoda, Kṛṣṇa is the eternal, complete object and, by analogy, like the sun - the jīvas being the sun's rays. As a portion of Kṛṣṇa, Bhaktivinoda relates, the Jīva is not like a rock broken off a mountain. Although many portions come off Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa remains complete. Thus, Kṛṣṇa is complete and independent, and the Jīva remains eternally dependent on him.⁶

Bhaktivinoda ultimately argues, therefore, that the eternal dharma of the Jīva is to be Kṛṣṇa’s eternal guidee. His conclusion relies on the following premises: because a pure spiritual object is the opposite of a material object, it cannot relate by its very nature to a material object. Thus, the Tatasthā energy is manifest to produce the jīva, which is an object suitable to have a relationship with both spiritual and material realms. Since it can fluctuate between the two, the jīva can be controlled by the material nature even though it is also spiritual. It is not, per se, a material object. The jīva is then different from both pure spirit and pure matter. Because of its association with matter, the Jīva has a changed nature with its accompanying temporary dharma. That is why living entities think they are their bodies and all accompanying misidentifications such as gender, race, sex, etc. This temporary dharma is then understood variously by various people to be the Jīva’s eternal dharma. The Jīva’s eternal dharma, however, is that of an eternal guidee of Kṛṣṇa.⁷

Thus, to the initial argument revolving around an object’s eternal and temporary nature, Bhaktivinoda’s attached conclusion is that the changed nature of an object is not the same as its real nature. The real nature is eternal, while the changed nature is temporary. Applying this argument to the relationship between Bhagavān, Jīva, and Māyā, the attached conclusion is that when the Jīva identifies itself with the material body, it identifies itself with its changed nature. But its changed nature is not the same as its real nature, which is to be a portion of Bhagavān whose ultimate personal manifestation is Kṛṣṇa. Māyā causes the Jīva to identify itself with its material body. Nevertheless, one who knows the eternal and temporary dharmas of the Jīva truly knows one’s real nature.

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The preceding is Bhaktivinoda’s philosophical theology regarding the nature of dharma. Philosophically, many questions remain: why should one accept that Kṛṣṇa is the ultimate personal manifestation of Bhagavān? How does it work out for the Jīva to be spirit and matter simultaneously? What proves that the Jīva is spirit also and not only matter? Why the priority of personalism over impersonalism regarding the ontology of the absolute? And why to claim universality for such a philosophical theology manifest as a sectarian theological and philosophical school? Bhaktivinoda will provide tentative questions to all these answers, and I will present and debate them within this series of articles.
Works Cited