

Field-Being and the Vedanta of Ramanuja

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In this paper I would like to examine how the theology of Ramanuja, a 12th century Hindu thinker of the Vedanta tradition, of the school of Visistadvaita, "qualified monism," can be studied and interpreted in terms of a field concept of being. I find that the notion of field-being at the first level refers to a world which is interconnected and marked by "incessant processes of activity." At the second level, the notion of field-being implies that there are no beings or things as such, but only fields of activity. According to Professor Tong this type of field thinking "constructs a conceptuality for the new millennium" and "does fuller justice to the universal experience of humanity." If this is the case, it is only appropriate that one examines the applicability of the concept of field-being to an important area of Indian philosophy, namely Vedanta philosophy. In the area of Vedanta philosophy there is one important reason to focus on the Vedanta of Ramanuja for this application of field theory, over against his Vedantic rival, namely Sankara (9th century AD). The reason is that the latter holds a non-dualistic view of Being (Brahman) which brands all experiences of plurality or diversity as ultimately illusory (*maya*), thereby bringing down all activity and dynamic interaction to the level of illusion. For Ramanuja, on the other hand, the Oneness or non-dualism of Brahman is true only in a qualified sense and not in a strict ontological sense. Ramanuja's "qualified monism" (*visistadvaita*) as a Vedantic school is built around the notion of a functional unity among three basic principles (*tattvas*) of Brahman (The Supreme Self/ Being), *atman* (individual self/ being), *prakriti*, primordial matter. The relationship among these principles is indeed very dynamic, and Ramanuja describes this relationship to be that of the self (*sariri*) and the body (*sarira*), with *atman* and *prakriti* constituting the body of Brahman. For Ramanuja, therefore, the absolute is not God (as such) and finite beings, but God in finite beings as their sustaining ground.

Ramanuja in his Sri Bhasya, a commentary on Badarayana's *Vedanta Sutra*, makes a distinction between Brahman in the causal state and Brahman in the "effected or produced state" in order to explain the state of unity where Brahman could be spoken as One only, and the state of multiplicity where Brahman becomes the sustaining ground for *atman* and *prakriti*

... the highest Self to whom the non-intelligent and intelligent beings stand in the relation of body, hence of modes, subsists in the form of the world, in its causal as well as in its effected aspect, and hence speak of the world in its double aspect as that which is (the Real); so e.g. 'Being only this was in the beginning, one only without a second—it desired, may I be many, may I grow forth—it sent forth fire....'¹

The "monism" of Ramanuja, therefore, is not to be understood as "non-dualism" (*advaita*) in the manner of Sankara. For Ramanuja, the self-body (*sariri-sarira*) relationship is eternal. We could venture to suggest that for Ramanuja there was never a "time" when Brahman remained unqualified. According to S.R. Bhatt:

... Ramanuja believes in the existence of a complex whole which includes both unity and diversity as integral elements. God is such a complex whole of which *cit* and *acit* constitute the modes. This idea is the very life blood of his philosophy. It is very well expressed by the term "*Visistadvaita*" which is assigned to his system.²

Like the Upanisads, Ramanuja solves the problems of one and many not by denying the many and affirming one, nor by denying one and affirming many but by making many the predicate of one. As a matter of fact one and many had never posed any problem to him, because he starts with the position that one, by its very nature... is impregnated with many.³

The concept of *apritaksiddi*, "inseparability" between the substance (Brahman) and its modes (*atman* and *prakriti*), is the central principle in the Vedanta of Ramanuja. For him creation is not creation *ex nihilo*

nor a process of One (Brahman) becoming many for instance as the Brahadaranyaka Upanishad describes by using the analogy of fire and sparks. For Ramanuja, even in the “pre-creation” state, due to the principle of inseparability, Brahman remains in relationship with *atman* and *prakriti*. This relationship is continued in the creation and post-creation states. Creation takes place at the initiative of Brahman, and it is a process in which the one becomes many: *Prakriti*, primordial matter, through an evolutionary process becomes manifold material world, gross and subtle, and *atman* becomes the manifold, embodied *jivas* (individual selves) assuming subtle and gross bodies. However, creation does not effect any changes in Brahman itself. The motive which prompts Brahman to create, Ramanuja describes as play (*lila*). Ramanuja writes in Sri Bhasya:

The motive which prompts Brahman—all whose wishes are fulfilled and who is perfect in himself—to the creation of the world comprising of all kinds of sentient and non-sentient beings dependent on his volition, is nothing else but sport, play. We see in ordinary life how a great king, ruling this earth with its seven *dvipas* (continents), and possessing perfect strength, valor, and son, has a game at balls, or the like, for no other motive than to amuse himself; hence there is no objection to the view that sport only is the motive prompting Brahman to creation, sustentation, and destruction of this world which is easily fashioned by his mere will.⁴

By describing creation as play Ramanuja avoids philosophical and logical difficulties connected with notions of necessary and purposive creation since both the concepts of “necessity” and “purpose” seem to impose limitations on the notion of “perfection” of Brahman. In the same process, Ramanuja also rejects the Advaita notion of creation as ultimately illusory (*maya*). For him, creation is real but not necessary or purposive. Play is an expression of divine spontaneity as well as joy and not something that involves deliberation or planning. Modern scholars of Ramanuja, highlighting this aspect of play, describe it as “purposeless purpose.” However, the spontaneity and joy side of play tells us also something about the intrinsic dynamism of Brahman. P.B. Vidyarthi writes:

Lila is a term that belongs to aesthetics and has reference to God indicating his freedom of expression. Isvara (Brahman) is Ananda, bliss and it is the very nature of Ananda ... to burst forth. Infinite Bliss or joy cannot remain pent up within itself. It must come out, must express itself. Infinite Bliss being itself the source and center of all happiness must find itself in the constant giving of its characters to all things. While It has itself nothing to seek, it fulfils itself in giving Itself to others. This is the secret of creation, of the creation of the world by God and it is this in sum, that seems to be real gist of Ramanuja’s theory of creation as *lila*, Sport, aesthetic delight.⁵

There are two sides to Ramanuja’s theology reflected in his theory of creation: one, the affirmation of the supremacy and transcendence of Brahman (*paratva*), and second, the theme of its closeness or accessibility (*saulabhya*). Supremacy is expressed by the fact that creation is not necessary and the accessibility is highlighted by the act of outpouring intrinsic to the nature of the creator reflecting its inseparable relationship with *atman* and *prakriti*. However, it is important to note that “inseparability” here does not imply “mutual dependence.” The dependence is one-sided-- *atman* and *prakriti* are dependent on Brahman for their sustenance while Brahman is not thusly dependent on them. By taking this position Ramanuja prefers to stay clear of what he considers a position of the Bhedabheda school of Bhaskara, where he finds that Brahman is “affected” by changes in its modes. According to the Bhedabheda, the Supreme Being, Brahman, though unconditioned by its nature, limits itself out of its own choice and becomes its sentient and non-sentient modes. In this situation, any condition that limits the modes also limits Brahman. In the words of P.N. Srinivasachari, for Ramanuja though, “Reality (Brahman) is qualified by plurality, but is not itself plural. The qualities co-exist as distincts and as ways of knowing Brahman.”⁶ The body is totally dependent on the soul for its very sustenance. But the reverse is not true. The independence of the Brahman as the Self in its relationship with the body interestingly enough does not imply the transcendence of Brahman’s relationship with its modes, the relationship is eternal. For Ramanuja, Brahman possesses innumerable auspicious qualities. These qualities are classified into two categories, *svarupa* and *svabhava*, essential or defining and inherent or natural qualities respectively. The *svabhava* qualities are

connected to the dimension of “accessibility” in contrast to *svarupa* qualities which are connected to the dimension of “supremacy” or “lordship.” A later classification by Sudarāna SØri identifies *svarupa* with the unchanging nature of the divine, and *svabhava* as linked to the situation of divine accessibility with qualities that are likely to undergo change.⁷

Five qualities are stated to be the defining qualities (*svarupa*) of Brahman. These are, *satya*, *jnana*, *ananta*, *anandamaya*, and *amalatva*: true being, knowledge, infinitude, bliss, and stainlessness or purity, respectively. Among the innumerable auspicious qualities connected to the *svabhava*, Ramanuja mentions *aisvarya*, *gambhira*, *audarya* and *karunya*: lordship, grandeur, generosity, and mercy respectively. These *svarupa* and *svabhava* aspects are often combined in Ramanuja’s description of Brahman:

We know from Scripture that there is a Supreme Person whose nature is absolute bliss and goodness; who is fundamentally antagonistic to all evil; who is the cause of origination, sustentation, and dissolution of the world; who differs in nature from all other beings, who is all-knowing, who by his mere thought and will accomplishes all his purposes; who is an ocean of kindness as it were for all who depend on him; who is all merciful; who is immeasurably raised above all possibility of any one being equal or superior to him; whose name is the highest Brahman.⁸

The transcendence of Brahman has to be read in the context of its active interaction with the created universe. Brahman’s transcendence and its intrinsic dynamism are factors to be equally reckoned with. This becomes more explicit when Ramanuja identifies Brahman with Vishnu. This is not to be understood as Brahman becoming Vishnu, as perhaps the second chain in the Great Chain of Being; rather Brahman is Vishnu. This identification is integral to qualities that emphasize divine accessibility. The accessibility qualities of Vishnu situate him as the redeemer and savior with reference to individual selves (*jivas*) in bondage (*samsara*). It is in this context, that the divine qualities of compassion such as (*karunya*), affection (*vatsalya*), generosity (*audarya*), etc., are stressed. P. N. Srinivasachari writes:

The infinite perfections of Isvara are dominated by the redemptive motive of *daya* (grace), and this view is the reorientation of the metaphysical qualities of *satya*, *jnana* and *ananta*, the ethical idea of *amalatva* or purity and the cosmological ideas omnipotence and omniscience. They are restated in the light of the redemptive motive of God as the attribute of *daya*. Brahman transcends the form and matter of *prakriti*, and is *niravayava* or formless and *nirguna* or attributeless, but he embodies Himself as *daya* to redeem the *jiva*. There is no God like unto the God of *daya*, and his mercy endures for ever and rains on all. His infinite perfections become valueless without *daya*.⁹

It is *daya* (grace) and, connected to this, the theme of divine accessibility which are expressed in the theology of Ramanuja when he discusses the three forms of divine manifestations, namely, *avatara*, *arca*, and *antaryami*. First, Vishnu assumes a number of human and non-human forms in order to make himself accessible to the *jivas* in bondage. This is the doctrine of divine incarnation (*avatara*) which is stated in the Bhagavad Gita and commented on by Ramanuja. Second, Vishnu makes himself accessible for worship and adoration in the form of *arca*, images (icons) in the temples. In addition to these his closeness is highlighted by the fact that the supreme being is present in each one of us in the form of an “inner-most being”—*antaryami*. The doctrine of divine incarnations is expounded in the first few verses of Chapter 4 in the Bhagavad Gita where Krishna, the incarnate Lord, tells Arjuna:

For Me have passed many
Births, and for thee, Arjuna:
These I know all;
Thou knowest not...
For whenever of the right
A languishing appears
A rising of unright
Then I send Myself forth.

For the protection of the good,
 And for the destruction of evil-doers,
 To make firm footing for the right,
 I come into being in age after age.¹⁰

It is important to note how Ramanuja interprets the purpose of divine incarnations, many of which are in human form. Ramanuja contends that the real purpose of incarnation is not so much to protect the good and destroy evil, which can be accomplished by the mere exercise of divine will, but to spiritually sustain those *jivas* who yearn intensely for a personal encounter with the Supreme Being. The only way that this yearning can be satisfied is by the Supreme Being assuming a “suitable” form which happens in the process of divine incarnation (*avatara*). The destruction of evil is only an incidental matter in this process. By assuming a human form, God enables human beings in the state of bondage (*samsara*) to establish some sort of relationship with him; such a relationship could assume forms of friendship, of parental love for children, or of lover and beloved, as incarnations happen in the context of time and space. These are indeed various forms of “love relationship”, which, while not fully developed in the writings of Ramanuja, are part of the Vaishnava tradition which he inherited.

The second form of divine manifestation is the iconic images used in places of worship, especially in the temples. One of the devotional writings of Ramanuja called Sri Rangagadya is addressed to the deity worshipped in the famous Vaishnava temple at the city of SriRangam, where Ramanuja served in some official capacity. Here he extols the iconic presence of Vishnu in the form of Sri Ranganatha. The *arca* theology becomes the focal point in post-Ramanuja theology, especially in the two forms of Sri Vaishnavism of Southern India. Each temple that houses the icon of Vishnu is considered a heavenly abode on earth. The icons in the Vaishnava tradition represent “the real presence” of the divine. Hence temples that house the icons are gateways for personal encounter with Vishnu, the Supreme Being.

The third form of divine presence that highlights the theme of divine accessibility is the presence of the divine as the inner-most being (*antaryami*) in all life-forms. This inner-most being is first of all a power or energy source without which no human action is possible. It is in this context that Ramanuja describes the relationship between the individual selves (*jivas*) and the Supreme Self (Brahman/ Vishnu) as a body-soul relationship (*sarira-sariribhava*). It is the presence of soul that enables the body to be active. Without the soul, body is simply inert matter. Second, the innermost presence also shows the closeness of the Supreme Being to every living being. The Supreme is so close to us that we can easily find him in ourselves. Thus the *antaryami* presence becomes the supreme instance of divine accessibility.

Thus divine transcendence and divine accessibility are central doctrines to the Vedanta of Ramanuja. They are linked as divine nature (*svarupa*) and divine disposition (*svabhava*). The transcendent dimension is non-relational whereas the accessibility dimension is relational. The link that he provides between these two dimensions is to be appreciated in the context of the process of “juxtaposition of the opposites” where Ramanuja brings together notions of divine immanence with transcendence, accessibility with inaccessibility, and nearness with “otherness.” The nearness of the divine has to be appreciated in the context of divine otherness. For Ramanuja, such a viewing of the divine in its paradoxical dimension generates devotion (*bhakti*) which is also a central concept in Ramanuja’s theology. Since qualities associated with divine disposition (*svabhava*) are relational they are to be read in an “active way.” For example, qualities such as condescending grace, compassion, accessibility, etc., are to be understood as being graceful, as being compassionate, and as being accessible.

We could find the relational focus also in Ramanuja’s epistemology, in his category of “attributive consciousness” (*dharmabhutajnana*). For him, perception is a dynamic process which involves active interaction between the knowing subject with the object known, instead of it being a passive occurrence in the manner of a mirror reflecting an object without one’s being in actual contact with the object. Unlike the Samkhya school of philosophy where there is a dichotomy between the self and the not-self, in Ramanuja, the self (*atman*) and the not-self (*prakriti*), interact with one another in any situation of

“knowing.”

Another principle of logic central to Ramanuja is the principle of co-ordination (*samanadhikarana*) which stresses the dynamic relationship and inseparability (*apritaksiddhi*) between substance (*prakarin*) and its modes or attributes (*prakara*). The centrality of the body-soul relationship in the metaphysics of Ramanuja as the relationship between Brahman on one side, and *atman* and *prakriti*, on the other, makes relational dimension highly important. But could we read this relational situation of embodiment as a field of mutual interaction and interpenetration? We should note at this point that the human embodiment is different from “Divine embodiment.” The human embodiment is operational at the level of samsara (bondage) where one’s actions are not freely chosen. They are conditioned and determined by karma. Such constrained actions result in the experience of pleasure, pain and other frailties of human life. The divine embodiment, on the other hand, is free of all conditioning factors. For Ramanuja, the divine embodiment is eternal as it is the relationship between the three eternal principles with Brahman as the Self and *atman* and *prakriti* as its body.

Keeping in mind the essential qualities (*svarupa*) of Brahman that account for its transcendence, Ramanuja denies the possibility of the body affecting the Self in any manner. This is true even in situations that highlight its dispositional qualities (*svabhava*). The Supreme Being maintains aloofness even in the situation of its interaction with the samsaric world, it appears! This has important implications also for the doctrine of divine incarnations (*avatars*) especially in post-Ramanuja theology. The divine incarnations involve situations where the divine assumes human forms, as in the case of Rama and Krishna, and lives “full lives” from “birth to death” among other human beings. However, these incarnations are assumed at the initiative of the divine as the Gṛt points out.¹¹ Thus there are no external constraints that initiate the process of divine incarnations (*avatara*) and constrain their actions in the incarnate state. This is in contrast to human reincarnations which are determined by an individual’s karma. The actions of incarnate beings flow from the very “dispositional” attributes (*svabhava*) of the divine. There are, however, some difficult theological problems with regard to the “human life” of these incarnate beings. The descriptions that we find in narration of the epics and the Puranas often portray them with human feelings and emotions, such as anger, despair, and grief, and limited in their knowledge like other humans. When a theological question is raised as to whether the Supreme Being is really transformed into human beings in its incarnate state so that they could also experience the frailties of the human condition, often the responses we get from the Vaisnava theologians are in the negative. Even in the incarnate state, they would urge, the divine nature is fully maintained and hence it is not subjected to human conditions. At best, divine incarnations “appear” to be angry, appear to grieve, appear to be ignorant, etc., since these experiences are meaningful only to those who are bound to samsara, and whose actions are governed and regulated by the law of karma. Thus, when one acts freely, one does not experience human emotions or limitations. Such is the case, one could see, in the *moksha* state where freedom from samsara is achieved, and where actions have no karmic consequences. Though the incarnate beings live in the world, strictly they are not of the world.

Such a “Gnostic rendering” of divine incarnation is also the consequence of what I would describe as the typical Vedantic definition of “reality.” The view that “reality” is that which does not change, and that whatever changes is not ultimately “real” is common to both Sankara and Ramanuja. Hence change cannot truly be attributed to Brahman or to any of its forms. Sankara’s non-dual Vedanta, applies this principle of reality fully leading to the assessment of the changing day-to-day world as ultimately illusory (*maya*). Ramanuja, beginning with three eternal principles based primarily on scriptural testimony, tends to admit the reality of change in the realm of individual selves (*atman/jivas*) and the material world but guards zealously Brahman (Ultimate Reality) against the possibility of change. However, this task of guarding Brahman from change is extended by Ramanuja even into the realm of attributes that follow from divine dispositions (*svabhava*), such as mercy (*karunya*), compassion (*daya*), concern for creatures (*sauharda*), and tender affection (*anuraga*).

In order to understand this, we have to look at two different models of relationships between the finite and

infinite used by Ramanuja in his writings. First is the model of subjects and the king; second is the model of servant (slave) and master (*sesa-sesibhava*). In the first model, the qualities listed above are favors granted by the king to his subjects. These come after subjects have been loyal and the king has been honored.¹² In the second model, these are fitting qualities for a master vis-à-vis the servant who serves him faithfully. Later schools of Srivaishnavism introduce models of intimate relationship where these qualities are related to the theme of “forgiving love.” Hence a “vertical model” of relationships based on hierarchy becomes a “horizontal” model where there is no clearly marked hierarchy. At this stage, what for Ramanuja is “a tension in unity” between divine supremacy and divine accessibility gets tilted in favor of divine accessibility and closeness. On a related issue, the following comments of John Carman on Ramanuja are worth mentioning:

In the thought of Ramanuja, God seems to have two somewhat different relationships to man’s religious activities. In the first relationship, He presides over the working of the law of karma. Here he does not interfere with the moral decisions and religious activities (or absence of such activities) on the part of the finite self...God’s second relationship to man’s moral and religious actions is quite different from the first. He actively intervenes, both in the life of the individuals and in the affairs of the world as a whole. He manifests himself in the empirical universe, or in other terms, descends periodically from his perfect and eternal realm of bliss to constantly changing world filled with misery or, at best, only limited happiness. There is not, in Ramanuja’s mind, any contradiction between the first relationship of Law and the second relationship of Grace, but there is a clear distinction between the two relationships. Indeed Ramanuja’s followers found it difficult completely to reconcile the two, because of the prominence that Ramanuja gave to the second relationship, in which God intervenes in the affairs of the world.¹³

As we have seen, Ramanuja’s Vedanta in contrast to Sankara’s Vedanta is more open to the possibility of Brahman being interpreted as a field of relationships. However, it gets limited because Ramanuja shares with other Vedanta thinkers a common definition of Reality as that which is not subject to change. This he applies in no uncertain terms to Brahman or Vishnu, and his notion of body—soul relationship keeps Brahman away from the changing categories that belong to its body, namely matter (*prakriti*) and the selves (*jivas*). However, the “relational” side of the same body-soul relationship as “embodiment” makes it possible for us to conceive of a dynamic relationship between Brahman and the manifold material world with embodied beings. Thus, Ramanuja’s Brahman has two sides: the Absolute non-relational transcendental side and the relational accessible immanent side and I want to argue that both sides are important in understanding the nature of Brahman in Ramanuja’s theology. Hence, Ramanuja’s theology is closer to “panentheism,” using a category from Charles Hartshorne, than it is either to classical theism or to pantheism.¹⁴

It is true that Charles Hartshorne places Ramanuja in the category of a classical theist and pantheist in his *Philosophers Speak of God*, but a careful examination of Ramanuja’s theology, as has been done by John Plott,¹⁵ will show that he is closer to panentheism than to standard forms of theism and pantheism. However, referring to the Hindu philosophical scene, Hartshorne seems to acknowledge the role that Ramanuja’s theology played in creating a “healthy instability” resulting in “approaches to dipolarism or panentheism.” Hartshorne writes:

...what we claim for him (Ramanuja) is not net superiority to Sankara. We do question the notion that the latter contains all the truth that is in his successor. Rather as it is with classical theism and pantheism: they are complementary forms of, each with its own defects and merits; and the grand issue of monopolarity versus dipolarity is scarcely covered at all in the main philosophical tradition of India. But, thanks in no part to Ramanuja, a healthy instability does obtain and now and then results in approaches to dipolarism or panentheism, as in Sri Jiva of more recent times. Ramanuja thus had apparently something like the role of William James in our culture. With immense courage and penetration he attacked the doctrines often supposed to be almost invulnerable and at least weakened the force of pretensions with which they were hedged about.¹⁶

I want to conclude by suggesting that this labeling of Ramanuja as a “panentheist,” opens up the possibility that Ramanuja, among the classical Ved¹ntic theologians, most profoundly invites a field-being analysis, a task which I have attempted to do some what peripherally in this paper. A fuller exploration that carefully situates Ramanuja among the Vedantic luminaries, and a detailed exposition of his basic formulations still needs to be done, a task which I hope to undertake in the future.

NOTES

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- ¹ Vedanta-Sutras with Ramanuja’s Commentary, (trans. George Thibaut), (1971). Delhi: Motilal Benarsidass, pp. 140-141.
 - ² Studies in Ramanuja’s Vedanta, (1975). New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, p.25.
 - ³ Ibid..
 - ⁴ II.1.33, Thibout, 477.
 - ⁵ P.B. Vidyarthi, Divine Personality and Human Life in Ramanuja, (1973). New Delhi: Motilal Benarsidass, p. 117.
 - ⁶ P.N. Srinivasachari, The Philosophy of Visistadvaita, (1978). Adyar: The Adyar Library and Research Centre, pp, 100-101.
 - ⁷ John Braisted Carman, The Theology of Ramanuja An Essay in Interreligious Understanding, (1981). Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, p, 91.
 - ⁸ IV.4.22. Thibaut, 770.
 - ⁹ P.N. Srinivasachari, 164-165.
 - ¹⁰ IV.5; 7-8. The Bhagavad Gita, (trans., Franklin Edgerton,) . (1964). New York: Harper & Row.
 - ¹¹ IV.6.
 - ¹² Sri Bhasya III.2.40, Thibaut, 626-628.
 - ¹³ John Carman, 176.
 - ¹⁴ I want to state that Ramanuja’s theology affirms the “law of polarity.” See: Philosophers Speak of God, Introduction, 2-4.
 - ¹⁵ “Ramanuja as Panentheist,” Journal of Annamalai University,xvii (1953), 65-90.
 - ¹⁶ Charles Hartshorne & William L. Reese, Philosophers Speak of God (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 178-179.