

Knowledge, reason and human autonomy: A review article*

DAYA KRISHNA
Rajasthan University, Jaipur

1

Prof. N. V. Banerjee was one of those rare persons on the Indian philosophical scene who devoted himself single-mindedly to philosophical reflection without caring much for illusory attractions of power which most academicians seek in India by rising (or falling?) to positions of administrative authority in the official educational establishment of the country. Whenever one dropped in at his residence near the Delhi University area where he lived after his retirement, one would find him working on some latest book of his, out of which he would read a few pages which would always reveal the freshness of his approach and the seriousness of his concern for philosophical issues that was so conspicuously missing in many of his contemporaries. Most people lose interest in intellectual matters as they grow older; many actually 'retire' from intellectual life after retirement; many other just go on repeating what they had said earlier. Not so, Prof. N. V. Banerjee. He continued to think and grow and write till almost the end of his life. His was the life of an active mind and the last work of his, posthumously published, shows him at the height of his powers as a philosophical thinker who had to say something of his own.

Published in 1985—a year after his death in 1984 at the age of eighty-seven—this book brings many of the themes of his earlier work into a new focus and a new unity which not only stands apart but is also, in many ways, independent of his earlier work. The diverse strands found in the earlier work are not only brought together and unified in a new way, but many new ideas are brought to enrich the whole which is the result of deep and sustained thought spread over a life-time.

Prof. Banerjee's thought is 'anthropocentric' in the best sense of the term. Whether we like it or not, we *are* there and we are aware that we are there. The very starting point of Banerjee's philosophical reflection is, thus, not the isolated Cartesian *cogito*, or the Husserlian 'transcendental ego' which has 'bracketed' the world, or the pure *puruṣa* of *Sāṃkhya* who is the eternal subject which can never be an object to itself or know that there are other *puruṣas* in the world besides itself, or the Advaitic Ātman which has no other or the non-Advaitic Ātmans which have an essential relationship only with

*N.V. Banerjee, *Knowledge, Reason and Human Autonomy*, Bombay, Somaiya Publications Pvt. Ltd. 1985.

the Lord and which either have no knowledge of other selves or know them only as fellow-devotees who are totally immersed in some form or other of the *bhakti* of the divine. Rather, it is man in the plural—man not as 'I' but as 'we', the 'we's'—who alone may communicate and have a dialogue or rather a 'multi-logue' amongst themselves. There is, of course, the whole inanimate world of nature and the living world of animals and plants with which he is in some sort of relationship also. Banerjee's distinction between the relationship at these different levels is in terms of the possibility of communication as well as its degree and mutuality. Inanimate nature, thus, is a 'bare other' to us as any manner of intercommunication between man and nature seems impossible. There may, of course, be 'empathy', 'whether purely natural as in the case of primitive man or predominantly aesthetic as in the case of the poet or the artist'.¹ Strangely, Banerjee also thinks that the 'otherness' of nature may also be construed as 'hostility' on the part of nature, particularly in the context of 'the rigour of the biological law of survival to which he is unavoidably subject'.²

The problem of communication between man and animate nature, specially with that part of it which has been brought into human orbit by domestication and keeping of pets, is considered by our philosopher, though only marginally. The plant world is, of course, totally ignored. The animal world is all lumped together, and not much attention is paid to the difference in communication that man is able to establish with some of the so-called higher species as against all others. However, a significant point is made when it is suggested that, even though linguistic intercommunication is not possible between man and animals, interbehavioural communication is possible. And, instead of the relation of 'empathy' which man develops towards inanimate nature in order to overcome its essential 'otherness', the relation with animate nature is characterized by 'sympathy'. And just as there can be a feeling that nature is 'hostile' to man, so also there may be such feeling with respect to the animal world. Only, in their case, the relationship of 'hostility' may be mutual, as it normally cannot obtain between man and nature. The relation with the animal world is, thus, characterized either by sympathy or hostility or even indifference—the last being existentially different from what he has called 'non-hostility' to nature.

The possible relationships between the human and the animal world are, in a sense, reproduced in the relationships within the human world, but only, so to say, at the animal level. The strictly human relationship is essentially beyond these; it lies in what he has called their '*essentiality to one another*'.³ The so-called 'we' of the human situation with which we all start is not 'I and others', but rather 'I with others' where the word 'with' is supposed to undo the alienation implied by the word 'other'.⁴ Man's relationship with man operates, thus, at a dual level, the animal, that is, the vital-biological, and the strictly human. The former is the inevitable result of his 'unavoidable biological birth' and makes him treat others as he treats the other non-human

species, that is, the animals. The latter, on the other hand, is a 'demand' on him of which he is vaguely aware and in whose realization his essential being may be actually said to consist in.

The varieties of 'otherness' and the diversities in modes of relationship with respect to it and the ways of its annulment is, then, the focus of Banerjee's inquiry. Everything is anthropocentric from the beginning, and, in fact, cannot but be so. Man is at the centre of philosophical enquiry, but not the isolated, lonely, monadic man of most philosophical thinking, or even the socio-political man of Aristotle or Confucius or Marx or Manu; but rather a being who has a relation of 'essentiality' with all other human beings; and who is somehow allergic to 'otherness' and tries to overcome it in one way or another. 'Basic otherness' is what characterizes inanimate nature in relation to man as he cannot communicate with it in human terms at all. Man relates to it in terms of knowledge, according to Banerjee, and the 'otherness' of the 'other' is sought to be removed by *empathy* 'which enables man to project his personality into what is an "other" to him and thereby make him feel his community with the latter'.⁵ If empathy is the way in which the 'otherness' of the inorganic world is sought to be overcome, then 'sympathy' is the way through which the 'otherness' is attempted to be overcome in respect of living beings with whom one can enter 'into linguistic intercommunication or at least inter-behavioural relation'.⁶ It is the latter, that is, the inter-behavioural relationship which brings the animal world within the scope of human sympathy and excludes the plant world from it, even though the latter is as much a part of the living world as the former. However, 'sympathy', even when it is confined to human beings, is essentially a one-sided affair and does not involve mutuality. Also, as 'the object of sympathy, whether an animal or a human being, is, after all, an *object*', it 'can by no stretch of imagination be regarded as strictly human'.⁷

If neither empathy nor sympathy can overcome the 'otherness' of the other, then can anything else do so? Communication is one way of overcoming the otherness. But communication may consist in the impartation of information about things or oneself, or in some cases about the feelings of persons. 'Sharing of feeling' is one way of overcoming 'otherness' and bridges the alienation between man and man. But, while sharing of feeling may help in overcoming of 'otherness', it may also, so to say, unite a particular group, whether it be a tribe, community, race or nation *against* other groups; and thus 'contribute to the aggravation of *otherness*' proving 'ruinous to the cause of the establishment of human relations'.⁸ Also, feelings and emotions are both evanescent and contingent, that is, dependent upon some situation, and hence can hardly be relied upon as means for 'the establishment of fellowship among individuals'.⁹

Treating knowledge as totally irrelevant to the situation as it essentially presupposes the 'otherness' of the object in order to exercise its function, and disappointed with feelings and emotions for the reasons mentioned above,

Banerjee turns to Will in the hope that he might find in it the clue to the solution of the problem he has set for himself. But Will, for Banerjee, is not just something concerned with action in the restricted sense of the term, as it has usually been understood in philosophical literature. Rather, it is seen as taking diverse forms such as the *Will to create*, the *Will to believe*, and the *Will to adjust* which lie, according to him, at the foundations of art, religion and morality—the three great adventures of the human mind 'which, in the last analysis, are but man's *immediate* attempts to establish communion between himself and his fellows'.¹⁰

But do these three enterprises of the human spirit succeed in offering 'any solution to the most human of all human problems—the problem of the conquest of otherness'?¹¹ The whole of the Part II of the book is devoted to an exploration of the answer to this question. As for art, Banerjee's conclusion is that, though 'artistic appreciation brings about an extraordinary and indeed a unique relation between the appreciator and the artist as represented by his work of art', the two, placed in this relation, remain basically 'external to each other, with the result that the problem of the conquest of *otherness* is left unresolved'.¹² As for the work of art itself, it essentially consists, for Banerjee, in 'the attempt to translate, in one manner or another, the ethereal vision of perfect adjustment or harmony into some *perceptible form* or other'.¹³ Now, this 'vision of perfect harmony which is essential to artistic creativity implies *transcendence*... from the world of change of which he himself is a part' and hence 'in art man finds a way of escape from the tyranny of time in the sense of the temporal series'. 'His refuge', here, 'however, is not the timeless or the eternal, but the *specious present* which is but the synopation of the temporal series through the absorption of the *before* and the *after* in the *now*'.¹⁴ Thus, neither the person who creates nor the person who appreciates is able to overcome the 'otherness'—the task which was sought to be attempted through the pursuit of art by man.

Does religion as the 'Will to believe' or morality as the 'Will to adjust', then, fare any better than art in the fundamental task which has been set for humanity or which humanity has set for itself, and without whose fulfilment the central problem of all human life will remain unresolved? Religion, for Banerjee, is basically rooted in the primal fear of annihilation, on the one hand, and the sense of the mysterious, on the other. The solution that religion builds out of these two is to posit a realm of the supernatural, and thus provide a transcendental solution to the foundational problem which hardly touches the essentially human dimension of the problem. The basic issue in this context for Banerjee is how religion, in whatever way it may be imagined, conceives of the relation between man and man and not between man and God or between man and himself which seem to have been the central concerns of most religions up till now. Seen in this perspective, the religious quest of man seems to be wanting in essential respects. First, it seems to be concerned too much with personal immortality and/or personal liberation or

salvation. Secondly, its relation to other human beings is basically minimal, indirect and instrumental. Also, the relation between a religious person, whether he be God-centric or Self-centric (the self with a capital S), and the other is basically that of a *Guru* and *Śiṣya* or master and disciple, that is, essentially asymmetrical. The religious solution to the problem of the conquest of 'otherness' thus is primarily transcendental, that is, tangential in character.

But, while both art and religion may be treated as tangential solutions to the essential problem of man as seen by Banerjee, how can the same be said about morality which, at least *prima facie*, seems to be concerned directly with the problem itself. The basic problem with both art and religion was that they were 'attempts to solve the problem in question through the intermediary of a system of symbols regarded as an extraordinary dimension of reality, *instead of in and through the ordinary sphere of human behaviour*'.¹⁵ But that is exactly what morality seeks to do, that is, concern itself with the ordinary, day-to-day, world of interpersonal behaviour of man. But, for Banerjee, this is only an apparent or seeming superiority, for 'owing to a certain peculiarity of its nature, the solution in its case, as in the case of aesthetic and religious experience, cannot but be indirect'.¹⁶ And, if something is not direct and immediate, it cannot count as a real solution for Banerjee.

There is, however, a basic distinction between moral experience and religious experience for Banerjee, as the former is essentially non-judgemental for him unlike the latter which consists in judgements of belief. In this respect, moral experience is closer to aesthetic experience as both are non-judgemental in nature according to his analysis, and he treats them as such. The difference between the two, according to him, is that, while aesthetic experience is still *epistemic* as it is 'nothing apart from the contemplation of beauty in some perceptible form or other',¹⁷ moral experience is *activistic* in character. Moral experience, then, is not only non-judgemental, non-epistemic and activist but activist in a sense which is primarily intentional in character rather than as indicating the actual behaviour in which it embodies itself. As he writes, commending Kant: '... moral experience, despite the fact that it is *activistic*, primarily refers to a disposition of the human mind and not to overt acts and their consequences'.¹⁸ The overt behaviour is basically secondary to the actor and becomes *primary* only to the onlooker or to those who are affected by the action, thus becoming the subject of moral judgements from their point of view. Perhaps, this is the reason why Banerjee thinks that the solution offered by morality to the essential problem of man is also not satisfactory, for it results in 'the anomaly which consists in that man is a person and yet appears not to be a person but a *mere* individual to others'.¹⁹

Such a situation requires one to distinguish between 'the demands that arise in, and are confined within the limitations of man as *mere* individual and the demand for the mere individual's being the person that man essentially is'²⁰ and the conflicts within and between the two realms. Banerjee further distinguishes between the demands 'confined within the limitations of the

mere individual' which are bound to be many and various and 'the demand for this very individual's being the person'²¹ which cannot but be just one and only one by its very nature. Further, while the former have power, but no authority; the latter has authority, but no power. Thus, 'it is evident that the conflict ... is, in the final analysis, between power and authority'.²² And it is this conflict which lies at the heart of that feeling of constraint which is essential to moral experience distinguishing it from those which are non-moral in character. The conflict and the constraint engendered thereby are sought to be resolved by formulation of 'certain standards or patterns of human behaviour in terms of certain rules of conduct' which 'play the same role of an intermediary in the field of morality as is done by relevant symbolic systems in the fields of art and religion'.²³ But while 'an intermediary in the shape of some symbolic system or other is an essential need of both aesthetic and religious experience, the admission of such things as standards or patterns of human behaviour is ruinous to moral experience in the manner of the denial of its essential directness'.²⁴ And this abrogation of 'directness' is the only reason given by Banerjee for the inability of moral experience to solve the fundamental problem of overcoming 'otherness', and thereby becoming a 'person' in the genuine sense of the term.

At this point, one may wonder that, if knowledge is irrelevant to the solution of the human problem and if art, religion and morality are only escapes from attempting to solve the problem, what else would fill the bill? Or, in other words, what surprise Banerjee has up his sleeve or what miraculous solution has he to offer to a problem which seems to have been formulated in terms that appear to render its solution impossible in principle? But, like a good story-teller, he keeps the reader in suspense, and takes a detour to discuss whether the human situation has been radically altered by the new phase in which science and technology dominate the scene and art, religion and morality seem to have taken a back seat.

The radical change in the human situation in the context of which the basic human task of becoming a person through the conquest of 'otherness' in respect of his fellow human beings is articulated by Banerjee in terms of what he calls 'the advancement of the "understanding of what is known"'.²⁵ Knowledge, for Banerjee, is essentially 'perceptual knowledge', which is rooted in 'basic otherness' and 'mere otherness', and which man shares with animals, barring some minor differences which derive from the type of perceptual structures that he possesses as a matter of biological heritage. Such knowledge 'in the case of man as well as in the case of animals is invariably an occasion for the occurrence of overt actions or else the arousal of the tendency to act'.²⁶ However, the distinction between man and animal in this respect, according to Banerjee, is that in man there is the additional 'demand for the understanding of whatever is known'. And it is this demand which leads to science, mathematics and logic. But, 'understanding', for Banerjee, is not purely cognitive in nature as both rationalists and empiricists have

tended to conceive it. Rather, it 'is a bi-dimensional faculty, being cognitive-performatory'. Not only this, it is also essentially social in character, and thus leads to what he calls 'technology-science'. In his own words: '... the possibility of technology-science is dependent upon understanding regarded as both cognitive and performatory on the one hand, and characteristically social on the other'.²⁷ But this 'sociality is no conquest over egoity, but, on the contrary, amounts to the enlargement or expansion of egoity'.²⁸ And, in a sense, this expansion of egoity tends to overcome some of the intrinsic limitations involved in the egoity of man as a mere individual. Understanding, thus, as technology-science, is to be seen as the attempt on the part of the expanded egoity of man to exploit nature, and, in the process, also to learn to exploit other societies, other men.

Understanding, then, like the vital drives at the individual level, is allied to power which has both a positive and a negative aspect: positive in that it is necessary for survival and progress; and negative in that it leads to exploitation and dehumanization. But, in order that the strictly human task of the overcoming of egoity and the realization of essentiality be accomplished, it is essential that there be a faculty in man other than understanding whose authority it may accept, at least to some extent. And this Banerjee finds in imagination, but imagination in his own peculiar sense of the word. Rejecting the usual classification of imagination in terms of 'productive' and 'reproductive', Banerjee raises the question as to what is the specific form and content uniquely belonging to this faculty of the human mind, and contrasts it with perception, on the one hand, and memory, on the other. Both perception and memory have a content, a variable content, and a form which, though needing to be discovered, is yet invariant in character. In the case of imagination, however, both its form and content have to be discovered and have to be the same for all persons. 'Thus Imagination', according to Banerjee, 'is that faculty of the human mind in whose case the content as well as the form are each universal without being subject to variation'.²⁹

Imagination, then, is what really provides universality and unites men in an essential manner as both its form and content are one, and, thus, shared by all human individuals, however different otherwise they may be. What, then, is the form and content of imagination is one of the central questions of Banerjee's inquiry. His answer regarding the real universal form of imagination—which is not just general as concepts are, or just abstract as the entities with which logic and mathematics deal with, nor some *a priori* intuition, for all intuitions are particular—is that it is time, time understood in a particular way. Normally, time is supposed to consist of the triad before-now-after where each enjoys an equal status and the three collectively constitute its reality. But, for Banerjee, this is not so. The so-called 'now' is 'mainly concerned with perceptual knowledge', and hence may be regarded 'as the formal aspect of this kind of knowledge'.³⁰ And this means that the "now" is essentially spatial and, in a sense, indistinguishable from "here" which may well be regarded

as the paradigm of the spatial references involved in knowledge derivable from perception.³¹ As for 'before', it obviously seems to be related to memory, and may be regarded as its form in a certain sense, conveying basically a sense of 'absence' characterized by something 'not being here'.

Interestingly, Banerjee has some externally perceptive and novel remarks to make with respect to space as it may be conceived in itself and space as it is seen under the influence of time. He writes:

But, while space itself is characterised by simulaneity and is *infinitely* divisible, space as determined by the influence of time presents itself *successively* and not *simultaneously* nor as infinitely divided, but as embracing the distinctions of 'now' and 'before'.³²

Thus, both 'before' and 'now' of the temporal triad are not purely temporal in nature, but rather 'temporalized spatial determinations', or rather space as it is apprehended under the influence of time.

What remains of the temporal triad is only 'after', and this, according to Banerjee, constitutes the real essence of time as unlike the 'before' and the 'now' it is completely non-spatial. It should, however, be understood that to think that there is, or can be, an 'after' to the 'after' itself, would be to conceive it in spatial terms, as it would make the 'after' turn into the 'now' or the 'before' once more. The 'after', thus, is ceaseless and endless, and 'its ceaselessness and endlessness imply that the "after" is one without division or break within itself or, in other words, is an undivided or unbroken whole; for division or break implies cessation or end'.³³ Yet, though time is endless in the sense of 'after', it need not be beginningless or rather 'the question whether it has a beginning or not is irrelevant in its case'.³⁴

Time as 'after', thus, is the form of imagination. But, then, what is its content? The content obviously would have to be intimately connected with the form, and, as the form consists essentially of time as the endless 'after', it is bound to be something that is to be endlessly realized by man of something which is essentially *for* man also. And this Banerjee calls the universal plan of action which is concerned with the realization by man of his essentiality with others and rising from being a mere individual sufficient unto himself to becoming a person essentially related to everyone else.

Now, imagination with time as its form and the one universal plan of action as its content exercises an influence on understanding which is bi-dimensional in that it is both cognitive and performatory at the same time giving rise to technology-science, on the one hand, and the human enterprises of what may be called the theoretical and practical reason on the other. Understanding in the form of technology-science usually allies itself with the power of the vital drives with their assertion of strident individuality against the gentle voice and authority of imagination.

[But] the impact of imagination upon Understanding succeeds in bringing about the disturbance of the equilibrium of the complex of performance-knowledge which characterizes Understanding and, in particular, is essential to its productivity of power. In consequence, Understanding is rendered indifferent to *power* which it is eminently fitted to beget; and it launches upon an altogether new career under the title of Reason with freedom to emphasize the importance of performance and knowledge *disjunctively* so as to function as Practical Reason on the one hand and Theoretical Reason on the other.³⁵

Reason, then, whether theoretical or practical, is related both to understanding and imagination, and derives some peculiar characteristics from both.

In virtue of its relation to Understanding Reason is left a stranger to time in its strict sense—time as 'after' which is the form of imagination. On the other hand, its relation to imagination holds it apart from the temporal triad before-now-after which constitutes the foundation of technology-science.³⁶

But, then, does reason have nothing to do with time at all? Banerjee's answer is that it does have something to do with time, but only in the peculiar form of the *specious present* 'which embodies the nullification of the division of time into the "before", the "now" and the "after" and so is in a sense non-spatial as well as non-temporal'.³⁷ And hence reason deals with both human performance and human knowledge in the context of the *specious present* which is neither spatial nor temporal in the usual sense of the terms. As concerned with performance, it obviously cannot deal either with the universal plan of action which is the content of imagination and whose form is time as 'after'; nor particular plans of action which vary from time to time and from individual to individual as they involve the temporal triad in the form of 'before-now-after', and hence can consist of nothing but types or patterns of action. And, as actions emanate either from the Will to adjust or the Will to create or the Will to believe, 'patterns of action as well as actions themselves are of three different kinds respectively characterisable as aesthetic, religious and moral'.³⁸ But, as already seen, these ideal patterns of action, whether belonging to the field of morality or religion or art, may only help one in 'adjusting oneself to a life of bondage as well as possible', but not in a release from it in any essential sense of the term. But, if practical reason has failed in the task, can theoretical reason do any better?

There can be little hope from theoretical reason as it is neither concerned with 'time as after' or even with the 'temporal triad', and hence is 'unavoidably indifferent to, if not absolutely unconcerned with, the one universal plan of action as well as particular plans for action'.³⁹ Thus, 'Theoretical Reason, while being of man, is alienated from him'.⁴⁰ The definition of man as a

'rational animal' is, thus, doubly wrong, for reason in its theoretical aspect ignores the notion of 'agency' along with the 'universal plan of action' which is distinctive for the understanding of man. But theoretical reason seeks to render the world intelligible, and in this enterprise develops into what has come to be called 'science' these days. But, as the enterprise of rendering the world 'intelligible' presupposes 'knowledge' which Banerjee confines strictly to the realms of sense-perception and memory, it is also thereby limited to those domains where these are applicable in a pre-eminent sense. It is, therefore, in the realm of inanimate nature where man encounters 'basic otherness' and which is known primarily through sense-perception alone that science is most successful, as it is suited just for that. Thus, even 'the animal world to which man is held in the relation of mere otherness, does not admit of so rigorous a scientific investigation as does the physical world to which he is held in the relation of basic otherness'.⁴¹ And, as for the human world, 'the realm of human beings falls outside the scope of scientific investigations, while the possibility of its being investigated in some other manner is left open'.⁴²

The problem of the intelligibility of the universe, thus, is not a unitary problem for Banerjee. Rather, it is seen as divided into three radically disparate parts: the one relating to the inanimate universe, and the other two relating to the living world of animals and the human world respectively. Science is pre-eminently fitted to deal only with the first, though it claims to encompass the other two in its domain also. But, even with respect to the intelligibility of the inanimate world as a whole, the problem remains as to how to construe this whole as a 'whole' and how to relate the so-called 'intelligibility' of its parts to the 'intelligibility' of the 'whole'. Banerjee touches on the problem, but does not pursue it systematically. The only conclusion he draws from the obvious difference between the 'intelligibility' of the whole and the 'intelligibility' of the parts is that the former, therefore, must be 'non-sensuous' in character. In his own words: '... whereas the intelligibility of the parts constituting the world is *sensuous*, the intelligibility of the world as a whole must be non-sensuous, though not opposed to the sensuous'.⁴³ Banerjee, though an ardent student of Kant, has forgotten that 'intelligibility', whether it be that of parts or of whole, cannot in principle be sensuous in character.

The whole, for Banerjee, is primarily formal in character. And, though forms may sometimes be perceptible, it is not necessary that this should always be so. Also, perhaps, a form that is perceptible may not be said to render the whole 'intelligible' in any intelligible sense of the word. Not only this. It is the non-perceptible forms that open our minds to the realization:

... that which is not perceivable need not necessarily be fictitious or unreal, but may on the contrary be real, but real, not in the ordinary sense in which things such as tables, chairs, etc. are real, but in a more com-

prehensive sense which makes room for the admission of certain extraordinary dimensions of reality.⁴⁴

Reality, then, is not identical with the existent, that is, that which is known through sense-perception and memory. Besides this which can be known and spoken of, it comprises also that which can only be spoken of but not known; or rather which is unknowable by its very nature and the merely symbolic which cannot even be said to be spoken of in any relevant sense of the word. The distinction between the knowable and the unknowable, on the one hand, and the speakable and the unspeakable, on the other, is important in Banerjee's thought. However, it should be remembered that he is using these terms in a peculiar sense in the context of his own thought. The term 'knowledge', as already explained, refers only to that which is apprehended through sense-perception or memory. And this is both speakable and knowable. The term 'speakable' has not exactly been defined, but one may construe by the context that he considers only that as 'speakable' which refers to the world known through sense-perception and memory. This seems supported by the fact that he characterizes myths and literary creations as being 'merely speakable' and not 'knowable'. On the other hand, that which is 'merely symbolic', he treats as 'unspeakable'. Perhaps, this may derive from the fact that most of the non-literary arts use a symbolic language which is strictly non-verbal and hence 'unspeakable' in principle. Religion also uses symbols which at least sometimes are said to convey that which is 'unspeakable'. Thus, the notion of a 'purely symbolic' language which is not literally 'speakable' is not as otiose as it may seem at first sight.

But Banerjee's interest here is not to draw attention to the purely symbolic and hence 'unspeakable' aspects of art or religion; but rather to point out the purely symbolic character of much of the language of science which it has perforce to employ to render the world 'intelligible' through 'interpreting' what is 'known' at the level of perception and memory. The only difference between the symbols employed by science and those used by the arts is that they 'are *invariably abstract and non-sensuous*' in character.⁴⁵

Practical reason, then, whether it be as Will to create or as Will to believe or as Will to adjust, is bound up with the world of perception. 'And', according to Banerjee, 'this must be so for the simple reason that Practical Reason is primarily, though not exclusively concerned with human actions, and that the field of human actions, after all, falls within and not outside the field of perception'.⁴⁶ Theoretical reason, on the other hand, is interested in interpreting the world as a whole and understand it, and hence has inevitably to create symbols which are not only abstract and non-sensuous but also impersonal, and thus not tied to the speaker in any essential sense which all verbal, or even gestural, language necessarily tends to be. It is thus only in the language of logic and mathematics that the enterprise of interpreting the universe

finds its foundational support and without which it cannot make much headway either.

In its theoretical aspect, then, 'reason is the source of three predominantly theoretical enquiries respectively called pure science, mathematics and logic'.⁴⁷ Pure science, at least, may 'yield the *laws* which serve to interpret, or bring out the *intelligibility* of, the world of nature'.⁴⁸ Mathematics and logic, on the other hand, are ultimately concerned with the invention of well-ordered symbolic systems, which are of fundamental importance in the *regulation* of our thought and, incidentally, in the scientific interpretation of the universe.⁴⁹ On the other hand, practical reason also elaborates its own characteristic symbolic systems in the field of art, religion and morality whose final achievement 'consists in the admission of man to a way of life lived in allegiance to the symbolic systems concerned'.⁵⁰ But, whether in its theoretical or practical aspects, reason only succeeds 'in encouraging indifference in preference to the spiritual struggle against human bondage and in helping the non-human attitude of complacency prevail over the human demand for the fulfilment of man's title to liberation'.⁵¹

What, then, can 'overcome the indifferentism of Reason, conquer the shortcomings of Imagination by rendering its authority effective and, above all, make the power of the vital drives as well as of technology-science obey the demand of the liberation of mankind'⁵² is the question that Banerjee poses at the end of his critique of the three faculties—reason, understanding and imagination—with which his work has been concerned up to this point. And his answer refers to a new activity of the human mind which he calls *autonomy*.

Human autonomy, for Banerjee, ultimately means man's determination by what is distinctive to himself; and that, at once, excludes not only everything in nature, including all other living beings, but also all that is supposed to be *above* man, that is, God or gods, the Absolute or, in short, the world of the superhuman and the supernatural. In his peculiar phrase, it should be not merely *for man* but also be *of man*. But, in order that it be both *of man* and *for man*, we will have to understand what man is. And the first thing in this connection to understand is that man 'while being embodied and, as such, being an object of perception, is not a mere object of perception, but something more, on which account he is a class apart from the world of material objects'.⁵³ And 'hence it is evident that neither the concept of the temporal triad nor that of the *specious present* is of relevance to the understanding of the nature of human existence and the determination of the destiny of man'.⁵⁴ Thus, man 'while being embodied, is, unlike material objects, ultimately non-objective so that he falls apart from the world of *becoming* governed by the triadic temporal series before before-now-after'.⁵⁵ But, though non-objective and not governed by the temporal triad, he still thinks himself to be so, and this is the fundamental structural ignorance determined for him by the fact of his biological birth, and thus the achieve-

ment of non-objectivity and non-triadic temporality is a task in terms of which human existence has to be essentially conceived. And the task is that man is to overcome this illusion forced on him by the natural conditions of his being and become a person, that is, to become a human being in the strict sense of the term. In Banerjee's words: 'The task in question then is to terminate the illusory supposal with which he is seized—the supposal that he is a *mere* individual, that is, an ego held at best in the relation of mutual otherness with his fellows'.⁵⁶ But this does not mean, as it has been taken many times to mean, that 'man as a strictly human being' is separate 'from biological man and, consequently, that it is incumbent upon him to desist from whatever action biological man is apt to perform'.⁵⁷

But, then, this humanizing task which is set for every man 'does not admit of formulation in terms of precepts like "do this", "do that", "do not do this", "do not do that"'.⁵⁸ Rather, 'Do *thus* whatever you do is preferable to "do this" or "do that"': for the former unlike the latter suggests a standard or a principle to which whatever is done is in need of conformity.⁵⁹ And it is in the formulation of these principles which take into account the human situation and are both 'of man' and 'for man' and which, if followed, would transform all action in such a way as to lead from 'socialization' which is an accomplished fact to personalization which 'points to a *problem* to be solved and a *task* to be accomplished'⁶⁰ that philosophy fulfils its function. The fundamental illusion being the result of man's biologically centered situation, the principles of human conduct cannot but be 'the embodiments of the negation of biological man's illusory ego-centrality and other illusions of a more or less basic character consequent upon it'.⁶¹

The first and foundational principle of all action which may lead man away from the separateness of human beings, then, may be derived from this very fact itself. And Banerjee formulates it thus: 'So behave in any given circumstance that your behaviour is not circumscribed by ego-consciousness but is such as to present itself to be, as it were, *anyone's* behaviour in that circumstance'.⁶² This may be called the principle of universalizability. But as it is too general and too abstract, it is necessary to discover

... certain *derivative* principles of human conduct, that is, principles of human conduct which would be *directly* and *immediately* concerned with the elimination of the basic and yet palpable manifestations of biological man's illusory ego-centrality, and whose concern with the elimination of such ego-centrality would be *indirect*.⁶³

The two manifestations of ego-centrality which may provide a clue to these derivative principles are: (a) 'excessive, if *not exclusive*, interest in one's own self conjoined with poignant concern about one's own future'; and (b) 'one's usual lack of interest in or indifference to, one's fellows'.⁶⁴ These are 'complementary to each other or, in other words, are the two sides of one

and the same thing, namely, ego-centricity'.⁶⁵ The deepest manifestation of the former is in the universal dread of death and the desire for personal immortality, while that of the latter may be said to be the 'aversion to suffer with or for others or, to put it otherwise, aversion to bear the cross'.⁶⁶

The two principles for the guidance of human conduct which may be derived from these two manifestations of ego-centricity would, then, be:

- (1) 'So behave that your behaviour is in no circumstance governed either directly or remotely by the dread of death and the desire for personal immortality'; and
- (2) 'So behave that your behaviour is on no occasion governed either directly or remotely by aversion to bear the Cross'.⁶⁷

The radical novelty of Banerjee's formulation lies in these two principles as they go counter to some of the deepest aspirations of man in all religions and cultures. The first articulates only the demand for universalizability which all ethical thinkers have accepted as a generalized requirement of any morality, at least at the abstract theoretical level. And, though Banerjee thinks that it is 'the embodiment of the practical significance of the doctrine of "no-self" (anātma) taught by Gautama',⁶⁸ it is nothing of the kind as Buddha did not deny rebirth nor discuss the problem of the 'other' in the state of 'nirvāṇa'. Similarly, his attempt to link his second and third principles with Socrates and Jesus and treat them as symbolizing 'the culminations of the ways of life lived'⁶⁹ by them is also misleading as the belief in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost is an integral part of what Christ believed and lived and died for. And so is his belief in the life hereafter, the heaven and the hell which provide the *raison d'être* of whatever is commanded or recommended by Christ. The example of Socrates seems more apt, though it is not clear why Socrates treats himself primarily as an Athenian and not as a world citizen. In any case, the references to Socrates, Buddha and Jesus, in my opinion, only tend to hide the far-reaching novelty and implications of Banerjee's principles. His is perhaps the first clear formulation of a conception of a community of human beings cut off from any idea of transcendence, not even of that of after-life or survival in some form which few thinkers have been able to give up.

These principles, then, are 'regulative principles' of human conduct; and, hence 'in order to live as a strictly human being, man should act as if these principles were *objectively valid*', since it is only 'by acting in this way that he can bring about the elimination of his alienation from himself and from his fellows and thus be restored to the joy of living (ānanda) in fulfilment of his ultimate destiny'.⁷⁰

The end of the long investigation closes with the formulation of these three principles which, if followed, would provide a solution to the problem set for man by his biological situation which leads him to conceive of himself as essentially apart from others and lends his consciousness, and all the actions

following from it, an essentially ego-centric character. The philosophic depth displayed throughout the investigation is truly remarkable, and there can be little doubt that Banerjee's three principles articulate the moral situation and the moral insight far better than the far more well-known principles formulated by Kant. Also, he is perhaps one of those very, very rare thinkers who has been able to avoid the temptation of succumbing to the charms of the transcendent without doing flagrant injustice to the values embodied in the religious quest of man.

II

We have tried to delineate the main line of Banerjee's thought developed in his book *Knowledge, Reason and Human Autonomy* and hope that those who have up till now been either indifferent or hostile* to him will be convinced that here is a thinker whose thought deserves to be paid serious critical attention by those who are genuinely interested in the creative philosophical thinking done recently in this country.

A critical evaluation, however, presupposes first a genuine understanding of what a philosopher has said. The exercise is doubly difficult in the case of any thinker who belongs to this country and tries to say something which is radically different from the past philosophical traditions of this country. Even the thought of K.C. Bhattacharyya or of Kalidas Bhattacharyya, two of the most original thinkers of this century in the field of philosophy in India, has had hardly a comprehensive presentation, not to talk of critical evaluation, up till now. The thought of N.V. Banerjee which displays an even more radical departure from the tradition would require perhaps an even more persistent effort at understanding before its full-fledged critical appraisal could be undertaken. Still, a few points may be raised which, in my opinion, require further elucidation. First, it is not quite clear what is exactly meant by 'essentiality to one another'. Surely, biological preconditions of living are far more 'essential' than other human beings, at least in one and perhaps the most basic sense of 'essential'. But even if one accepts that other human beings are 'essential' to one's being a 'human being', it is not clear how each and all of them are equally 'essential'. And what about people about whom I do not know anything at all, with whom I never come into contact? To put the same point differently, from 'some human beings are essential to some one human being' it does not follow that 'all human beings are essential to every human being'.

And what is this fuss about 'ego-centricity'? Is one human being different *The phrase may seem too strong, but it is difficult otherwise to account for the fact that these days, when there are *Festschriften* galore and *Essays in Honour of* or *in Memory of* every Tom, Dick and Harry (or Chaitra and Maitra, as they say in the Indian tradition), none has been brought out in his honour. Nor has the university which he served all his life (the University of Delhi) instituted any awards, lectureship, etc. in his honour. And he was the only eminent living Indian philosopher who was so conspicuously absent at the Fifth Session of the Indian Philosophical Congress held at the University of Delhi.

from another human being, or not? Banerjee eschews metaphysics, and, in fact, is totally against it. Being out-and-out anthropocentric, he cannot have recourse to some transcendent, non-empirical, non-vyavahāric identity as many Advaitins do. But at the empirical, vyavahāric level differences are what provide individuation, and thus provide that richness and variety which is the spice of life. Not only this. At the empirical level, we are not just human beings but belong to some sex, caste, race, religion, nation, language group, civilization, etc. All these define and restrict the field of those with whom I can meaningfully communicate. It is strange that, while Banerjee has said so many interesting things about language and communication, he has not talked about the empirical fact of there being a plurality of languages along with the fact that most human beings are born into a particular special community which restricts their communication-field primarily to those who can speak that language.

Similarly, Banerjee seems to believe that all action is primarily individual, that is, done by individuals in their individual capacity and oriented to other individuals *qua* individuals. But this just is not true. Many actions are done in a *representative* capacity and are oriented to others who also *represent* groups, institutions, public bodies, etc. What norms or principles should govern such actions of competitiveness which are as much a fact of life as those of co-operativeness and hence should also have been the subject of philosophic attention? One may try to minimize the former and increase the latter in one's personal life. But is it also possible at the level of public institutions, and to the same extent?

Had these issues been raised during the lifetime of Prof. Banerjee, he might have replied to them or reformulated his position in their light. Unfortunately, this is a posthumous work, published after his death, and hence even the possibility of the arising of such a situation does not exist. But he had written many other works prior to this in which some of the key ideas developed in this book had been sketched and which were published during his lifetime. However, the tradition of taking our thinkers seriously has hardly flourished in contemporary India. And, when belatedly, the Department of Philosophy at the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, under the leadership of Dr. K. L. Sharma, organized a seminar on his philosophy in its series devoted to the critical evaluation of the work of living Indian philosophers,* he was too ill to attend it. Let us hope that the same fate will not befall the work of other thinkers in contemporary India, and that the philosophical community in this country would revive the past tradition of *pakṣa* and *pratipakṣa*, argument and counter-argument, in an ongoing debate which sometimes lasted many centuries, if not millennia.

*The first seminar in this series was organized on the philosophy of Kalidas Bhattacharyya. The volume containing the papers and his replies thereto has been published in the *Indian Philosophical Quarterly Series* (No. 9) from Pune under the title *The Philosophy of Kalidas Bhattacharyya* (1985).

NOTES

1. N.V. Banerjee, *Knowledge, Reason and Human Autonomy*, p. 6.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 27 (italics author's).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 82 (italics mine).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 100-01. The use of the word 'disposition' here is unfortunate, as it is difficult to understand how a disposition can be an experience.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 105. It is strange that Banerjee forgets that the same objections can be raised against what he offers as his final solution to the problem at the end of the book.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 109; italics mine.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 133-34.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 222-23.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 242. The quotation has been slightly changed to suit linguistic convenience. But it means the same as in the original.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

Sri Aurobindo, the sage of Pondicherry and his śakti, The Mother

A review article*

S.R. BHATT
University of Delhi, Delhi

In profundity of thought and width of its spectrum, in prolificity of writings and felicity of expression among the contemporary Indian thinkers Sri Aurobindo can legitimately claim to have a distinction, parallel only to that of Mahatma Gandhi. Imbued with a spirit of nationalism both set out with a mission to emancipate the motherland from foreign yoke and emerged victorious to a large extent. They, however, widened their horizon to liberate the whole humanity in their own way. But, in contrast to Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo had the unique privilege of having the Mother as his collaborator in his major spiritual experimentation and in his victorious achievements. Whereas Mahatma Gandhi's task was carried forward by his followers rather half-heartedly, the Mother continued the task left by Sri Aurobindo with ardent devotion and personal involvement. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had identity of purpose and singularity of the method, and that is why they could partake in a joint venture. They came into existence, so to say, to supplement and complement each other, to reinforce each other, to support each other. Before they met physically they were at it independently, but when they met they joined hands together, helped each other, collaborated and perfected it.

The book under review presents a lucid and comprehensive account of some of the salient 'experiments, experiences and realisations' of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother from the pen of an erudite Aurobindian scholar and an ardent devotee of the Mother who had the good fortune of being an 'antevāsīn' (intimate disciple) of the Mother, who partook in 'numerous educational experiments under the direct guidance of the Mother' and who lived and taught at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education for two decades.

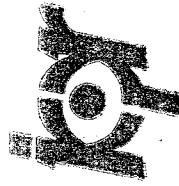
This work gives a complete picture of the thought and practice of the Integral Yoga by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and the whole presentation is profusely interspersed with lengthy citations from the original works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother providing an aura of authenticity to it. The choice and selection of the passages from their voluminous writings is very apt and judicious, and only one who is deeply steeped in this discipline and

*Kireet Joshi: *Sri Aurobindo and the Mother*, The Mother's Institute of Research and Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1989, Rs. 150.

✓ ISSN 0970-7794

*Journal of
Indian Council
of Philosophical
Research*

JICPR
Editor D.P. CHATTOPADHYAYA



VOLUME VII NUMBER I
SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER

1989