

# PRINCIPLES OF METAPHYSICS



LIBER ESSE, SCIENTIAM ACQUIRERE, VERITATEM LOQUI

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## Preface

Guenon's *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedanta* will draw the attention of the well trained and qualified reader. Of course, it will also become the source of misunderstandings for a certain category of "third rate" critics and intellectuals who oscillate between platitudes and political and spiritual fancies. ~ Julius Evola

This is the beginning of a slow motion translation, still in progress, of the fundamental texts of metaphysics as described by Rene Guenon. These texts are mostly found in the following books:

- *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedanta*
- *The Symbolism of the Cross*
- *The Multiple States of the Being*

The first goal of the translations is to make it read smoothly in English; this is not possible with a word for word translation, which often is misleading. In this way, the fundamental points of the text.

The second goal is to employ the most commonly accepted English words to express the metaphysical ideas. This is often not the literal translation of the French word.

The third goal is to make the style and terminology consistent among the three works listed above.

The first text selected is Chapter II: Fundamental Distinction between Self and Ego from *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedanta*

## The Self and the Ego

To fully understand the doctrine of the human being in the Vedanta, it is important first of all to establish, as clearly as possible, the fundamental distinction between the *Self*, which is the very principle of being, and the *individual ego*. The use of the term "Self" does not imply for us any commonality of interpretation with certain schools which have made use of this word, yet which have only presented wholly Western and often fanciful conceptions, under a mostly misunderstood oriental terminology.

We are alluding not only to Theosophy, but also to some pseudo-Oriental schools which have completely distorted the Vedanta under the pretext of accommodating it to the Western mentality, about which we previously had the opportunity to explain. The misuse that may have been made of a term is not, in our opinion, a sufficient reason for us to stop using it, unless we find a way to replace it with a another that is just as well adapted to what we want to express; that is not the case at present. Moreover, if we were too rigorous in this respect, we would no doubt end up having very few terms at our disposal, because there are hardly any which have not been used more or less abusively by some philosopher. The only terms we intend to discard are those which have been invented expressly for conceptions which have nothing in common with what we are expounding: such are, for example, the denominations of the various kinds of philosophical systems as well as the terms which belong specifically to the vocabulary of occultists and other "neo-spiritualists". The latter groups have only borrowed terms from previous doctrines which they are in the habit of brazenly plagiarizing without understanding anything. We obviously don't have any scruples about taking them back and restoring the meaning which normally belongs to them.

Instead of the terms "Self" and "ego", one can also use "personality" and "individuality", albeit with one reservation: the Self can still be something *more* than personality. The Theosophists, who seem to have taken pleasure in confusing their terminology, take personality and individuality in a sense which is exactly the opposite to how they should be understood correctly; it is the former that they identify with the ego, and the latter to the Self. Previously, on the contrary, and even in the West, whenever any distinction whatsoever has been made between these two terms, personality has always been regarded as superior to individuality, and that is why we say that this is their normal relationship which is advantageous to maintain. Scholastic philosophy, in particular, did not ignore this distinction, but it does not seem to have given it its full metaphysical value, nor to have drawn from it the profound consequences which are implied in it. This is moreover what frequently happens, even in cases where it shows the most remarkable similarities with certain parts of the Eastern doctrines. In any case, personality, understood metaphysically, has nothing in common with what modern philosophers so often call the "human person," which is in reality nothing but individuality pure and simple. Moreover, it is this alone, and not the personality, which can be said to be properly human. Generally speaking, it seems that Westerners, even when they want to go further in their conceptions than most of them do,

take for personality what is really only the upper part of the individuality, or a simple extension of it'. Under these conditions, everything that is of the pure metaphysical order necessarily remains outside their comprehension.

The Self is the transcendent and permanent principle of which the manifested being, the human being for example, is only a transitory and contingent modification which cannot in any way affect the principle itself. The Self, as such, is never individualized and cannot be, because it must always be considered under the aspect of eternity and immutability which are the necessary attributes of the pure Being. It is obviously not susceptible to any particularization which would make it "other than itself."

Immutable in its own nature, the Self develops the indefinite possibilities contained in itself, by the passage from potency to act through an indefinite number of degrees. That does not affect its essential permanence, because this passage is only relative and its development is only one of them when considered from the aspect of manifestation, outside of which there can be no question of any succession, but only of perfect simultaneity. Even what is virtual in a certain respect is no less realized in the "eternal now." With regard to manifestation, we can say that the Self develops its possibilities in all the modalities of realization in an indefinite multitude, which are so many different states of the integral being, of which only one, subject to the very special conditions of existence which define it, constitute the portion or rather the specific determination of this being which is human individuality. The Self is thus the principle by which all the states of the being exist, each in its own domain. This must be understood, not only of the manifested states, whether individual like the human state or supra-individual, but also, although the word "to exist" then becomes improper, of the non-manifested state, including all the possibilities which are not susceptible of any manifestation as well as the possibilities of manifestation in principal mode. But this Self itself is only for itself, not having and unable to have, in the total and indivisible unity of its intimate nature, any principle which is external to it.<sup>ii</sup>

The Self, considered in relation to a being, is really the personality. One could restrict the usage of this latter word to the Self as the principle of the manifested states, just as the "divine Personality", Ishvara, is the principle of universal manifestation. But it can also be extended analogically to the Self as the principle of all manifested and non-manifested states of being. This personality is an immediate, primordial, and non-specific determination of the principle which is called in Sanskrit Atma or Paramatma, and which we can, for lack of a better term, designate as the "Universal Spirit", with the condition of not seeing in this use of the word "spirit" anything that could recall Western philosophical conceptions. In particular, it is not a correlative of "matter" as it almost always is for the moderns, who are under, in this respect, the influence of Cartesian dualism<sup>iii</sup>, even unconsciously. Genuine metaphysics is well beyond all the oppositions like the types that "spiritualism" and "materialism" can provide us, and it need not concern itself with more or less special, and often quite artificial, questions which arise from such oppositions.

Atma penetrates all things, which are like its accidental modifications, and which, according to Ramanuja's expression, "constitute in some way its body [taken in a purely analogical sense],

whether they are of an intelligent or non-intelligent nature", that is, according to Western conceptions, 'spiritual' as well as 'material', for this, expressing only a diversity of conditions in manifestation, makes no difference to the unconditioned and unmanifested principle. This, in fact, is the "Supreme Self" (the literal translation of Paramatma) of all that exists, in whatever mode, and it always remains "the same" through the indefinite multiplicity of degrees of Existence, understood in the universal sense, as well as beyond Existence, that is, in principal non-manifestation.

The Self, for any being whatsoever, is in reality identical with Atma, since it is essentially beyond all distinction and all specialization. This is why, in Sanskrit, the same word *atman*, in cases other than the nominative, takes the place of the reflexive pronoun "oneself". The Self is therefore not really distinct from Atma, except when it is considered particularly and "distinctively" in relation to a being, and even more precisely, in relation to a certain definite state of this being, such as the human state, and only considered from this specialized and restricted point of view. In this case, moreover, it is not that the Self becomes effectively distinct from Atma in any way, because it cannot be "other than itself". It obviously cannot be affected by the point of view from which it is envisaged, any more than by any other contingency. To the extent that one makes this distinction, one moves away from the direct consideration of the Self to truly consider only its reflection in human individuality, or in any other state of being, for it goes without saying that, vis-à-vis the Self, all states of manifestation are strictly equivalent and can be envisaged in the same way. But at present it is human individuality which concerns us in a more particular way. This reflection determines what may be called the center of this individuality. But, if we isolate it from its principle, that is, from the Self itself, it has only a purely illusory existence, for it derives all its reality from the principle, and it effectively possesses this reality only by participation in the nature of the Self, that is, insofar as it is identified with it by universalization.

Personality is essentially of the order of principles in the strictest sense of this word, that is, of the universal order. Therefore, it can only be considered from the point of view of pure metaphysics, which has precisely the Universal as its domain. The "pseudo-metaphysicians" of the West have a habit of confusing things which, in reality, belong to the individual order with the Universal. Rather, since they have no conception of the Universal, they apply this name improperly to what is ordinarily the general, which is really only a simple extension of the individual. Some push the confusion even further. The "empiricist" philosophers, who cannot even conceive of the general, liken it to the collective, which is truly only the specific. By these successive degradations, one finally arrives at lowering all things to the level of sensible knowledge, which many indeed consider as the only possible one, because their mental horizon does not extend beyond this domain and that they would like to impose on everyone the limitations which result only from their own incapacity, whether natural or acquired by a special education.

To prevent any misunderstanding of that kind, the following table specifies the essential distinctions in this respect.

Universal		General	
Individual ...	{	Specific...	{
			Collective
			Singular

It is important to add that the distinction between the Universal and the individual should not be regarded as a correlation, because the latter term, a nullity in relation to the former, cannot be opposed to it in any way. It is the same with regard to the unmanifested and the manifested. Moreover, it might at first seem that the Universal and the unmanifested must coincide, and, from a certain point of view, their identification would indeed be justified, since, metaphysically, it is the unmanifested which is all essential. However, it is necessary to take into account certain states of manifestation which, being informal, are thereby supra-individual. Therefore, if we distinguish only the Universal and the individual, we will necessarily have to correlate these states to the Universal, which we can do all the better because it is a matter of a manifestation which is still principal in some way, at least in comparison with the individual states. This, of course, must not cause us to forget that everything manifested, even at these higher degrees, is necessarily conditioned or relative. Considered in this way, the Universal will no longer be only the unmanifested, but the formless, including both the unmanifested and the supra-individual states of manifestation. The individual contains all the degrees of *formal* manifestation, that is, all the states in which beings take on forms, for what properly characterizes individuality and essentially constitutes it as such, is precisely the presence of form among the limiting conditions that define and determine a state of existence. We can summarize these considerations in the following table:

Universal ...	{	Unmanifested	
		Formless Manifestation	
Individual ...		Formal Manifestation ...	{
			Subtle state
			Gross state

The terms "subtle state" and "gross state" refer to different degrees of formal manifestation. This distinction is valid only on the condition of taking human individuality as a starting point, i.e., the corporeal or sensible world. The gross state is bodily existence itself, to which human individuality belongs only through one of its modalities, and not in its integral development. The subtle state includes the extra-corporeal modalities of the human being, or of any other being

situated in the same state of existence, and, on the other hand, all individual states other than that one. We see that these two terms are really not symmetrical and cannot even have a common measure, since one of them represents only a portion of one of the indefinitely multiple states which constitute formal manifestation, so that the other includes all the rest of this manifestation.<sup>iv</sup>

The symmetry is found up to a certain point only if we restrict ourselves to the consideration of human individuality alone, and it is moreover from this point of view that the distinction is first established by Hindu doctrine. Even if we then go beyond this point of view, and even if we consider it only to actually going beyond it, it is no less true that this is what we must inevitably take as a basis and as a term of comparison, since that is what concerns the state in which we currently find ourselves.

We shall therefore say that the human being, considered in its entirety, comprises a certain set of possibilities which constitute its bodily or gross modality, plus a multitude of other possibilities which, extending in various senses beyond this one, constitute its subtle modalities. But all these possibilities together represent only one and the same degree of universal Existence. It follows from this that human individuality is both much more and much less than Westerners usually believe: much more, because they hardly know more than corporeal modality which is only a tiny portion of its possibilities; but also much less, because this individuality, far from being really the total being, is only one state of this being, among an indefinite number of other states, of which the sum itself is still nothing in comparison to personality, which alone is true being. Personality alone is its permanent and unconditioned state, and that alone can be considered absolutely real.

Everything else, no doubt, is also real, but only in a relative way. That is because of its dependence on the principle and insofar as it reflects something from it, as the image reflected in a mirror draws all its reality of the object without which it would have no existence. But this lesser reality, in which it only participates, is illusory in relation to the supreme reality, as the same image is also illusory in relation to the object; and, if one claimed to isolate it from the principle, this illusion would become pure and simple unreality. We understand by this that existence, that is, the conditioned and manifested being, is at the same time real in a certain sense and illusory in another sense. This is one of the essential points which has never been understood by Westerners who have outrageously distorted the Vedanta by their erroneous and prejudiced interpretations.

We must warn philosophers especially that the Universal and the individual are not what they call "categories". The categories, in the Aristotelian sense of this word, are nothing but the most general of all genera, so that they still belong to the individual domain, whose limit they denote from a certain point of view. It would be more accurate to assimilate into the Universal what the scholastics call the "transcendentals", which precisely exceed all genera, including categories. If these transcendentals are indeed of the universal order, it would still be an error to believe that they constitute the whole Universal, or even that they are what is most important to consider for pure metaphysics. They are coextensive with Being, but do not transcend Being,

where the doctrine in which they are considered stops. If ontology or the knowledge of Being does indeed come from metaphysics, it is very far from being a complete and total metaphysics, for Being is not the unmanifest in itself, but only the principle of manifestation. Consequently, what is beyond Being matters much more, metaphysically, than Being itself. In other words, it is Brahma, not Ishvara, which must be recognized as the Supreme Principle. This is what the Brahma-Sutras, which begin with these words, expressly declare: "Now begins the study of Brahma", to which Shankaracharya adds this comment: "By enjoining the search for Brahma, this first sutra recommends a thoughtful study of the texts of the Upanishads, made with the aid of a dialectic which [taking them as its basis and principle] never disagrees with them, and which, like them [but as a mere auxiliary means], proposes Deliverance as its goal."



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<sup>i</sup> Léon Daudet, in some of his works (*L'Heredo* and *Le Monde des images*), has distinguished in the human being what he calls "Self" and ego; but both, for us, are equally part of the individuality, and all that is the province of psychology which, on the other hand, can in no way affect the personality; this distinction, however, indicates a kind of presentiment which is very worthy of remark in an author who does not claim to be a metaphysician.

<sup>ii</sup> We will explain more completely, in other studies, the metaphysical theory of the multiple states of the being; we only indicate here what is essential to understand the constitution of the human being.

<sup>iii</sup> Theologically, when we say that "God is pure spirit", this should not be understood either in the sense that "spirit" is opposed to "matter" nor where these two terms can be understood only in relation to each other, because we would thus arrive at a kind of "demiurgic" conception more or less close to that attributed to Manichaeism. It is no less true that such an expression is one of those which can easily give rise to false interpretations, resulting in the substitution of "a being" for pure Being.

<sup>iv</sup> We can make this asymmetry understood by a remark of current application, which is simply ordinary logic. If we consider an attribution or any quality, we thereby divide all possible things into two groups, which are, on the one hand, that of things which possess this quality, and, on the other hand, that of things which do not possess it. But, while the first group is thus positively defined and determined, the second, which is characterized only in a purely negative way, is in no way limited thereby and is truly indefinite. There is therefore neither symmetry nor common measure between these two groups, which therefore do not really constitute a binary division, and its distinction moreover is obviously valid only from the special point of view of the quality taken as a starting point, since the second group has no homogeneity and can include things that have nothing in common among them, which does not however prevent this division from being really valid in the relation considered. Now it is indeed in this way that we distinguish the manifested and the unmanifested. Since in the manifested, the formal and the informal, and finally, in the formal itself, the corporeal and the incorporeal.