



Kalidas Bhattacharya's Notion of Swing in Standpoints

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alternation, svikrita grahna, subjectivism

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ABSTRACT Kalidas Bhattacharya (1911-1984), an eminent Indian philosopher, was well-known for his doctrine of *Alternative Standpoints in Philosophy*. The claim is that all genuine philosophical constructions are valid, but only alternately. This proto-epistemological claim was further backed up by a metaphysical account of alternating absolutes, that is, the idea of a multi-faced absolute, each face being self-complete. In today's parlance, a disjunctive epistemology was backed up by a disjunctive metaphysics. I propose to submit a very brief account of this swing- concept without indulging in possible controversial deliberations around it. It is important to note that Bhattacharya does not abandon his notion of alternation but couples it this time with a notion of togetherness in the form of a swing from one alternative to another. To what extent it marks a genuine departure from his earlier stand on alternation is a matter of further investigation.

Kalidas Bhattacharya (1911-1984), one of the most original thinkers of this country, developed an ingenious way of meeting skepticism about philosophical discourse. He was well known in his life- time for his doctrine of *Alternative Standpoints in Philosophy*, which incidentally is the name of one of his first published works (1953) as well. Briefly put, the claim is that all genuine philosophical constructions are valid, but only alternately. In other words, every honestly and rationally formulated attitude towards reality is correct, although in alternation. This proto-epistemological claim was further backed up by a metaphysical account of alternating absolutes, that is, the idea of a multi-faced absolute, each face being self complete. In today's parlance, a disjunctive epistemology was backed up by a disjunctive metaphysics.

This much is well known. But, what is less known is that in his later works --- particularly in a Bengali monograph entitled 'Bharatiya Samskriti O Anekanta Vedanta' (Indian Culture and many-faced Vedanta), published in 1982 by the university of Burdwan, West-Bengal. Bhattacharya introduced a concept of *Swing* or *See-saw* among the alternating attitudes towards the alternating reality. In what follows, I propose to submit a very brief account of this swing-concept without indulging in possible controversial deliberations around it.

In Kalidas' earlier works, especially in *Alternative Standpoints in Philosophy* (1953) Bhattacharya, while trying to explain the close unity in the Knowledge- situation of two apparently incompatible elements like subject and object, came to notice that the recognition of this opposition between the two terms has given rise to divergent movements in philosophy. To some, subject has seemed self- evident and the independent object inconceivable. This attitude was responsible for the rise of *Idealism*. Again, some have asserted the primacy of the object over the subject. This attitude was responsible for the advent of *Realism*. Again, some have proposed the dialectical unity of the subject (consciousness) with the object. This has been responsible for what Bhattacharya calls 'the dialectical attitude towards reality'. According to Bhattacharya, each attitude is further marked by one or the other of our conscious functions of Knowing, Feeling and Willing. In our subjective attitude, *Knowing* pre- dominates. In our object-oriented attitude, it is *Feeling* that takes the lead. And, in our dialectical attitude, it is *Willing* which is the main executor. This requires elaboration. But that would take us far away from our main concern here. What is of importance is to note that according to Bhattacharya's earlier account there is a *disjunctive unity* among all these three attitudes, represented respectively by Subjectivism, Objectivism and Absolutism (in the Hegelian sense). Each is valid, but alternately. We cannot say that only one of them is valid. But we cannot say either that all the three are valid

simultaneously.

The foregoing is a micro-presentation of what Bhattacharya had to say in 1953. Almost thirty years later, he incorporated in the earlier framework an idea of *see-saw* (his own coinage) or swing (in Bengali, *dolachal*) between the alternative attitudes themselves. In the Bengali monograph, mentioned above, we find him distinguishing between two forms of acceptance (*grahana*): Acceptance with commitment (*Svikrta grahana*) and acceptance without commitment (*Asvikrta grahana*). In fact, Bhattacharya makes use of his notion of absolute in alternation to drive home the point that we ordinarily make a choice of one of its self-complete faces and remain committed to it. This is what *Svikrta grahana* or acceptance with commitment is according to Bhattacharya. However, according to Bhattacharya this does not preclude one from accepting the *possibility* of other faces or forms of the absolute holding good as well. This is not mere non-denial, which is negative in nature. This is positive acceptance, but without commitment. This is what *Asvikrta grahana* or acceptance without commitment is, according to him.

There are two questions. First, is the notion of acceptance without commitment justified in terms of reason? Second, and more important, is the question whether each of the mutually incompatible philosophical standpoints (which, in 1953 were declared by Bhattacharya to hold *only* alternately, i.e. not simultaneously) may be accepted by an individual with equal commitment.

To both the questions Bhattacharya replies affirmatively. And, it is in the context of the reply to the second question that his notion of swing comes in.

Bhattacharya is of the view that in our ordinary life we generally choose one of the self-complete forms of the multi-faced absolute and live accordingly. It is my own world-view, my own life-world. But what about other forms of absolute? What about other world views? Do we reject them altogether? Bhattacharya does not think so. For him, every genuine choice involves a predicament, the predicament of allowing at least the possibility of other options/ alternatives holding good. The claim is that in every such case, we are left at least with the idea that there are or maybe some other forms of absolute, to which others may remain committed. In his own terminology, it is as if all other possible forms of Truth move like shadows around the particular form of Truth to which I have committed myself. According to Bhattacharya this very fact opens up the possibility that we are capable of *equal but alternative* commitments to each of the alternative faces of the absolute. This is a sort of phenomenological backpack that every choice has to

carry with itself, at least implicitly. And this possibility of equal but alternative commitment to several alternative faces of the absolute is captured in the Bengali monograph by the metaphor of *swing* or *see-saw* (dolachal), among various alternative standpoints in philosophy that a true philosopher can afford in his theoretical flight. It is important to note that Bhattacharya does not abandon his earlier notion of alternation, but couples it this time with a notion of togetherness in the form of a swing from one alternative to another. To what extent it marks a genuine departure from his earlier stand on alternation is a matter of further investigation.

Reference:

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