

CHAPTER II

*(from "Man and His Becoming according to the Vedanta,
René Guénon, Translation: Richard C. Nicholson, 1958)*

FUNDAMENTAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE "SELF" AND THE "EGO"

IN order thoroughly to understand the teaching of the Vedânta as it pertains to the human being, it is essential to define from the start, as clearly as possible, the fundamental distinction between the "Self," which is the very principle of the being, and the individual "ego." It is hardly necessary to explain that the use of the term "Self" does not imply on our part any identity of view with certain schools who may have used this word, but who, under an Oriental terminology, generally misunderstood, have never set forth any but purely Western views, highly fantastic at that ; we are alluding here not only to Theosophism, but also to certain pseudo-Oriental schools which have entirely distorted the Vedânta under the pretext of adapting it to the Western mentality. The misuse which may have been made of a word does not, in our opinion, provide adequate grounds for declining to employ it, except where it is possible to replace it by another word equally well suited to express the same meaning, which is not the case in this instance; besides, too great a strictness on this score would undoubtedly leave very few terms indeed at one's disposal, especially as there exist hardly any which at one time or another have not been misapplied by some philosopher. The only words which we intend to reject are those invented deliberately to express views which have nothing in common with what we are expounding: such, for example, are the denominations of the different kinds of philosophical systems; such, also, are the terms which belong specifically to the vocabulary of the occultists and other "neo-spiritualists"; as for terms which the last-named have merely borrowed from earlier doctrines which they habitually and shamelessly plagiarize without understanding anything about them, we obviously need have no scruples about employing such words, while at the same time restoring the meaning which normally belongs to them.

In place of the terms "Self" and "ego," we may also use those of "Personality" and "individuality," with one

reservation, however, for the “Self,” as we shall explain later on, may denote something over and above the Personality. The Theosophists, who seem to have taken a delight in confusing their terminology, interpret the Personality and the individuality in a sense which is the exact opposite of that in which they should rightly be understood; it is the first which they identify with the “ego,” and the second with the “Self.” Previously, on the contrary, even in the West, whenever any distinction has been made between these two terms, the Personality has always been regarded as superior to the individuality and that is why we say that this is their normal relationship, which there is every reason to retain. Scholastic philosophy, in particular, has not overlooked this distinction, but it does not seem to have grasped its full metaphysical significance, nor to have extracted the most profound consequences which follow from it ; this is moreover what often occurs, even on occasions where Scholasticism shows the most remarkable similarity with certain portions of the Oriental doctrines. In any case, the Personality, metaphysically speaking, has nothing in common with what modern philosophers so often call the “human person,” which is, in fact, nothing but the individuality pure and simple ; besides, it is this alone and not the Personality which can strictly be called human. In a general way, it appears that Westerners, even when they attempt to carry their views further than those of the majority, mistake for the Personality what is actually but the superior part of the individuality, or a simple extension of it¹: in these circumstances everything which is of the purely 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 transient and contingent modification, a modification which, moreover, can in no way affect the principle, as will be explained more fully in what follows. The “ Self,” as such, is never individualized and cannot become so, for since it must always be considered under the aspect of the eternity and immutability which are the necessary attributes of pure Being, it is obviously not susceptible of any particularization, which would cause it to be “other than itself.” Immutable in its own nature, it merely develops the indefinite possibilities which it contains within itself, by a relative passing from potency to act through an indefinite series of degrees. Its essential permanence is not thereby affected, precisely because this process is only relative, and because this development is, strictly speaking, not a development at all, except when looked at from the point of view of manifestation, outside of which there can be no question of succession, but only of perfect simultaneity, so that even what is virtual under one aspect, is found nevertheless to be realized in the “eternal present.” As regards manifestation, it may be said

that the “Self” develops its manifold possibilities, indefinite in their multitude, through a multiplicity of modalities of realization, amounting, for the integral being, to so many different states, of which states one alone, limited by the special conditions of existence which define it, constitutes the portion or rather the particular determination of that being which is called human individuality. The “Self” is thus the principle by which all the states of the being exist, each in its own domain; and this must be understood not only of the manifested states of which we have just been speaking, whether individual like the human state or supra-individual, but also,—although the word “exist” then becomes inappropriate,—of the unmanifested state, comprising all the possibilities which are not susceptible of any manifestation, as well as the possibilities of manifestation themselves in principial mode; but the “Self” derives its being from itself alone, and neither has nor can have, in the perfect and indivisible unity of its nature, any principle which is external to it.²

The “Self,” considered in this manner, in relation to a being, is properly speaking the Personality; one might, it is true, restrict the use of this latter word to the “Self” as principle of the manifested states, just as the “Divine Personality,” Ishwara, is the Principle of universal Manifestation; but one can also extend it analogically to the “Self” as principle of all the states of the being, manifested and unmanifested. The Personality is an immediate determination, primordial and non-particularized, of the principle which in Sanskrit is called *Âtmâ* or *Paramâtmâ*, and which, in default of a better term, we may call the “Universal Spirit,” on the clear understanding, however, that in this use of the word “spirit” nothing is implied which might recall Western philosophical conceptions, and, in particular, that it is not turned into a correlative of “matter,” as the modern mind is prone to do, being subject in this respect, even though unconsciously, to the influence of Cartesian dualism. Genuine metaphysic,³ let it be repeated once more in this connection, lies quite outside all the oppositions of which that existing between spiritualism” and “materialism” affords us the type, and it is in no way required to concern itself with the more or less special and often quite artificial questions which such oppositions give rise to.

Âtmâ permeates all things, which are, as it were, its accidental modifications, and according to Râmânûja’s expression, “constitute in some sort its body (this word being taken here in a purely analogical sense), be they moreover of an intelligent or non-intelligent nature,” that is, according to Western conceptions, “spiritual as well as “material,” for that distinction, implying merely a diversity of conditions in manifestation, makes no sort of difference in respect of the unconditioned and un-manifested Principle. This, in fact, is the “Supreme Self” (the literal render-

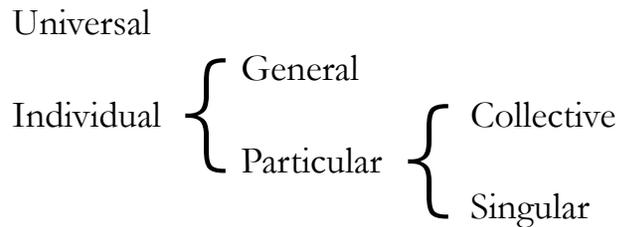
ing of Paramâtmâ) of all that exists, under whatever mode, and it abides ever “the same” through the indefinite multiplicity of the degrees of Existence, understood in the universal sense, as well as beyond Existence, that is, in principial non-manifestation.

The “Self,” in relation to any being whatsoever, is in reality identical with Âtmâ, since it is essentially beyond all distinction and all particularization; and that is why, in Sanskrit, the same word âtman, in cases other than the nominative, replaces the reflexive pronoun “itself.” The “Self” is not therefore really distinct from Âtmâ, except when one considers it particularly and “distinctively” in relation to a being, or, more accurately, in relation to a certain definite state of that being, such as the human state, and in so far as one considers it from this special and limited point of view alone. In this case, moreover, the “Self” does not really become distinct from Âtmâ in any way, since as we said above, it cannot be “other than itself,” and obviously cannot be affected by the point of view from which we regard it, any more than by any other contingency. What should be noted is that, to the extent that we make this distinction, we are departing from the direct consideration of the “Self” in order to consider its reflection in human individuality or in some other state of the being, for, needless to say, when confronted with the Self, all states of manifestation are strictly equivalent and can be regarded in the same way but just now it is the human individuality which more particularly concerns us. The reflection in question determines what may be called the centre of this individuality; but if isolated from its principle, that is, from the “Self,” it can only enjoy a purely illusory existence, for it is from that principle that it derives all its reality, and it effectually possesses this reality only through participation in the nature of the “Self,” that is, in so far as it is identified therewith by universalization.

The Personality, let us insist once more, belongs essentially to the order of principles in the strictest sense of the word, that is, to the universal order; it cannot therefore be considered from any point of view except that of pure metaphysic, which has precisely the Universal for its domain. The pseudo-metaphysicians of the West are in the habit of confusing with the Universal things which, in reality, pertain to the individual order; or rather, as they have no conception at all of the Universal, that to which they fallaciously apply this name is usually the general, which is properly speaking but a mere extension of the individual. Some carry the confusion still further the “empiricist” philosophers, who cannot even conceive the general, identify it with the collective, which by right belongs to the particular order only; and by means of these successive degradations they end by reducing all things

to the level of sensory knowledge, which many indeed regard as the only kind of knowledge possible, because their mental horizon does not extend beyond this domain and because they wish to impose on everybody else the limitations which are but the effect of their own incapacity, whether inborn or acquired through a particular form of education.

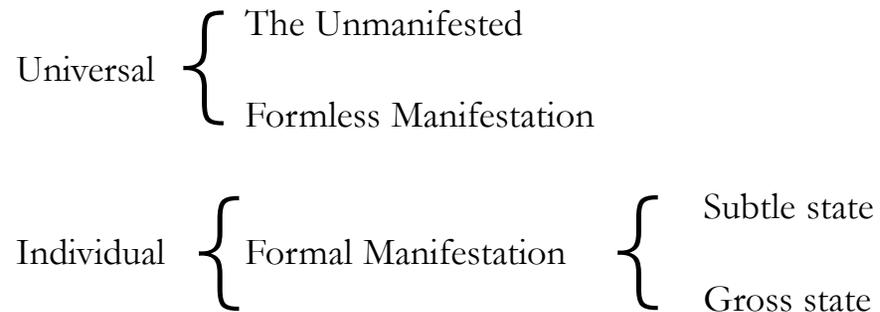
To obviate all misunderstandings of the kind which we have just described and in order to avoid tedious repetition, we will here, once and for all, provide the following table, which sets forth the essential distinctions in this connection, and to which we ask our readers to refer whenever necessary.



It is important to add that the distinction between the Universal and the individual must not be regarded as a correlation, for the second of these two terms, being strictly annulled in respect of the first, cannot in any way be opposed to it. The same holds good with regard to the unmanifested and the manifested. Moreover, it might at first sight appear that the Universal and the unmanifested should coincide, and from a certain point of view their identification would in fact be justified, since, metaphysically, it is the unmanifested which is the all-essential.

However, account must be taken of certain states of manifestation which, being formless, are from that very fact supra-individual; if, therefore, we only distinguish between the Universal and the individual we shall be forced to assign these states to the Universal, which we are the better able to do inasmuch as it is a question of a manifestation which is still in a way principial, at least by comparison with individual states; but this, it should be clearly understood, must not lead us to forget that all that is manifested, even at this higher level, is necessarily conditioned, that is to say, relative. If we regard things in this manner, the Universal will no longer consist solely of the unmanifested, but will also extend to the formless, comprising both the unmanifested and the supra-individual states of manifestation. As for the individual, it includes all degrees of formal manifestation, that is, all states in

which beings are invested with forms, for what properly characterizes individuality and essentially constitutes it as such is precisely the presence of form among the limitative conditions which define and determine a given state of existence. We can now sum up these further considerations in the following table:



The terms “subtle state” and “gross state,” which are assigned to the different degrees of formal manifestation, will be explained later; but we may point out now that this last distinction only holds good on condition that we take as our starting point the human individuality, or more precisely, the corporeal and sensible world. The “gross state” in fact is nothing else than corporeal existence itself, to which, as we shall see, human individuality belongs by one of its modalities only, and not in its integral development. As to the “subtle state,” it includes, in the first place, the extra-corporeal modalities of the human being, or of every other being situated in the same state of existence, and also, in the second place, all other individual states. It is therefore evident that these two terms are not truly symmetrical and cannot even have any common measure, since one of them represents only a portion of one out of the indefinite multiplicity of states which constitute formal manifestation, while the other includes all the remainder of this manifestation.⁴ Symmetry up to a certain point is to be found on condition that we restrict ourselves to the consideration of the human individuality alone, and it is, moreover, from this point of view that the distinction in question is in the first place established by the Hindu doctrine. Even if one afterwards transcends this point of view, or even if it has only been entertained with the ulterior object of transcending it effectively, it remains nevertheless true that it must inevitably be taken as a basis and term of comparison, since it relates to the state in which we actually find ourselves at the present moment.

It may be said, therefore, that the human being, considered in its integrality, comprises a certain sum of possibilities which constitute its corporeal or gross modality, and in addition, a multitude of other possibilities, which, extending in different directions beyond the corporeal modality, constitute its subtle modalities; but all these possibilities together represent, none the less, one and the same degree of universal Existence. It follows from this that human individuality is at once much more and much less than Westerners generally suppose it to be : much more, because they recognize in it scarcely anything except the corporeal modality, which includes but the smallest fraction of its possibilities ; much less, however, because this individuality, far from really constituting the whole being, is but one state of that being among an indefinite multitude of other states. Moreover the sum of all these states is still nothing at all in relation to the Personality, which alone is the true being, because It alone represents its permanent and unconditioned state, and because there is nothing else which can be considered as absolutely real. All the rest is, no doubt, real also, but only in a relative way, by reason of its dependence upon the Principle and in so far as it reflects It in some degree, as the image reflected in a mirror derives all its reality from the object it reflects and could enjoy no existence apart from it ; but this lesser reality, which is only participative, is illusory in relation to the supreme Reality, as the image is also illusory in relation to the object; and if we should attempt to isolate it from the Principle, this illusion would become a pure and simple non-entity. We thus observe that existence, that is to say, conditioned and manifested being, is at once real in one sense and illusory in another; and this is one of the essential points which Western writers, who have distorted the Vedânta by their erroneous and highly prejudiced interpretations, have failed to grasp.

We must furthermore warn philosophers more especially that the Universal and the individual are by no means for us what they call “categories” ; and we will recall to mind—for the more modern among them seem to have forgotten it somewhat—that “categories” in the Aristotelian sense of the word are nothing but the most general of all genera, so that they still belong to the individual domain, of which, moreover, they denote the limit from a certain point of view. It would be more correct to compare with the Universal what the Scholastics term “transcendentals,” which do precisely transcend all genera, including the “categories”; but although these “transcendentals” belong indeed to the universal order, it would still be a mistake to suppose that they constitute the whole of the Universal or even that they are the most important consideration in pure metaphysic; they are coextensive with Being, but they do not transcend Being, at which point, moreover, the doctrine in which they are thus considered

stops short. Although “ontology” does indeed pertain to metaphysic, it is very far from constituting metaphysic in its entirety, for Being is not the Unmanifest in itself, but only the principle of manifestation; consequently, that which is beyond Being is, metaphysically, much more important than Being itself. In other words, it is Brahma and not Ishwara which must be recognized as the Supreme Principle. This is declared expressly and above all by the Brahma-Sûtras, which open with these words: “Now begins the study of Brahma,” to which Shankarâchârya adds the following commentary: “This first sùtra, while enjoining the quest of Brahma, advises a reflective study of the texts of the Upanishads carried out with the aid of a dialectic which (taking them as its basis and principle) is never in disagreement with them, and which, like them (but only in the capacity of simple auxiliary means), envisages “Deliverance” as the goal.”

1. M. Léon Daudet in certain of his works (*L'Hérédité* and *Le Monde des Images*) has distinguished in the human being between what he calls ‘self (soi) and “ego” (moi); but both of these, as he conceives them, are for us equally included in the individuality and fall entirely within the scope of psychology which, whatever he may have supposed, is quite incapable of extending its sway so far as to include the Personality; however, the fact of having tried to establish such a distinction indicates a kind of presentiment which deserves to be pointed out as remarkable in an author who had no pretensions to be called a metaphysician.

2. It is our intention to set forth more completely in other works the metaphysical theory of the being’s multiple states; here we need only touch on those aspects of that theory that are indispensable to an understanding of the constitution of the human being.

3. In theology, when it is declared that “God is pure spirit” it is reasonable to suppose that this statement must likewise not be taken in the sense of “spirit” as opposed to “matter,” that is to say, according to the sense in which these two terms have no meaning except in reference to one another; to understand it in this way would amount to accepting a kind of “demiurgic” Conception, more or less akin to the theories attributed to the Manichæans. It is none the less true to say that such an expression is of a kind that readily lends itself to false interpretations, leading to the substitution of “a being” for pure Being.

4. This asymmetry can be made more intelligible by applying to it a well established observation of ordinary logic; whenever an attribution or quality of any kind is considered, all possible things are automatically divided into two groups, namely on the one hand things endowed with this quality and on the other hand things devoid of it; but, while the first named group is found to be thus positively defined and determined, the second, which is only characterised in a wholly negative manner, is in no wise limited thereby and is in reality indefinite. Thus, there is neither symmetry nor any common measure between the two groups, which do not really constitute a two-fold division, since their distinction holds good merely from the special point of view of a certain quality taken as a starting-point; the second group possesses no homogeneity and may include things having nothing in common with one another, which however does not rob this division of its validity under the original terms of reference. Now it is precisely in this manner that the manifested

can be distinguished from the unmanifested; so also, within the manifested, a similar distinction can be made between the formal and the formless and lastly, within the realm of form itself, between the corporeal and incorporeal.