The Theology of Avatāra in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa

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Abstract: The idea of avatāra no doubt presents a philosophical challenge, as it appears to stand in contrast to the Vedāntic principle of non-duality; the Bhāgavata purāṇa (BhP) offers an opportunity to look into this question due to its unique structure, which combines the Vedānta and Rasa traditions. As such, this paper looks into the theology of Avatāra in the Bhāgavata purāṇa; it argues that reading the purāṇic genre in light of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta is not as conducive to the understanding of the avatāra as reading it in light of Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, which indeed is compatible with the purāṇic genre. Moreover, uncovering the underlying assumptions of Western notions of personhood, it seems that classical ideas of "the person" have to be looked into, and offering an alternative idea of personhood may be necessary in order to better understand the theology of avatāra.

Keywords: avatāra; Bhāgavata purāṇa; personhood; Viśiṣṭādvaita

The idea of divine descent known as avatāra is no doubt one of the cornerstones of the Bhāgavata purāṇa (BhP), if not the main theme. Moreover, the Līlā or sports of the various avatāras comprise the heart of the entire text; indeed, the importance of these avatāras in Vaiṣṇavism, and especially in the Bhāgavata, can hardly be stressed enough (Sheridan 1986, p. 59). The notion of avatāra enables the exhibition of a large variety of personal qualities, and due to its dramatic nature, has the ability of arousing a diversity of emotions in the hearts and minds of the devotees. Despite the importance of the avatāras, scholars find it difficult to point out their theological significance; as such, this paper argues that in order to understand the avatāras' theological significance, one would have to look at them through a non-Western notion of personhood, a notion which highlights their dramatic nature as an essential component.

As the BhP gradually leads the reader into higher stages of emotional understanding of the divine, the stories of the various avatāras foster various devotional emotions, based mainly upon dāsya or servitude. One of the first topics to be discussed in the BhP is the list of the avatāras and their functions. The topic is a fundamental one within the purāṇa, and it traces back to the dawn of history; i.e., the creation.

"[1] Sūta said: In the beginning, desirous of creating the world, the Supreme Person assumed the form of a Universal Person, and manifested the sixteen elements. [2] The Universal Person was lying in the water of the universal ocean, and sleeping in a yogic state. There was a lake in His navel, and from that lake a lotus flower sprouted; from that lotus was born Brahmā, the chief universal progenitor. [3] The various planetary systems are resting on this universal form, which is comprised of a state of unadulterated purity. [4] Seers visualize this wonderful form along with its thousands of legs, thighs, arms, faces, heads, ears, eyes, and noses, shining with thousands of garlands, garments and earrings. [5] This form is the imperishable

seed of the various avatāras, and from its parts and fragments, beings such as gods, humans and animals are created."[1]

This section lays the foundation for the avatāra doctrine in describing how the Lord assumed the form of a person,[2] how Brahmā took birth from his navel, and how the original form of the Supreme Being[3] became the seed and resting place of the various incarnations. Through the fragments of his fragments, the supreme creates not only the gods, animals, and men, but also different qualities, attributes, doctrines, and ideas that will be henceforth stated. The text goes on to describe the various avatāras, one by one. As the text is rather long, only the narratives of eight avatāras are cited:[4]

"[6] At first, that Divine Person manifested himself as the four celibate sons of Brahmā known as the Kumāras, and as a brahmin, practiced the very difficult vow of unbroken celibacy. [7] Secondly, the Lord of sacrifices assumed the body of a boar and for the welfare of the earth, raised it from the lower regions where it had fallen to, and reestablished it in its place. [8] Thirdly, in the seer- creation, he appeared as seer among the gods, Nārada, and propounded a devotional treatise which has the power of freeing one from the bondage of actions. [9] In the forth incarnation, he appeared as the twin sages Nara and Nārāyaṇa born of Dharma's wife, and performed severe austerities with a fully pacified mind. [10] The fifth incarnation named Kapila, the foremost among the perfected beings, taught the brahmin Āsuri the doctrine of Sāṅkhya which is engaged with the fundamental elements, as this knowledge was lost in the course of time. [11] Being invited through the penances of Anasūyā, in the sixth incarnation her and Atri's son Dattātreya, taught metaphysics to Alarka, Prahlāda and others. [12] The seventh incarnation was Yajña, the son of Ruci and Ākuti, and with the help of Yāma and other gods, he protected Svāyambhuva Manu's reign. [13] In the eighth incarnation Viṣṇu appeared as the son of King Nābhi and Queen Merudevī, and paved the path of perfection for those who are resolute and firm, a path which is honored by all social classes."[5]

Altogether the avatāra section[6] contains a list of 22 avatāras, listed as follows:

1. The four Kumāras, the child sages who practiced unbroken celibacy.
2. The Boar, Varāha, raised the earth and placed it back in place after it had sunk to the lower regions of the universe.
3. Nārada, the divine sage, who taught knowledge which releases one from karma.
4. Nara and Nārāyaṇa, two saints who performed severe penance.
5. Kapila, founder of the Sāṅkhya school of philosophy.
6. Dattātreya, a saint who taught knowledge of the soul.
7. Yajña, who protected the universe during Svāyambhuva Manu's regime.
8. Ṛṣabha, who taught the path of sannyāsa to the strong-minded.
9. Prithu, a king who milked the earth for the various goods she was withdrawing from the population.
10. The Fish, Mātsya, who protected the Vedas during the universal flood.
11. The Tortoise, Kūrma, supported the Mandara mountain on his back while gods and demons were churning the ocean.
12. Dhanvantari, the divine physician.

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[1]   BhP 1.3.1-5; my translation.
[2]   *Puruṣa*.
[3]   Parrinder considers this puruṣa to be the first *avatāra*; See: (Parrinder 1982, p. 75).
[4]   The full list of avatārs and their deeds follows: See BhP 1.3.6-26. (Tagare 1999, pp. 24–29).
[5]   BhP 1.3.6-13.
[6]   BhP 1.3.6-26. (Tagare 1999, pp. 24–29).

13.   Mohinī, who enchanted the demons, thus alluring them to give her the nectar which she then gave to the gods.

14.   Narasiṁha, the lion man, who saved his devotee Prahlāda from his demonic father Hiraṇyakaśipu.

15.   Vāmana, the dwarf brāhmaṇa who reclaimed the three worlds by covering them with three steps.

16.   Paraśu-Rāma, who extirpated the warrior class from the earth twenty-one times.

17.   Veda-Vyāsa, who divided the one Veda into branches for the benefit of the less intelligent people of kali yuga.

18.   Rāma, the heroic king who helped the gods by killing the demoniac king Rāvaṇa.

19.   Balarāma, elder brother of Kṛṣṇa.

20.   Kṛṣṇa. The two brothers relieved the burden of the earth from the many armies marching on its surface.

21.   Buddha, who will appear in the kali yuga to delude the enemies of the gods.[7]

22.   Kalkin, who will appear at the twilight of the Kali age, when kings will become robbers.

The last two avatāras, Buddha and Kalkin, are spoken of in the future tense, as if the BhP predicts their future coming. The BhP considers this list a sample only, and states that there are unlimited avatāras.[8]

We may first examine briefly the literary implications of the avatāra idea. The question may be raised: 'How should the BhP be read?' or 'What literary genre does the BhP represent? Is it philosophy, epic, poetry, or something else?' Freda Matchett sheds further light on the notion of avatāra as distinct from the notion "Incarnation", and emphasizes that the avatāra is "God appearing upon the world's stage", or, in other words, may be read as a universal drama. She writes:

"Although its primary meaning is "descent", the word avatāra is often translated into English as "incarnation". This is misleading because it suggests too strong a resemblance to the Incarnation of Christian theology. The Latin incarnatio, like the Greek ensarkosis which it translates, implies that what is important in the Christian concept is that the divine personage should be "in the flesh", i.e., totally real in human terms, all of a piece with the rest of human history. Whereas Christians have been reluctant to use words like "appearance" or "manifestation" of their incarnate Lord, such ideas are implicit in the term avatāra, since it has associations with the theatre.[9] The avatāra is God appearing upon the world's stage, having descended from the highest level of reality to that of the trailokya[10] in order to perform some beneficial action, notably the restoration of the socio-cosmic order[11]" (Matchett 2001, p. 4).

Matchett highlights the nature of avatāra as "appearing" or "manifesting" while not necessarily being "in the flesh". She also highlights the way in which the divine descends from the highest reality, to appear on the world's stage, by associating the term avatāra with "theatre" and the "acting profession". The idea of avatāra no doubt presents a philosophical challenge, as it appears to stand in contrast to the Vedāntic principle of non-duality; as such, the question of reconciling the notion of avatāra with the principle of non-duality is addressed. It may be helpful to first look closer at the relations between non-dual ideology and the idea of avatāra; as to the apparent problem, Geoffrey Parrinder writes:

"It has seemed to some Indian writers, past and present, that the concept of Avatāras is an unnecessary complication, if not a betrayal of the non-dualism of the Upaniṣads. If the cardinal assertion of monism, "thou art that", is true then all men are divine. It is hard to

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[7]   The text (BhP 1.3.24) speaks in the future tense.

[8]   BhP 1.3.26, (Tagare 1999, p. 29).

[9]   *raṅgāvataraṇa*, "entering on the stage", is a word for the acting profession; *raṅgāvatāraka* is an actor.

[10]   The triple world of devas, asuras and human beings.

[11]   *Dharma*.

see a difference between an Avatāra and other people. At most, it appears that the Avatāra knows his identity with Brahman, whereas others are yet unaware of it, though potentially they are the same as he is" (Parrinder 1982, p. 48).

Parrinder raises the question "in what essential way is the avatāra unique?". If the avatāra is to be considered unique at all, Parrinder argues, it is due to his possessing the true knowledge of his identity with Brahman. However, one may assert that this kind of knowledge is open for every jīva who undergoes the process of self-realization, and as such, doesn't really highlight the avatāra's specification. Parrinder goes further on to shed light on the tension between monism and the avatāra doctrine:

"The appeal that monism still has comes from its apparent unity, simplicity and refinement. It does away with mythology and crude theological symbols. In place of a transcendental deity, a God "up there", it teaches a universal Mind, with which the human mind is one. The universe appears to be informed by intelligence, indeed to be all mind, and man is that mind. Religion and worship disappear along with superstition. It goes without saying that there is no room for incarnation. Nor indeed is there room for revelation, prayer, or anything that suggests a transcendent Deity" (Parrinder 1982, p. 48).

It seems that the idea of avatāra stands in sheer contradiction to this unity, simplicity, and refinement. This deep tension between non-dual theorists and the avatāra doctrine is expressed in traditional commentaries; sometimes reservations are directly expressed, while sometimes they are conspicuous by their absence. Parrinder comments:

"Since thorough-going non-dualists have tried all down Indian history to maintain belief in the undifferentiated unity of divine and human, their comments on the Avatāra doctrine of the Gītā, however respectful, have been weak" (Parrinder 1982, pp. 48–49).

Parrinder gives the example of Śaṅkara and contrasts his approach with that of Rāmānuja:

"It is significant that in his commentary on the Gītā Śaṅkara wrote only short notes on the critical verses that deal with the coming of Avatāra, though he went to considerable length in exposition of anything that could be turned to the service of non-dualism . . . In contrast, his successor and critic Rāmānuja wrote pages of comment on these crucial verses" (Parrinder 1982, p. 50).

It seems that Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita is compatible indeed with the purāṇic genre, in which the idea of avatāra is common. Regarding Rāmānuja Klostermaier notes:

"His viśiṣṭa theory enables him to incorporate into the philosophical system of Vedānta all the traditional Hindu notions of bhagavān from the Epic-Purāṇic-Āgamic tradition" (Klostermaier 2007, p. 361).

As a central goal of this essay is to reconcile the concept of avatāra with non-dualism, and as Rāmānuja's teachings indeed play a central role in that, a deeper look into Rāmānuja's teaching may be warranted. Rāmānuja, who served as the main priest of the famous Śrīraṅgam temple, was clearly a theist and personalist; his great project was to articulate a philosophy which will foster devotionalism and a more emotional type of religion. He himself was the great philosopher of the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* school of *Vedāntamīmāṁsā*, and moreover, he was the first Indian thinker who succeeded in creating a philosophical system out of the data of popular emotional religion (Van Buitenen 1974, p. 1). Rāmanuja's project was even more ambitious than creating a philosophical system to support emotional religion, as he wished to establish the personhood of *Brahman* and gain the support of *śruti* by basing his doctrine on the *Upaniṣads*. As such, Rāmānuja deserves the credit for successfully attempting to coordinate personal theism with absolutistic philosophy, and indeed, Rāmānuja may be said to have secured for *Vaiṣṇavism* the sanction of the *Upaniṣads* (Dandekar 1986, p. 212).

Rāmānuja's contribution to the development of theistic *Vedānta* is central and in many ways, he is the founding philosopher of this tradition. Śaṅkara[12] was very successful in establishing non-duality, but the position awarded to devotion and relationships with the supreme in his doctrine was unessential or ultimately illusory. The challenge facing Rāmānuja was to maintain the *Upaniṣadic* sense of non-duality, and at the same time award an essential status to the devotional relationships between the soul and the supreme. His solution was to describe existence as one organic unity, which is qualified in an essential way. According to Rāmānuja, the Supreme Person who possesses supremely good qualities is the only absolute reality, and therefore the only object worthy of love and devotion. Matter[13] and souls,[14] which are equally ultimate and real, are the qualities[15] of the Supreme Person, but, as qualities, they are entirely dependent on him in the same way as the body is dependent on the soul. They are directed and sustained by the Supreme Person and exist entirely for him and within him. Rāmānuja's doctrine is therefore known as *Viśiṣṭa-Advaita*, or the doctrine of a single Supreme Person qualified by *cit*—souls, and *acit*—matter. These three factors[16] form a complex[17] organic unity (Dandekar 1986, p. 212). As such, these three realities occupy the heart of Rāmānuja's doctrine: The personal God or *īśvara*, the conscious souls or *cit,* and inert matter or *acit.*

Rāmānuja emphasizes time and again that the Supreme *Brahman* is Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, who not only is a personal God, but is The Personal God or the Supreme Person. This point seems to be fundamental to his system, so much so that he opens four of his main treatises stating exactly this in a condensed form, and elaborates on this matter in the fifth. This is a direct answer to Śaṅkara, preparing to offer an interpretation to the subject matter of *Brahman*; however, in direct opposition to Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja considers *Brahman* to be *puruṣottama* or the Supreme Person. This policy is followed by Rāmānuja in the introductions of his other treatises; the *Vedārtha saṃgraha,* the *Vedānta dīpa*, and the *Vedānta sāra.* In his opening to the *Bhagavad gītā bhāṣya*, Rāmānuja describes the Supreme Person, Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa: "He is equipped with divine weapons which are appropriate to Him, countless, of wondrous powers, eternal, impeccable and surpassingly auspicious" (Ādidevānanda n.d., unspecified: 42). Rāmānuja makes here an exposition of his position in regards to the supreme *Brahman*; he is personal and endowed with unlimited auspicious qualities. He has a divine form which is eternal and flawless. His essential nature consists purely of infinitude, knowledge, and bliss.[18] As such, the essential personhood of *Brahman* in his system cannot be mistaken. Rāmānuja lays the foundation for his *pariṇāma* doctrine, according to which the supreme *Brahman* creates the world, shaped the various entities in his own figure, and incarnated into the world of creatures. Referring to the supreme *Brahman* who is the Supreme Person, Nārāyaṇa, he writes: "He shaped His own figure into the likeness of the various kinds of creatures without giving up His own supreme nature, and got incarnated in the worlds of creatures . . . " (Ādidevānanda n.d., 43) As such, the Supreme Person, Nārāyaṇa, is characterized by perfection, personal qualities, initiatives, and a loving exchange of paternal relationships with his devotees, and is related to the world through *pariṇāma* or modification. In discussing *pariṇāma* or the "modification" which *Brahman* undergoes in changing from the state of cause to the state of effect, Rāmānuja explains that the *pariṇāma* he teaches is not of such nature as to ascribe imperfections to the Supreme *Brahman*. On the contrary, according to Rāmānuja, it ascribes to him unrestricted lordship. The word that Rāmānuja often uses to express the fact that the universe is a positive perfection of God is *vibhūti,* "the manifestation of his lordship" or the "realm which he controls" (Carman 1974, p. 132). Rāmānuja's positive attitude towards the world has attracted the attention of Christian thinkers and

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[12]   The great exponent of advaita vedānta; pure non-dualism.
[13]   *Acit.*
[14]   *Cit.*
[15]   *Viśeṣaṇas.*
[16]   *Tattva-traya.*
[17]   *Viśiṣṭa.*
[18]   Denoted by the words *anata, jñāna* and *ānanda*. See (Ādidevānanda n.d.), (translator) *Śrī Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya*, p. 41.

various comparative works have been written on Rāmānuja and Christian thinkers, shedding light on the similarities and differences between *Vaiṣṇavism* and Christianity.[19]

A unique characteristic of Rāmānuja's doctrine is his idea that the souls and the world relate to God as the body to the ensouled; scripture testifies to a supreme self who is the inner self of finite selves, and thus the finite self is to the supreme self as the material body is to the finite self. This is Rāmānuja's doctrine of *śarīra-śarīri-bhāva*; accordingly, the relation of the self to the body corresponds to the relation between grammatical subject and predicate adjective, or substance and mode. It is the special characteristic of finite selves to be a mode in relation to the Supreme Person and substance in relation to material things, which are their bodies or instruments. The idea of *śarīra-śarīrin bhāva* may be considered in somewhat functional terms, emphasizing its being controlled and supported (by that conscious being) for its own purpose in all circumstances. Thus, a body (i) belongs to a conscious being; (ii) is controlled and supported by that being; (iii) serves to further that being's purpose in all circumstances; and (iv) its proper and essential form is accessory to that being (Overzee 1992, p. 63).[20] At any rate, the entire finite universe of souls and material bodies is also the body of God; thus God is the only ultimately substantial reality, and reality may be viewed as *Viśiṣṭādvaita*: The nondual reality of that which is internally distinguished (Carman 1974, p. 212). It is not exactly clear how literally this analogy should be taken, as this metaphor could be taken in a more gross way, or alternatively, in a more subtle one. The example of the grammatical relations of subject and predicate adjective hints at a more subtle type of relation, whereas the example of a material body relating to its soul would be more concrete or gross, but whatever the case may be, this doctrine is no doubt central to Rāmānuja.

Daniel Sheridan holds the view that the doctrine of avatāra does not contradict the non-dual doctrine of the BhP, and hints that his position on the question of the BhP's doctrine may be somewhat close to Viśiṣṭādvaita:

> "The avatāra, however, is a particular immanent form of the Supreme Deity within his non-duality, the transcendent becoming immanent within the phenomenal which is ultimately not other than the Deity" (Sheridan 1986, p. 61).

This raises a question as to Sheridan's own view of the BhP's doctrine, which he indicates by the name of his book "The Advaitic Theism of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa". Sheridan addresses this at the book's concluding words:

> "For the Bhāgavata non-dualism functions within a religion of devotion which maximizes the personhood of the Deity. Although each tradition of devotion characteristically maximizes the personhood of the Supreme Deity, and thus distinguishes the Deity from the person of the devotee, the Bhāgavata introduces this distinction within the person of the Supreme Deity. Perhaps a homologue to the nature of this distinction is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity wherein otherness does not imply separation. Rather the perfection of the Deity requires a Triune difference within the identity of the Godhead. In a homologous manner the Bhāgavata proposes a vision of a God who by his own power creates distinctions within himself. These distinctions derive reality from the Godhead without diminishing his reality. To separate devotion from non-dualism as has often been done is therefore to trivialize the Bhāgavata's vision of the devotee's love for Kṛṣṇa. Devotion is primarily an ontological rather than a moral phenomenon" (Sheridan 1986, p. 148).

Sheridan's analysis soundly represents the doctrine of the BhP, and he is right in stating that "a religion of devotion maximises the personhood of the Deity". Personal devotion indeed concentrates on the specific attributes of the deity, magnifies and maximizes them, and experiences them through

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[19]　A famous example being Rudolf Otto's *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted*. See (Otto 1930).
[20]　The quote refers to *SB*, 2.1.9.

tasting various related rasas. Moreover, we agree with the idea "of a God who by his own power creates distinctions within himself, distinctions which derive reality from the Godhead without diminishing his reality", as representative of the BhP's doctrine of non-dualism. The avatāras exemplify this principle, as the divine creates distinctions within himself by appearing or manifesting in various personal avatāra forms. These avatāras represent divinity and infinity, and the existence of one doesn't diminish the divinity of the other. We also agree that devotion is an ontological phenomenon rather than a moral one, and, as argued earlier, devotional emotions indeed have an ontological value. In other words, being devoted and experiencing devotional sentiments is not only a state of mind, rather it seems to represent the ontological status of the jīva, according to the BhP, and that implies the essential personhood of the jīva, too. What does this have to do with the BhP's Vedāntic doctrine? A doctrine in which "God who by his own power creates distinctions within himself", "a religion of devotion which maximizes the personhood of the Deity", and in which "devotion is primarily an ontological rather than a moral phenomenon", seems to be close to Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita. Moreover, the idea of "a God who by his own power creates distinctions within himself" no doubt resembles Rāmānuja's doctrine, where Brahman creates distinctions within himself to form Īśvara, cit, and acit. The distinctions within divinity are manifested, inter alia, through the avatāras who exhibit various personal distinctions, yet simultaneously keep a unified divine identity. The religion of devotion, which maximizes the personhood of the deity, points to the emotional religion following the avatāra doctrine—every avatāra evokes a different aesthetic and emotional mood, and through that mood, the personal characteristics of the deity are magnified. Devotion as an ontological category corresponds to the jīva's nature in Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, as being essentially devoted to the supreme, even at the state of mokṣa. As such, it may well be that the type of Vedānta underlying the BhP resembles in some ways Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. Sheridan's conclusion as to the nature of the BhP's doctrine is basically acceptable, but is still in need of some refinement. In what sense is devotion ontological? Is the tendency to express devotional relationships an essential and ontological quality of a person? Is this devotion reciprocal; i.e., does the Deity return this expression of devotional relationships? If the Deity does respond, does this response emanate from the Deity's essential nature, or is it a lower, lesser, or external expression of the Deity's personhood? As far as Sheridan's mentioning the homologue for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—does it imply that the BhP holds the same notion of personhood as the Christian tradition? In order to focus further on the point under discussion, which is the reconciliation of the essential personhood of both the Deity and the devotee with the doctrine of non-duality, we shall refer to Sheridan once more on this issue:

> "But what is this non-differenced, non-dual reality? In certain passages the Bhāgavata says that it is knowledge or consciousness itself. Thus in the first canto, where the program for the Bhāgavata is laid out, Sūta replies to the questions of the sages by pointing out that "the aim of life is inquiry into the Truth and not (desire for enjoyment in heaven) by performing religious rites. Those who possess the knowledge of the Truth call the knowledge of non-duality as the Truth; it is called Brahman, the Highest Self, and Bhagavān".[21] The non-duality of Truth or the reality (tattva) is such that no ultimate distinction between knower and knowledge can be made, though by giving the absolute reality different names, the Bhāgavata affirms that the richness of absolute reality cannot be exhausted by considering it from one angle only. With admitting any distinction within the absolute reality, the Bhāgavata draws on various traditions to aid the understanding. The terms 'Brahman' and 'Highest Self' are drawn from the Vedānta, while 'Bhagavān' is dear to the Vaiṣṇavas. The final position given to Bhagavān seems to raise it above the other two in importance, and this is borne out by the Purāṇa as a whole. Thus non-dual knowledge, which is the essence of the absolute reality, is, according to the Bhāgavata, ultimately personal" (Sheridan 1986, pp. 23–24).

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[21] BhP 1.2.10b-11.

Sheridan undoubtedly offers a deep doctrinal analysis of the BhP, but is still unable to fully dissipate the obscurity over the question. At first, Sheridan points at knowledge and consciousness as comprising the non-dual reality. He then quotes BhP 1.2.11, which, no doubt, is engaged with this very question. He explains the non-duality of the Truth by concluding that no ultimate distinction between knower and knowledge can be made, though he expresses a reservation, and claims the BhP's reality to be rich and many angled. He then expresses a counter-reservation by saying that this richness doesn't necessitate any distinction within the absolute reality, yet he doesn't reconcile the two seemingly contradicting views. He then points to the BhP's eclectic nature by saying that 'Brahman' and the 'Highest Self'[22] are of a Vedāntic source, whereas the term 'Bhagavān' is of a Vaiṣṇavite source, as if there is a contradiction between Vaiṣṇavism and Vedānta. However, Sheridan doesn't actually reconcile the problem under discussion, rather concludes that 'non-dual knowledge, which is the essence of the absolute reality, is, according to the Bhāgavata, ultimately personal'. So, the question still remains, 'How can non-dual knowledge be personal?', or phrasing it differently, 'How can the reality of Bhagavān be non-dual?' In order to shed further light on this question, we propose a non-Western definition of personhood, which we consider to be underlying the BhP; this definition intertwines the components of rationality, enjoyment, creativity, and exchange of relationships in a way which is perhaps more natural for the BhP than Western definitions:[23]

> A specific individual, conscious, and rational being, whose nature is enjoyment, desires, creativity, and reciprocal relationships with other similar beings.

This definition seems to be balanced and holistic, in that it perceives personhood through a variety of qualities; rationality being but one of them. It not only represents a balanced view of the knowledge and aesthetic paradigms, but it expresses specific qualities such as rationality, enjoyment, creativity, etc. without having to compromise its essential position. This definition of personhood may better reconcile non-dualism with the person of Bhagavān, as manifested through the various avatāras; based upon this notion, the avatāra may be seen as manifesting a deeper amount of personhood than the previous notions. In other words, the avatāra is more specific; i.e., his qualities are particular, whether he is a boar, lion, or dwarf. His consciousness is manifested to a wider degree through his activities and speech. His emotional state is clearer, and it is evident when he is pleased, enjoying, or displeased. His desires and aims are also clearer, and so is his creativity manifested in the way he does things—the boar avatāra dives into the cosmic ocean to rescue the earth, the tortoise avatāra has the devas and the āsuras scratch his back with a mountain, the dwarf avatāra begs for three steps of land and then expands to cover the entire world, etc. The avatāra exhibits a wide variety of relationships with various other persons; with some he fights, others are saved by him, to some he relates as a king to his subject or a master to his servant, whereas to others he acts as an obedient son, a friend, or a lover.

Having offered a definition of personhood which, so we believe, represents the BhP's underlying notion of personhood, we may now attempt to differentiate it from classical notion of personhood, which is somewhat more scholastic, i.e., emphasizing knowledge and rationality as the essential qualities of personhood; for this purpose, we may offer a critique of Geoffrey Parrinder's important work *Avatāra and Incarnation*. However, as the question of personhood is somewhat complex, we may first offer a very brief survey of the evolution of the term person, along with a brief discussion of the term in Sanskrit terminology.

Attempting to articulate notions of personhood within Hinduism, one faces a translation problem, as the term 'person' is a somewhat Western imposition on Indian culture. The uncertain status of the notion of 'person' in India is conditioned by the fact that it is foreign to the Sanskrit tradition and has no adequate rendering in any of the Sanskritic languages. When dealing with either the human being or the deity, Indian philosophy always worked with other concepts, which rarely imported the

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[22]   *Paramātman*.
[23]   I have developed this idea elsewhere; see (Theodor 2015, pp. 9–19).

holistic signification of 'person' (De Smet 1974, pp. 52–53). As the term 'person' has no adequate rendering in any of the Sanskritic languages, various terms such as *ātman, puruṣa, jīva, īśvara, bhagavān, avatāra*, and *mūrti* are used to denote both human and divine persons within various contexts. The term 'person' has a long history, dating back to the Greek–Roman period, where it was used to denote the stage masks of the actors (Mauss 1985, pp. 14–20). It has taken the meaning of a dramatic hero, and hence became applicable by the Stoics to every human being, as all are endowed by God to play on the world stage. The Roman law defined the citizens as persons and as opposed to slaves, they had legal rights and duties. Boethius[24] coined a basic definition of 'the person', emphasizing the quality of rationality as characterizing personhood, and the Christian tradition adopted the term to designate the Trinity; as it viewed all men as brothers, it considered all to be persons, whether free citizens, slaves, or foreigners. In the medieval period, the term 'person' was considered to belong to the realm of responsible action, and to refer to an intellectual and morally free subject. Consequently, Aquinas refined Boethius' definition finally to declare that 'person' means an integral and unitary self-subsistent subject characterized by intellectual consciousness, moral freedom, and all properties ensuing from these defining notes. Prominent among these properties were privacy, ownership of natural rights, moral responsibility, being a source of values in its own right, and capacity of initiating interpersonal relationships. It was also such that it could with due precision apply analogically to the divine as well as to human persons (De Smet 1974, pp. 52–53). This usage remained as such for hundreds of years, but was later restricted to mean 'human individuals' whereas its application to the divine was taken as merely anthropomorphic. The translators of Sanskrit works in the late 19th century, translated the terms *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa brahman* as impersonal and personal *Brahman*. Other terminology used by them was to refer to *nirguṇa brahman* as the Absolute, and to *saguṇa brahman* or *īśvara* as God. Underlying this obscure usage of terms was the assumption that the Hindu personal notions were not absolute. Against this background, it becomes understandable that the question of personhood in Indian thought has become far too complex and obscure to be dealt with beyond the constrains of modern humanism. Yet the materials for an Indian recognition of the person are present both in the theologies and in the various anthropologies of the Indian tradition.[25]

Returning to Geoffrey Parrinder's important work *Avatāra and Incarnation*, we do not know what definition of personhood underlies this work, as Parrinder does not define his usage of the term; still we may take the liberty to presume that it is a widely accepted Western definition, emphasizing rationality as the essence of personhood, and as such, placing rationality above aesthetics or the emotional realm. Parrinder analyses twelve characteristics of the avatāra doctrine (Parrinder 1982, pp. 120–26); in general, his points are sound and rigorous, and thoroughly cover the theology of avatāra. He effectively emphasizes the avatāras, reinforcing the personal aspects of God, and points out the difficulty this imposes on the monists. The avatāras reinforce a realist world-view, as opposed to an idealistic one, and they reinforce the sense of God as a person, able to exchange relationships, reciprocate prayers, and show grace. The avatāras also serve as role models to be practically followed by people, and thus to sublimate and enhance the quality of human action and life in the world. However, Parrinder's view of the avatāras is somewhat alien to the BhP, in that his world-view seems to be either oriented towards the Bhagavad gītā, western thought, or both. He writes:

> "The divine descent has a purpose, it is not mere 'play'. These purposes range from slaying demons and delivering earth, men and gods, to showing the divine nature and love. The great purpose is to establish dharma, to restore right and put down wrong" (Parrinder 1982, p. 124).

The word "play" refers most probably to the term līlā; Parrinder considers it to be on a lower level than the serious business of restoring dharma, and that is exemplified by applying to it the adjective "mere". Although this may fit well with the mood of the Bhagavad gītā in which the reinstatement of

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24 Approximately 475–525 CE.
25 (Ibid., p. 54).

dharma is much valued, it may not necessarily best represent the mood of the BhP, in which dramatic and aesthetic expressions occupy a central place. Additionally:

> "The character of Kṛṣṇa is many-sided, and both character and history are very different from those of Christ. It is easy to smile at the infant prodigies of the child Kṛṣṇa in the Purāṇas, or perhaps lament enviously his adventures with the milkmaids, and frown at the ecstasies of the Rādhā- Kṛṣṇa cult. Yet in considering the character of Kṛṣṇa the dominance of the Bhagavad-gītā must be remembered, and here Kṛṣṇa is noble, moral, active and compassionate" (Parrinder 1982, p. 123).

Here Parrinder resorts to the Bhagavad gītā, and stresses nobility and morality as representing higher values than smiling at the infant prodigies of Kṛṣṇa or frowning at the ecstasies of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa cult. In considering the question of whether nobility and morality are higher values than emotional exchange, we may return to the BhP's idea of a person. From the point of view of the BhP's definition of "the person" as has been suggested in this essay, expressing emotions is not a lesser expression of personhood than acting nobly and morally, or teaching a philosophical treatise such as the Bhagavad gītā. Additionally a dramatic expression of creativity, such as appearing as a boar or half-man half-lion, is not taken by the tradition to be inferior to appearing in a human avatāra. It seems that Parrinder's statements are underlain by a concept of personhood which may not fit the BhP, in that they consider emotional expression to be inferior to moral and noble deeds. In maintaining this concept, one has to somewhat apologetically restore to Kṛṣṇa's noble and moral deeds, as if to compensate for his rather lower deeds expressed through his infant prodigies or his frowning at the ecstasies of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa cult. Parrinder's citing the Bhagavad gītā as a reference is somewhat problematic for our purpose too. The Bhagavad gītā does not carry the same dominant personal flavor as the BhP does; rather, it is dominated mainly by the jñāna trend,[26] and therefore much larger sections tend to be interpreted impersonally, i.e., considering the supreme to be ultimately impersonal. As an example to the common tendency to interpret the Bhagavad gītā in this way, or at least to question its personal interpretation, we may quote Keith Ward:

> "Within the Gītā itself, atheistic forms of Sāṅkhya are revised so that the eternal souls become creations of one Supreme Lord. But it is not entirely clear that this Lord is finally adequately characterized as a loving person. For much of the Gītā, it seems that the Supreme Self is pure consciousness and bliss, without purpose and unaffected by anything in the material realm. Śaṅkara … might be prepared to accept Viṣṇu as Īśvara (the Supreme Lord), and Kṛṣṇa as one of the main avatāras, or earthly embodiments of Viṣṇu. But he would insist that beyond the personal form of Viṣṇu lies the impersonal or supra-personal nirguṇa Brahman, which is in itself without qualities and so is indeed beyond action and enjoyment as we understand them" (Ward 1998, p. 44).

Ward questions whether the personal notion of the Lord as the supreme is not imposed on the Bhagavad gītā, and refers to Śaṅkara, who "would insist that beyond the personal form of Viṣṇu lies the impersonal or supra-personal nirguṇa Brahman, which is in itself without qualities". The Bhagavad gītā is one of the triple foundations of Vedānta, and as such, it is generally a philosophical text, which can be relatively easily interpreted in an impersonal way,[27] and indeed, this was done by Śaṅkara, as Ward points out. The BhP, however, is differently composed, and contains not only a direct philosophical mode of expression, but an indirect one too; that is why the BhP is much more congenial than the Bhagavad gītā for expressions of personhood, and it is the BhP, and not the Bhagavad gītā, in which

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[26] Although there are some traces of rasa in the Bhg, too, conveyed, for example, by the usage of various epithets for both Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna.

[27] I have developed this idea of the relations between philosophy, direct usage of language an impersonal worldview elsewhere; see (Theodor 2015, pp. 43–53).

the Vaiṣṇava idea of God being a person is expressed so clearly. Therefore, in order to state that the avatāra's aspect of being a moral agent in establishing dharma is higher than his līlā aspect, Parrinder has to resort to the Bhagavad gītā, leaving his ideas to be somewhat at odds with the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

In summary, it may well be that in order to understand the BhP's theology of avatāra, one would have to first recognize the BhP's close relations with Viśiṣṭādvaita. That in itself may still not be sufficient, as reading the BhP while assuming a Western and scholastic notion of personhood may obscure the importance of the avatāra's dramatic elements. As such, a more holistic definition of personhood is needed, and once such a definition is applied, the importance of the avatāra doctrine and its unique characteristics are revealed.

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