

PHILOSOPHY OF MAN

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“Man” seems to have been quite a neglected subject in the history of Western philosophy; more attention has been paid to God and universe than to man. Though there are many reputable histories of the specific branches of philosophy; and even of some of its special subjects such as logic ethics, aesthetics, politics, law and history, a “history of the philosophy of man” has yet to be written and even yet to be conceived. True “man” has sometimes been discussed as a part of this or that theory or system in ethics, politics or education, but such subsidiary discussions by their very nature remain controlled by the requirements and presuppositions of a particular theory or system.

All this strikes rather ironical in view of the fact that, to the great Socrates; first of the founders of Western philosophy, the central theme of philosophy was not the world, but man. Socrates’ deep concern for the well-being of man makes him look like a prophet moving amongst the Greeks. In the celebrated Platonic Dialogue; the Apology, Socrates is reported to have gone to God, only to be graced with a special message for his fellow men. This Divine message exhorted the Athenians to “take the greatest possible care of their souls and not to ruin their lives by letting the care of the body and of the “possessions” take precedence over the good of the soul. Nay, they must make their souls as good as possible, making them like God”.

Socrates is, however, better known to us for his detailed and meticulous analyses of the moral qualities of man; such as justice, goodness, courage, temperance and so on. But what is more important for us to note here is the woeful fact that nowhere in ‘all the twenty-eight platonic Dialogues, we find Socrates giving as a definition

of man. Perhaps even for Socrates, man was too much of a mystery, and a veritable riddle to be comprehended through a philosophical definition.

Both Plato and Aristotle, after Socrates, ventured to give us definitions of man; but these definitions, with due deference to these two great masters, unfortunately, are no longer tenable on empirical grounds. Plato's definition of man as a political animal, perhaps, reflects only the intensely political atmosphere of the city-states of his days. We in our own days know fully well that man in the pre-literate and primitive societies has neither state nor politics. Aristotle's definition of man as a social animal, very sadly, casts a slur on his otherwise well-established reputation as "the founder of a systematic and comparative Zoology". Sociability cannot be said to be the real hallmark of man to distinguish him from the animals. Some of the animals, at quite a lower rung of the evolutionary ladder, manifest as much sociability in their behaviour as man. The social insects like termites, ants, bees and wasps live in colonies and give clear evidence of group-integration and division of labour; they have their kings and queens and workers and soldiers much as the human beings have.

The definition of man as a rational animal not only carries the formidable authority of Aristotle but also the weight of a long tradition running throughout the ages. This definition of man, to my mind, is more prescriptive than descriptive. It exhorts man to think rationally rather than describe the fact of man's actually thinking rationally. But it is an imperative or a command, and a good command indeed but for that very reason not a definition. It may be insisted that Aristotle, in his definition has made an empirical statement of the kind that man by virtue of the quality of rationality (differentia) inherent in him, always thinks rationally. In that case this definition is not satisfactory, because it is an incomplete definition which has taken "rationality" as the sole distinctive quality of man as it differentiates him from the animals. There are, however, other similar unique qualities of man differentiating him from the animals, which have been completely bypassed in Aristotle's definition--qualities, for example, of artistic imagination and numinous sense of the presence of the Divine to all things. Aristotle's-definition could give us only a fragmented man as if a featherless biped.

Aristotle's definition of man in terms of genus and differentia, Plato's in terms of the tripartite division of the soul, and the great scholastic philosophers' in terms of the indivisible soul-substance which does nothing to us nor we do anything to it; all of them seem to be some of the blind

alleys in the history of philosophy. These definitions, however, are not altogether meaningless; in any case they are better than Cartesians' definition of man as an assembled organic machine ready to run, or behaviourists' definition of him as a toy in the Watsonian box mercilessly caught between the stimuli and the responses. Classical philosophers' definitions or conceptions of man are to be construed not through the detailed analyses of their philosophical terms but through a close and deep understanding of their whole philosophical perspective. In case their definitions continue to remain unacceptable to us, even then we are to change not the definitions but the philosophical perspective from which these definitions have emerged. This is much like moving from the geocentric perspective to the heliocentric perspective in astronomy. But the change of a perspective in philosophy, as in other domains of human knowledge, usually entails a change in the methods of its study, like, for instance, studying the moon, through a telescope and studying it by landing on its surface, or more precisely, as Max Weber puts it, like studying the cultural phenomena through the usual methods of scientific explanation and studying them through the method of "interpretative understanding".

Quite a few new perspectives in philosophy and even the new methods of their study came to be keenly discussed and elaborated in some of the major universities in Germany such as Munich, Hamburg and Berlin, somewhere in the 1020's. Some of these new perspectives or branches of philosophy and their methods may be roughly translated in English as: "Philosophy of Life", "Study of the Human Sciences", "Study of the Cultural Sciences", "Method of Spiritual Interpretation", Method of understanding (verstehn) in Human Sciences", and "Method of Phenomenology".

From the very titles of these new branches of philosophy, it becomes clear that they especially focus their attention on man. The method, that the proponents of the new sciences of philosophy employ in the study of man is a highly technical affair; broadly speaking, it may be characterized as an empirical method of the highest order. From the new undertakings and preoccupations of some of the distinguished German philosophers in the new philosophy, there emerged quite a few new disciplines such as a "Philosophy of Culture", "Philosophy of Symbolism", "Biographical Studies" and "Philosophy of the Human Sciences". Among them was also

the philosophy of man as a very specialized and independent discipline; named as Philosophical Anthropology or Anthropological Philosophy. By 1940 there were quite a few chairs for philosophy of man in some of the renowned universities in Germany. After World War II interest in this discipline spread to Holland and France. Soon after it had its impact felt in the United States; possibly through the influence of the most distinguished German philosopher, Ernest Cassirer, who after having left Germany in 1933 had taught at Oxford and later chaired the Departments of Philosophy, at the universities of Yale and Columbia. He is perhaps the only German Philosopher to have been admitted to the distinction of the library of living philosophers.

Without any pretensions to originality the philosophers of man have acknowledged their great indebtedness to many of the philosophers of the past; notably to Blaise Pascal, Goethe, Kant, Herder, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Feuerbach, Nietzsche. They have drawn their greatest inspiration, however, from the works of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911); one of the greatest philosophers of history and culture. Dilthey is noted for his thoroughgoing empiricism and for the encyclopedic range of his academic interests. The most singular of his contributions to philosophy, however, is his construction of a new methodology for philosophy, and a Dew science of interpretation (Hermenutics) for the study of human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften). He is reported to have worked on these major preoccupations of his for forty years. Dilthey's works, prepared by a team of editors, have appeared in eighteen volumes with more to follow. A six-volume English translation of his selected works is being published by Princeton University since 1984.

Among the writers; specifically on the "philosophy of man" in Germany, by far the most active of its exponents, is Max Scheler whose work *Man's Place in Nature* (*Die Stellung des Menschen in Kosmos*. 1928) is perhaps the first ice-breaker. Scheler was also the first to employ an independent method of phenomenology to the study of religion. He, however, is better known in the Anglo-Saxon world for his pioneer work on *Sociology of Knowledge*, the great merit of which has been recognized by th Max Weber and Karl Mannheim.

Ernest Cassirer, generally known to us for being one of the earliest writers on Einstein's Theory of Relativity (1921), is in fact the most distinguished philosopher of symbolism. His very original theory of symbolism as exhibited variously in science, art, religion, myth and language, is elaborately expounded in his three-volume work: *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: (Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen, 1923-1929)*. This theory has given the new philosophy of man a firm empirical base; it has also given to it a definitive starting point. Man, according to Ernest Cassirer, is essentially a symbolizing animal. It is man's unique ability to use symbols, or in the language of the Quran, the ability to name things that differentiates man from the pre-human animals.

It is through this unique ability to use symbols that man learnt to assign to objects, persons and adverbs certain meanings such as could not at all be grasped through the sensations. So long as man did not become aware of symbols, he remained at a level of mental existence in which the world was dark and opaque and meant nothing. But the moment man started using symbols he was, as if through a magic wand, awakened to a new mode of consciousness; the consciousness of meanings. Man's awareness of, so to say, capturing the things by assigning meanings to them through the use of symbols, lifted him literally to a new dimension of human existence. This exaltation of man to a new level of existence, verily because of his ability to use symbols; is referred to in the Quran i.e. verse: when Adam exhibited the ability to name things-- and this was beyond the angel's spiritual

dimension--angels prostrated themselves before him. It is interpreted sometimes to mean that it is verily through his ability to use words that man came to have a mysterious sway over everything that he touched or looked at.

In the symbolic' comprehension of meanings, the words dog, rat, rabbit, are not merely sounds but meaningful sounds. The meanings, however, are not inherent in the sounds (or in the shapes or the configurations of the letters in case of written words) as such, but are arbitrarily or conventionally assigned to them by human beings. The point to be noted here is that, in an articulate speech, the sensory sounds of the words have no intrinsic relations to the meanings intended by the speaker; sounds or patterns of sounds are used

merely as symbolic instruments or vehicles for the meanings. This explains very largely that though the anthropoid apes, in the so-called great-ape-language-experiments, usually succeed in picking up short series of single words, they utterly fail to develop a sense of “contextual” relevance of words as also to acquire the ability to link the words syntactically or as the experimenters put it: “Apes are complete blank in grammar.”

How and when did man learn to use symbols or words continues to remain an open question. Plato was perhaps the first to broach the subject of the origin of language in his Dialogue *The Cratylus*. His discussion of the matter, however, was inconclusive as also were the speculative theories of many classical philosophers who ventured into unravelling the mystery of language. Inquiries into the origin of language are now quite out of fashion with the modern philosophers and linguists.

We must, however, note here the position on this issue taken by Edward Burnett Tylor. He was, admittedly, one of the most distinguished of the British anthropologists. He tells us that “at some point in the evolution of primates, a threshold was reached in some line, or lines, when the ability to use symbols was suddenly realized and made explicit in overt behaviour. There is no intermediate stage, logical or neurological, between symboling and non-symboling: an individual or a species is either capable of symboling or he or it is not. “ All that Tylor means to tell us here is that the ability to use symbols emerged through a kind of mysterious leap and is not the product of gradual and continuous process of evolution. This is clearly indicated by the, expression “suddenly realized” in the above passage. Instead of openly confessing his ignorance on the issue of the origin of symboling, i.e., language, Tylor seems here to cloak this ignorance by using the doubtful and debatable doctrine of leaps or jumps so popular with the Emergent and Creative Evolutionists. If both philosophy and science fail us in this matter, why not then accept the view given in the Scriptures that man learnt the names of things from God Himself and call it the divine theory of language. Even as scientists we are not to say that there are only perceptual symbols and completely ignore a whole class of symbols called the religious symbols. The religious symbols constitute a peculiar language of their own which is quite as meaningful as scientific language; only like the language of

art, it has its own unique method of interpretation or in Dilthey's words a unique Hermenutics.

Having acquired the capacity to use symbols a bit more freely and having built up a sizable working lexicon of these symbols, man started his journey away from the physical world (merely a sensory world of the animals), created by the Lord, to a non-physical world, created by man himself as the Deputy of the Lord. Very briefly this new world of the Deputy is the world of, meanings and values; giving a broad classificatory description of it, it is the world of language, myth, art, religion, philosophy, and science. It is however more convenient to call it the world of culture. It is to be noted here that animals cannot possibly be admitted to man's world of culture as earlier they could not be admitted to man's world of symbols. Culture and symbols indeed are like soul and body to each other. Hence it would not be inappropriate to say that culture, born of the inmost passions of man's psyche or spirit (Geist), always manifests itself in and through the dress of symbols. Much more important, however, is the fact that it is only through its symbolic dress that culture receives a tangible form so that it can be safely stored in libraries, galleries, museums, and places of worship. Soon, culture assumes a personality of its own, independent of man, its creator. It then begins to move from generation to generation, and from epoch to epoch and manages to stalk in man's history as a power by itself. Culture thus comes to change its position with man and claims to be creator of man.

The way culture is transmitted from one generation to another is the most wondrous of all the cultural phenomena. Nietzsche observed in his usual inclusive way that culture could be possessed by man alone for man alone is born as an unfinished animal. The human infant as compared to the infants of other animals is biologically much less formed as if it were born premature and certainly it is too much of a weakling to face the slightest blows of nature. Moreover this creature has to go a long way before it can lay claims to be on its own - if ever it would! On the other hand the parents of this weakling are irresistibly attracted to it and extend to it the most affectionate care and love. The weakling's helplessness for a long - stretched period of its infancy and the corresponding intense attachment of the parents (particularly of the mother) are some of the important constituents of a new phase of the human weakling's life. This phase has been termed as the second gestation or

the extra-uterine gestation. It seems as if the infant at the time of its birth was released from the biological confines of the mother only to be thrown into the socio-cultural confines of the world. It has sometimes been said that most human animals move from the confines of one shell into those of another and never really are born, unless, of course, if they are helped through some kind of cultural maiuetics or spiritual midwifery.

It is a well-known fact that a child learns his native language in the shortest possible span of time. By the age of six and even five most children would have learnt not only more than 90% of the basic vocabulary of their language but also its grammar, the correct form of its a lot of idioms, the right pronunciation, the proper accent or intonation, the appropriate choice of words to be addressed variously to parents, a sibling, a playmate, or a servant. This is amazing! How does the child learn all this? The simple and perhaps correct answer is: The child learns all this through its skin. The child starts being sensitized right from the early days of its birth by a deeply emotionalized inter-personal involvement with a number of persons around it. The most important of these persons, of course, is the mother who starts teaching the child a new scheme of conditioned reflexes, soon to be developed into an elaborate system of symbols, not merely through the words of mouth but also through the soft and warm touches of her body, her hugs, her fondlings, her caresses, and her one and hundred kisses. The language as if it were, was being injected into the child. As the child grows up through boyhood and adolescence right into adulthood this language stays with him and becomes the veritable part of his personality. It would not be for wrong to assert that the child gets enclosed for ever within the shell of its native language which it cannot possibly break through - unless it chances to be a Ghalib or an Iqbal.

It is exceedingly important to note here that the child imbibes its native culture through the same emotionally sensitized, subjectivized, internalized way as becomes available to it in learning the native language. Culture and language (scheme of symbols) are so closely tied to each other that it is well-nigh impossible to imagine a culture without its peculiar language; nor is it possible to think of a language without its culture. To have a language without a culture is tantamount to having words without meanings, which makes no sense. Thus child's learning its native culture, and its learning the

native language are not two processes but one in which the two are intertwined with each other for their very existence. Some leading modern psychologists, however, are of the view that the child learns the whole value and belief-system embodied in its culture much quicker than he learns the language. The process of imbibing the culture they hold is comparatively more sensitized, more subjectivized and more internalized; than that learning the language. Language on the other hand, is a bit more of a cognitive and schematic affair. Language further has more of an instrumental value to serve as a symbolic medium, while culture carries all the intrinsic meanings and values which are closest to the child's heart. The child internalizes all the cultural meanings and values of his milieu and they become real powerful ingredients of his personality. In other words the child gets snugly enclosed in a fully fortified, double-walled shell of language and culture for the rest of his life. The notion of the second, i.e., the socio-cultural gestation of man is, thus, not to be labelled a mere speculation of the philosophical anthropologists but a doctrine well-rooted in the empirically grounded evidence.

The above process of acculturation through which every human child has to pass has led some American psychologist, notably Benedict Ruth and Margaret Mead, to advance their doctrine of cultural determinism. According to this doctrine, even though individuals think that they make personal choices, at least, in such trivial matters as buying an article of clothing or eating or not eating a particular food in the restaurant, their choices are, in fact, fully determined by the socio-cultural milieu in which they have been brought up. However bleak, gloomy or disheartening by this view of stark determinism might be, it is not easy to refute it. It carries weight in so far as it explains some important socio-cultural phenomena. Take, for instance, the strifes and conflicts between socio-cultural groups, small or big, belonging to this or that piece of land, in the south or the north, in the east or the west, subscribing to this or that religious view or ideological shiboleths. These social psychologists and culturologists tell us, are very largely due to the fact that the socio-political behaviour of the individuals and more particularly of their leaders is determined in the final analysis by the forces residing within their respective socio-cultural shells.

Cultural determinism as viewed by Ruth and Mead and even as conceived earlier by the behaviourists, the psycho-analysts and the historical materialists poses a real serious challenge to any philosophy of man. Philosophers like Dilthey and Scheler, however, insist that the solution to this apparently impossible problem is not theoretical but entirely practical and experiential. Culture, according to them, owes its origin, essentially to the extraordinary experiences and arduous creative work of the great prophets, the great artists, and the great philosophers and other great geniuses who have given new meanings and new dimensions to human life. These torch-bearers of life cannot be said to be passive product of socio-cultural forces of their milieu. The very fact that they have the capacity to take these socio-cultural forces into their own hand and direct them into new channels in the light of their Geist falsifies any such view. Dilthey, however, goes farther and urges us to absorb and internalize the extraordinary experiences of these luminaries of humanity to the best of our abilities; so that these may be re-lived to the maximum possible extent in our own humble souls, Thus alone shall we be born again and be released from the bondage of cultural determinism. This is, however, by no means, an easy, affair. Nevertheless, it is a real uphill task. It may be recalled that Dilthey worked for full forty years on the sciences of human spirit (Geisteswissenschaften); then he could arrive at their methodology.

This is a methodology, primarily, about transferring or transmitting the experiences of the great founders of human culture to the generality of mankind. Among other things, Dilthey has insisted on the experiential rather than the barely intellectual or academic interpretations (Hermeneutics) of the great texts. It is through the former type of interpretation alone that we are enabled to have true intuitive comprehension (Verstehen) of the inner import of these texts. It is heartening to note that Allama Iqbal has advocated a method for the comprehension of the text. of the Quran which is almost identical with that of Dilthey. The Allama says in his Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam: “No understanding of the Holy Book is possible until it is revealed to the believer just as it was revealed to the Prophet”.

This most remarkable statement, unique in the history of Islamic thought, is to be found in the opening’ passage of Lecture VII of the Reconstruction, a,

lecture addressed originally to the very learned audience of the Aristotelian Society in London (on the 5th of December, 1932). Though the Allama has ascribed this statement to an unnamed Muslim Sufi (sic), I, on the basis of my study of the Reconstruction and experience of expounding its text to a few generations of students for the last more than 20 years, beg to differ with him and aver that the said statement is positively his own. The Allama has ascribed it to an unknown Sufi, to my mind, only because he had great misgivings about the way it might be received by the traditional scholars of Islam.

Let me add that the statement is purely prescriptive and not descriptive in the usual sense; it does not refer to a fact, here a credal fact, i.e., a belief; it only exhorts us to do something in a certain way if we want to have a desired end. So, as a prescriptive statement, it strongly recommends to us a method for the true comprehension of the meanings of the Quran. It tells us that a true believer must so deeply interiorize the meanings of the Holy Book that he starts almost re-living certain “experiences” on account of which, these meanings were comprehended by or revealed to the Prophet. Thus, the reference here is essentially to a spiritual process or method through which alone (and the true believers have no choice in this matter) a true believer would comprehend the meanings of the Quranic text closest possible to the comprehension of the Prophet. This perhaps is the only, though very arduous, way of deepening or intensifying our Islamic consciousness. The statement, however, is open to the misinterpretation that in so far as it recommends the believer to do something which is very close to Prophet’s very unique way of doing it, it implies or suggests that the believer is raised to the status of the Prophet - and this is sacrilegious. It is to be noted that the true believer’s being raised in his status is purely and entirely epistemic or experiential which is a blessing, not ontic, real, or actual which is impossible, or, as James Wards puts it, the most impossible of all things in the world. We cannot be a Plato or a Shakespeare, how can we be an Abraham, a Moses or a Muhammad? May God forgive us for any such thoughts.

At the time of writing Lecture VII which embodies the above statement, i.e., September 1932, the Allama was very busy and much preoccupied in so many things - Javid Nama was to come soon in December; in October he was to leave for Third Round Table Conference and so on. He did not want

to be disturbed just because the great traditional scholars would not understand him on an important academic statement of his; so in haste he foisted it on a Muslim Sufi. Please note the rather unusual expression “the Muslim Sufi”, most unexpected of Iqbal, as perfect a master of English diction- as that of Persian. “The Muslim Sufi”, as if there could be also Christian or Hindu Sufis, betrays the very divided feelings or moments of hesitation at the time of thinking of this expression and tacitly nodding to it: “Let it go!” He was keenly aware of the profound religious meanings embodied in the above statement but also painfully aware of the spiritual opacity of his co-religionists who might be displeased with it. He was divided between pleasing his co-religionists and pleasing himself. So he chose to father the statement on a “Muslim Sufi” he would not name, and thus please both himself and his brethren in faith - nobody would know that the “Muslim Sufi” was he himself.

It is generally narrated that somewhere in early November, 1933, on way back from Afghanistan Iqbal told Syed Sulaiman Nadvi that the Sufi referred to in the above statement was no other than his own father. The very fact that the name of the author of the statement “popped up” signifies that the statement must have struck the Syed extraordinary. More notable, however, is the fact that the great Syed accepted Iqbal’s assertion as it was and did not comment on it nor added anything to it - not even later. He did not say, for example: “I am so pleased to know this”. But my dear friend, it is nothing very original, it may as well be found in Ghazali, Rumi, Ibn Arabi, Jili, Mujaddid Alit Thani, or any name like them. It looks rather odd that the Iqbal scholars have quietly agreed to foist such an important and methodologically most significant statement on a Sufi, who never had any pretensions whatsoever in the Sufi-lore nor in the subtle and profound ways of the Sufis.

The fact that Iqbal himself was the author of the statement given in the Reconstruction gets fully corroborated by the following verse from the Bal-i-Jibril:

تیرے ضمیر پہ جب تک نہ ہو نزول کتاب

گرہ کشا ہے نہ رازی نہ صاحب کشاف

Unless the Book's each verse and part

Be revealed unto your heart

Interpreters, though much profound

Its subtle points cannot expound.

Not only is the Allama the only Muslim thinker to have clearly enunciated the above Diltheyian method but also the first to have practiced it in his expositions of the many passages of the Qur'an. I have the privilege of having paid special attention to this aspect of Allama's Islamic thought in my annotated edition of the Reconstruction; the matter however needs the very special attention of the experts in the Quranic exegesis.

In the conclusion I would like to say that Philosophy of man is highly disciplined endeavour aimed at the discovery of man in the manifestations of his spirit at its peaks as these are embodied in the celebrated texts of the great prophets, the great poets and the great philosophers which texts are to be re-lived anew in every age through an interpretative method as recommended by philosophers like Dilthey and Iqbal.