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ON UNDERSTANDING INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING

by

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All attempts to understand Indian Philosophical thinking (commencing with the poetic outpourings of the Vedic seers and the speculative ventures of the Upaniṣadic sages and including the later systematic writings—both orthodox and heterodox) in terms of sweeping generalizations as either being “essentially spiritual”, “atheistic”, “religious” or “materialistic” have been guilty of oversimplification. In view of the extreme complexity, subtlety and long historical span of Indian philosophizing it will be naive and hazardous to “understand” it in terms of any neat formula. All possible schools and viewpoints, such as idealism, naturalism, materialism, realism, empiricism, transcendentalism, absolutism, etc., etc. have been represented in India’s philosophies. It is therefore evident that a sweeping claim to “spirituality” in contra-distinction to Western Philosophy’s implied lack of it must be repudiated. Such a claim is all the more implausible if “spirituality” is identified with atheistic belief in God. Potter in his paper has pointed out how and on what grounds Daya, Riepe, Anikeev and Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya have vehemently contested and rejected this characterization of Indian philosophizing. But Potter has reiterated in this paper his earlier interpretation that philosophies in India have been mainly concerned with mokṣa or transcendental freedom, and that speculative arguments were marshalled to remove doubts arising from skeptical and fatalistic positions. Riepe challenges, in jest and in earnest, such an idealistic interpretation as puerile and naive. The main thrust of his contention is that such a piece-meal interpretation of ideas which ignores their socio-historical context is bound to “mystify” and confound people instead of enlightening them. Riepe attempts a Marxist interpretation of Indian philosophy (in line with Chattopadhyaya and Anikeev) and illustrates his thesis with the help of two examples. It will be the aim of my paper to point out the reasons for the seeming plausibility of these two contrasting positions and bring out their limitations.

One of the outstanding features of India’s philosophies, with the exception of the Carvaka materialists, has been its continuing concern and almost an obsessive preoccupation with the self and its freedom. Such an existential concern is prominent in the speculations of the Upaniṣads as well as in the teachings of the historical Buddha. The seers of the Upaniṣads as well as the Buddha were deeply impressed by the passing, the transient and the transitory nature of all phenomena. It was natural for them to be dissatisfied with the obvious fact that nothing in the world lasts and endures. Change, both in nature and society, is bound to call for adaptation, and if it is too rapid as in times of social and political turmoil, it may give rise to philosophies of “transcendence” or “withdrawal”. The Upaniṣadic doctrine of the Ātman or Brahman was the outcome of such a quest for certainty, intelligibility and unification in the face
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of manifest diversity and multiplicity of all natural and social phenomena. The Aryan hordes after settling down in the tropical climate of the Indo-Gangetic plains were faced with the task of conquering the native tribes and of learning the arts of agriculture. The class-system (Brāhmans, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras) emerged as a result. The old tribal unity of the Aryan nomadic hordes was lost. The quest for a unified principle of intelligibility (in terms of Ātman or Brahman) was partly nostalgic and partly a result of curiosity. The old tribal solidarity was gone, and with a new socio-economic structure class distinctions became prominent. However, it was difficult for the ancient thinkers of the Upaniṣads to have a thorough intellectual grasp of the changes in the structure of their society. Having lost practical social unity they compensated for it by positing a transcendental principle of unity (Brahman) behind all the passing particulars of nature and society. Their error was in hypostatizing this principle of unity into an Absolute Reality (with its capitalized solidity) as against the "lower" reality or "phenomenality" of natural events. No doubt, the concept of Brahman of Ātman fulfilled their need for security, unification and intelligibility—giving them an experience of a different order (ānanda or bliss) and quality. This imaginative experience lifted them out of the humdrum and repetitive nature of the passing particulars.2

The historical Buddha, though denying ostensibly the concept of Ātman (transcendental Self), was responding to the all-pervasive phenomenon of change and transience precisely in the same way as the thinkers of the Upaniṣads. The Buddhistic concept of suffering is not merely that of physical or mental pain but is of deeper poignant significance. It dramatizes the felt tension between the fact that nothing really lasts and endures, and the deep-seated human need to cling to and be emotionally entangled with our natural and social concerns. Buddha's concept of Nirvāṇa is a "withdrawal-response" to the all-pervasive fact of transience. Buddhistic emphasis on universal love, compassion, understanding and tranquility served an important psychological function of bolstering inner human resources in the face of change. But it failed to take note of the fact that it was well-nigh impossible to develop non-attachment and love for all human beings without a concomitant socio-economic change and a well-directed restructuring of society. In other words the pervasive fact of change is neither to be lamented over (giving rise to "metaphysical" concept of suffering of the Buddha), nor to be sentimentally gloated upon, but it to be noted and made use of in guiding social processes in an intelligent manner. The Buddhistic withdrawal into monasteries was one-sided emphasis on personal and psychological transformation without any reference to a social transformation in the world outside.

Such an existential concern with one's self together with an effort to "transcend" the temporal flux is a common feature both of the Upaniṣads and Buddhism. Nay, it has remained a constant backdrop to all later philosophizing. Though Potter is right in pointing out that mokṣa or transcendental freedom has been a central concept in India's philosophies he has failed to see the larger socio-economic context in which such a concern arose and gripped the Indian mind. Heisolates this phenomenon from its social setting as Riepe points out.
in his criticism of Potter's paper. It is this obsessive concern with the self and its realization through immediate intuitive experience, and its de-identification from anything natural—body, mind, senses etc.—that accounts for the seeming plausibility of the view that Indian philosophy is essentially "spiritual." Secondly, most classical Indian philosophers (whether Hindu, Jain or Buddhist), while recognizing the evident importance of logic, language and argument, have given primary importance to immediate experience. Philosophical problems and arguments arose simply from the obvious fact that immediate experience (whether sensuous or allegedly super-sensuous) in its existential occurrence is non-cognitive and therefore, requires a conceptual articulation in order to be communicated. Potter's thesis that speculative arguments arose only to remove doubts (intellectual) and thus facilitate the adoption of a specific path to mokṣa is too narrow. It implies not only the universal acceptance of mokṣa as the ultimate ideal but also that it was somehow beyond the pale of philosophical inquiry. Neither mokṣa nor any other aspect of human experience could be accepted on its face-value simply on the ground of its occurrence. Nothing is beyond the scope of philosophical inquiry. Once conceptual articulation takes place it is obvious that philosophical problems arise and the sheer intellectual need for consistency requires us to think them through. Hence arise all the problems and puzzles about the nature of substance, causality, change, permanence, self and not-self, subject and object, knowledge and belief, experience and existence etc., etc. They are interminable. But the inference drawn from these seemingly unending philosophical problems by Nāgārjuna and Śaṅkara, and endorsed by Potter, that reason is incapable of grasping "reality" shows a great confusion regarding the nature and function or reason vis-à-vis experience. Potter seems to think seriously that the idealistic and transcendental philosophies of Nāgārjuna or Śaṅkara "provide attractive candidates for the role of true philosophy" as an escape "between the horns of the contemporary dilemma between theology and technology, faith and reason". It is amazing to find that Potter instead of analyzing the factors in contemporary Western society responsible for the burgeoning of interest in such "anti-rational" or "super-rational" philosophies such as Zen or Advaita, uncritically accepts Madhyamika and Advaita as viable alternatives to science and reason. He implies a derogatory and narrow use of "science" as mere "scientism". Science need not be confused with mere technology or with the human (or non-human) application of it. Scientific method of free cooperative inquiry, willingness to consider all available evidence and freedom from personal bias and prejudice is the only alternative to an uncritical and blind acceptance of allegedly "supra-rational" philosophies of "transcendence" which debunk and devalue reason in a wholesale manner and debar it from the "innermost" sanctuary of reality. Potter seems to be dazzled by the dialectics of Nāgārjuna and Śaṅkara (or of F. H. Bradley in the Western tradition) and concurs in their relegation of the whole rational enterprise to the realm of "appearance" against the background of a "transcendental reality" which remains impervious to rational modes of inquiry. He is taken in by the subtle, yet seductive logic of Nāgārjuna and Śaṅkara without being aware of their assumptive use of the
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The concept of "reality" or "phenomena". The Śūnyavāda of Nāgārjuna and the Advaita of Śāṅkara both assume a particular view of "reality" as something eternal, unchanging and permanent. Here is a quest for certainty, for freedom from all doubt and escape from change and transitoriness of all worldly things and pursuits. Even the clever "no-view" doctrine of Nāgārjuna implies unconsciously some view of "reality", and idealistic philosophers like T.R.V. Murti have been quick to interpret Nāgārjuna's concept of Śūnyatā as the transcendent Absolute. All such absolutist philosophies which denigrate the whole rationalistic enterprise as mere "appearance" forget the important distinction between "having" an experience and "talking about" it in rational discourse. They do not realize that the function of rational thought is not to "devour" experienced reality but to articulate, clarify and organize it. The whole cognitive enterprise in terms of conceptual categories is never a substitute for "having" a full-blooded, concrete and vivid experience. But this does not mean, as has been asserted by Śāṅkara, Nāgārjuna or Bradley, that since conceptual problems and paradoxes arise in the course of such articulation the whole rational enterprise therefore belongs to a "lower" order of reality—"mere" phenomena—as against Absolute Reality given in a mystical intuitive experience. Conceptual philosophical problems may arise because of unexamined assumptions, inadequate attention to the nature and function of language, or failure to refer back these concepts to the bar of immediate experience.

Another factor which has given rise to the belief that Indian philosophy is essentially "spiritual" is that not only Vedānta, Madhyamika and other idealistic schools but also realistic schools such as Śāṅkhya, Nyāya and Jainism have not limited the concept of experience to mere sensuous experience but have included (with emphasis on its superior status) some kind of "transcendental" and super-sensuous experience under it. All their claims to a privileged access to reality are based on their absolute reliance on such a super-sensuous experience. From the strictly philosophical point of view all kinds of experience are subject to rational examination of their cognitive claims. This means that there has to be a continuing interplay between experience and dialectics. Such an interplay need not lead to a confusion between their distinctive yet mutually interdependent roles. Dialectical discourse should enrich and clarify our "lived" experience—which in its turn should enable us to sharpen our rational categories so as to be able to further clarify experience. This is an ongoing process and belongs to the same order of reality. Any attempt to bifurcate the universe into two orders of reality—"transcendental" and "phenomenal" not only betrays a great confusion of thought but is fraught with the gravest of social consequences. The social and political history of India illustrates the disastrous consequences of such a hiatus between reality and appearance. Contemporary India should get rid of this dead dross of the past so as to release its energy for rapid socio-economic change based on cooperative intelligence of its people.

A few words about Riepe's approach to India's philosophies may be added here. Professor Riepe is right in believing that Indian philosophical thought cannot be "understood" in a piece-meal isolated manner as if "ideas" spring up from the blue air or from people's heads ready-made. He rejects all idealistic
interpretations as arrant nonsense. He positively adopts a materialistic interpretation of the Marxist variety to render Indian thought intelligible. No doubt, a socio-historical interpretation of ideas is logically sound provided no linear, one-sided dependence of ideas on socio-economic factors is insisted upon. Marx and Engels, as is well-known, had spent quite an amount of time and thought on the mutual relationship between the "infra-structure" and the "super-structure" in any social analysis. A monolithic analysis of ideas is too simplistic and is based on a dogmatic and one-sided interpretation of social history. As a matter of fact there is not one society. There are various social groups. There is not one History, with a capital "H". There are several histories. History is not an entity or a mystical force. There is no one iron law of dialectical materialism. It is therefore important to realize that the concepts of society and history are complex, and are best understood in the plural than in the singular. Socio-economic factors do give rise to ideologies, but man's conscious understanding of these factors adds a new dimension to the historical process. Ideas are capable of dialectical development too. In other words there is a history of ideas also. It is therefore quite natural that once the socio-historical process gives rise to ideas, these ideas in their turn can give rise to certain conceptual, philosophical problems. There is no rigid determinism in a one-sided manner. The long history of philosophical disputes between rival systems of Indian Philosophy during the Sūtra period, and the philosophical confrontation between Buddhist logicians and idealists (of the Dīnāga school) and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophers (Uddyotkara and his followers) during the six hundred years (5th century A.D. to 11th century A.D.) shows how ideas are capable of generating their own problems. Though it is possible to throw light on these disputes by studying them in their socio-historical context, yet they cannot be "explained" without reserving merely on such an analysis.

Today there certainly is an urgent need to study Indian philosophical thought in the concrete developing socio-historical context and to take it out of its surrounding mystical "idealistic" haze so that a fruitful dialogue may ensue between historical experience and philosophical ideas. Any divorce between historical experience and philosophical ideas will leave concrete socio-historical problems without control and guidance on the one hand, and on the other will make philosophical ideas effete—fit to be stacked in the museum of antiquities.

FOOTNOTES

1I have deliberately used the pervasive concept of "philosophical thinking" instead of "philosophy" to avoid any veiled stipulation about the "correct" nature of philosophy. This is not the place to discuss the philosophical question: "What is philosophy?" Only an "ostensive" definition of philosophy has been adopted here with respect to the whole gamut of Indian philosophical thinking.

2For an elaboration of this point see my paper "The Concept of Self in the Upaniṣads: An Alternative Interpretation", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Buffalo, March, 1972, pp. 380-96.

3I have criticized Nāgārjuna's concept of sūnyatā and brought out its implicit assumptions in my paper "Experience and Dialectics: A Study in Dialectical Interplay", Diotimes, No. 60, Paris, 1967, pp. 35-50.