



THE PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT OF JOHN DEWEY- (SOCIETY)

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In the present work an attempt has been made to present the role of philosophy in shaping man's image of himself as understood by the prominent western thinkers. The problem is approached from a purely philosophical and practical point of view. The western philosophers show deep interest mainly in the problem of man and his attempts at making his life meaningful and successful. They have also made certain significant contributions in the understanding of man's situation, his relationship with the various institutions, to which he himself has given birth to.

The reason for confining me to the study of the few eminent thinkers was that I did not propose to make an extensive study at this level. The investigator is concerned with the study of a specific problem and he found that the few thinkers which the investigator has discussed, represented the main tendencies and views of the western thought so far as the problem of philosophy and man is concerned. So the investigator thought it fit to confine himself to few thinkers in order to be in a position to make a systematic, critical and comprehensive study of the problem in the present work.

It is a proven fact that philosophy has played a very significant role in man's life, right from his food-gathering days to the present day. Let us see now, how philosophy has influenced our lives since ages. But before we dwell upon the importance of philosophy it would be appropriate to give a generally accepted definition of philosophy.

Philosophy is a Greek word which literally means love of wisdom. But it is difficult to give a precise definition of philosophy. A philosophy, like other great human enterprises of ideal society – art, science, religion, every definition turns out to be expressions of an individual, reflecting that of the definer's own culture and experience. Thus, it can at best, be defined as a human and cultural enterprise to be inquired into.

Philosophy, unlike other subjects, is not confined to any one particular activity of man. As such, it encompasses all the activities of the mankind. It permeates every aspect of human lives. Thus every one possesses a philosophy of his own and it would



be a misnomer to say that one lacks philosophy. Because, admission of lacking of philosophy amount to possession of philosophy.

All men are instinctively philosophical. All men have natural beliefs or implicit pre-suppositions which guide their lives. These implicit presuppositions when made explicit by conscious reflection yield a philosophy. When we contemplate, it will be found that most of our generally accepted beliefs, belief which are taken for granted and which many of us think cannot be reasonably doubted, in other words, what we call commonsense beliefs are really philosophical theories of an earlier age, which having been once consciously held as theories by the intellectual few have sunk into unconscious of the many and constitute our mental atmosphere, influencing our life without our being explicitly aware of them. The progress of mankind from one age to another proves that common sense has not remained stationary. It has changed from time to time. This is amply proved by certain beliefs held by a certain community as sacred might look absurd to us.

Philosophy is a way of living. It is there with the man right from his food gathering day when his basic necessities were met with, he found ample leisure to think about the various expressions of Nature viz. the rise of sun and the moon life after death etc. thus philosophy, as Plato has said “begins in wonder”. In the ancient times men were concerned with the things like sun, moons, stars and their existence etc. but presently, the modern man is not unduly bothered about the various metaphysical problems that formed the core of ancient thought. Presently, a man is more interested in, himself and his relations with his fellow beings. Thus, the purpose of philosophy in the present times is to make men think carefully and systematically about certain fundamental questions concerning about himself, his conduct his institution and the world in which he lives. It gives meaning of human life, general nature of universe and its impact on human character, what is destiny, how far man affects it by his own actions, which actions and pursuits should one follow, what kind of life is worthwhile, leading individually and collectively.

Thus, presently, concept of ‘Man’ dominates the philosophical thought. Man now, is no more perceived as a cog in the wheel. He is not considered any more as subordinate to nature. Nature, though has certain influence over man is being subordinated to the powers of man. These powers are not the property of a privileged few. But every man has these powers in him. It is the function of philosophy to make man aware of his innate potentialities and make use of his mental faculties to the maximum and thus thereby shape his destiny.



In our new world, in respect to human relations, it is a period of great confusion. Evidently it is a time, for reflective thinking – and that is just the function of philosophy currently. We are living in a very singular moment of history. It is a moment of crises, in the literal sense of that word. In every branch of our spiritual and material civilization we seem to have arrived at a critical turning point. This spirit shows itself not only in the actual state of public affairs but also in the general attitude towards fundamental values in personal and social life. Many people say these symptoms mark the beginnings of a great renaissance, but there are others who see in them things of a downfall to which our civilization is fatally destined.

In such crises, we can only do one thing – that is to consult that one authority which one would like to call it as reflective thought which is the prerogative of man, by which, since times immemorial, has helped achieve progress in various spheres of life. When this reflective thought becomes serious, sustained, and logical and directed towards questions of life and values, it becomes philosophy. As William James said “philosophy is an unusually persistent effort to think clearly.”

The impulse to philosophy is the compelling need of every rational being to come to grips with life, and find his bearings. Hence, the motive of philosophy is to make us understand and understanding makes possible a more effective adjustment to the problems of living.

Every one is a philosopher of a kind. Every man acquires and possesses certain attitudes, beliefs and values, which he might have either acquired from the society of which he is a part or might have resulted in acquisition due to the experiences that enrich or embitter one's life.

It is true to say that no one can escape the contradictions and vicissitudes, which the nature presents to a man in abundance. A sudden reversal of fortune, a cruel bereavement, impact of war or even human misery all these remind the human race continuously of the uncertainty that prevails and the Chaos into which one is thrown in. In such moments there is a craving for a philosophy. Under such circumstances of duress, when one starts to philosophize, one can reach a conclusion, based on the rational grounds, that a man is free enough to choose his destiny thus thereby proving that philosophy guides one in one's pursuit.

Philosophy has the ability to recognize difficulties. Growth is possible only when difficulties are faced in such a way that new depth of understanding is achieved. The experiences out of which come the insights, in terms of which men try to organize



their lives and their total world views, is very complex. It embraces not just one set of institutionalized activities, but a host of others as well which give rise to a philosophic response. And in its choice of principles of interpretation its grasp of those insights which embraces all of man's idea and activities, that the organizing function of philosophical thinking approaches the functions of the poet. After all the labor of analysis and criticism the moment arrives for the philosopher to "see" and makes us "see".

Philosophy perceives civilization as the development of a culture, a system of education political religious and economic organization which would make environment as natural and beautiful as possible by which it strives for the continuous improvement in moral character of man.

Western society, like most others, used to provide the young with the accepted answer to the question "what is the chief end of man?" through its institutions of organized family and religion. The man of society was satisfied with the answers that were to be provided to their queries of man's life and universe power. Hence the society remained stable.

But now in the west, the scenario is different the major discussion revolves around the chief question, "what is man's role in shaping his destiny". The answer to this query can be found in the various institutions he has given birth to. Beliefs about the destiny of man and process that control it have been connected intimately with man's social experience.

But, the western society, due to its constant expansion, owing to its developing economy and mushrooming industrialism. Is confronted with novel types of societal experience, together with ever repeated problems of liberation from older institutional organizations and their reconstruction into new ones. Each novel form of experience generated a philosophic response. It not only provoked the analysis, classification of ideas, but also forced the fundamental reintegration of the meaning of human experience and gave rise to new world view and new speculative visions of human destiny.

In the present world, the need of philosophy has become imminent as the world is undergoing a tremendous change in all spheres. Only philosophical thinking would aid the humanity to overcome the entrenched institutions of the past.

Human life is conditioned by the various institutions which he himself has given birth to, physical science has outrun our social knowledge due to which the life has become routine, thus reducing man to the stage of machine. The trouble is not due to the paucity of knowledge about social fact, but unwillingness to adopt a philosophical



attitude which only will help in living fully by expounding the various mysteries which even the empirical sciences would fail to do.

Although Metaphysics I the branch of philosophy which dominated the ancient thought, has little significance in the present day man's life. The significance of being, for the present man, is not its existence but the emotions it stirs and the thought it sustains. Thus, philosophy and life are not different aspects. Philosophy helps us to seek knowledge because of which we demand a complete picture of life as it is possible to have before, he selects and suggests what the best factors in life are. John Dewey said, "philosophy, life politics, literature, and the arts, in itself a phenomenon of human culture. Its connection with social history, with civilization is intrinsic"²

The role of philosophy, for the present day man, lies in his practical life which consists in pursuing an occupation, marriage life and interpersonal relationships. Its role in such institutions is great because of the preponderance of critical factors and predominance of the mechanism of co-ordination in philosophers. They can comprehend life in a better way.

The importance of philosophy is being emphasized more in the present day times. But nevertheless, philosophy always played a vital role in shaping man's life since times immemorial. It always dealt with problems that lay beyond the realm of science but yet made man as its centre of attention. The ancient Greeks were troubled by the problem of permanence and change; change meant physical change, motion of material atoms. But such queries are of little or negligible significance to a present day generation. Present day changing world presents a different picture changing social customs, changing political relations, changing morality, changing religious ideas, changing literary standards. Thus the role of philosophy presently is that of interpreting life, its value and meaning, its source and its destiny. Hence, evolution, progress, knowledge, ways of the mind, problems of conduct and society has come into foreground. The metaphysical problems that dominated the thoughts of the philosophers of yore, has receded into background. Now, with our modern individualistic, humanistic and romantic streaks, we tend to perceive the world in terms of social, political, moral religious and literary fields.

What we need now is to have life itself, its meaning and relative values, interpreted for us. This has been the task of philosophy, which at times has also been defined as cultural study of meanings and values or as the interpretation of life. The aim is to see life as a wholesome thing, but not with the slant of a business man or the artist or the poet or a preacher or a professor but to see it as it would be seen by "the



spectator of all times and all experience”.³

Philosophy in the present time might be different from what it was in the ancient times but nevertheless, philosophy all through the ages emphasized on man and his relation with his environment. It always focused on the human nature which is rational in character. This streak of rationality which is deprived of in animals helps men to philosophize. By philosophizing, man is able to penetrate the darkness that surrounds him. His reflective thought is enabling him to find solutions to the problems which even empirical sciences are failing to solve. Thus, philosophy is aptly summed up as mother of all sciences.

Philosophy always interpreted life in terms of man's needs, thus, it made man as centre of its activity. Man, by his reflective attitude, demonstrated the rationality of his self. And this rationality is not applicable only to any one particular cross-section of society, but to the entire human race. The self, which is rational, possesses self-consciousness and self-determinism as its attributes. These attributes make self totally autonomous. Every person thus possesses innate capacities with which he can create miracles. But unfortunately, in most of the cases the innate potentialities lie in the dormant stage by which man subordinates himself willfully to the nature. It would remain in that state perpetually but his rational activity propels him to assess critically of his position in the environment. This critical attitude helps him to become aware of his potentialities which ultimately lead him on to the path of self-realization.

The self-realization makes him to identify himself with all-good. The Christian tradition calls it as the union of man and God. St. Augustine calls it as “liberty” this liberty is not an end in itself, but it should be considered as the means for the realization of our full potentialities, as human beings. But it is difficult to find the universal meaning for the concept of human fulfillment. It means many things to many people. For some, wealth is the fulfillment, for some, it is power, sensual pleasures and for others it can be God etc.

The self-realization is possible only through the society. Self, being social in nature, attains its highest ideal by giving expressions to its potentialities. The ‘social’ aspect of self makes one, aware of himself particularly in relation to his social environment. He desires to be a group. He needs the approbation and support of his group and to escape its approbation and rejection. The moral, economic, scientific, artistic and religious sides of his development as a person, are probably the extensions and refinements of this interactivity with the social environment, as he reflects upon the problems whose solution is likely to lead to success in his social world. All the



qualities considered admirable in a person—courage, honesty integrity, co-operatives etc. are social and are developed in social intercourse with an appropriate group.

In the social institutions like home and school, factory & office, services or church, if one associate reflectively with their fellows, merging their personalities imaginatively with theirs in thought, word and deed; they can grow eventually into full membership with them. One can gain experience, loyalty, insight and ability necessary for the wise exercise of such functions.

The realization of the self is found in the institution to which it helps the person to give birth to. Institutions of politic, economic, educational, religious are not organic in nature. They owe their origins to the genius of man. How well an institution function depends upon the level of realization of the self? Thus, society in which one lives in not abstract in nature. But reflects the beliefs and attitudes of the people who constitute. These attitudes are in turn conditioned by the values which the individuals hold.

The moral life of the individual and society is same. If a society is united in the love of good, it will be a good society; if its aims are bad it will be bad society. Society thus is a mirror which reflects, on a magnified scale the ideals of those who compose it.

Our civilization today has become materialistic. Due to which the distinction between means and ends has narrowed down leading to a chaotic state. The only salvation to such a crises can be provided only by ethics. Philosophy, through its 'branch of ethics, can influence individuals in realizing their potentialities and thus, thereby leading normal lives by providing them with the conditions required for well rounded and individualized personalities.

The human society, despite tremendous amount of science and technological advance, is still pregnant with many evils. The solving of these evils, which is a vital task, lie with philosophy. This is what the love of wisdom can do to the love of man. Our world has seen many a catastrophe and with the probable nuclear war, looming large on the horizon, it becomes imperative, not just for a social scientist, but to the philosophers to advocate a moral theory to provide the vision and understand the consequences, for ethics cannot permit the social sciences to act as its surrogate in the handling of social evil.

Philosophy translates social problem into moral terms. Philosophy and problems of social field are considered as means and ends. That is to accomplish the end, one has to adopt means, and whichever is plausible in the moral sense. For example,



unemployment, depression, political tyranny, dictatorship, class and racial oppressions, delinquency, divorce, disease, ignorance are not in themselves immoral. But they have tremendous impact upon the feelings and conduct of people, thus thereby influencing the person in totality and his relationship with the society. Thus, it is the philosophy which adds directive factory.

Philosophy is determined by personal equation, though only partially. And this personal equation is due to the social pattern. Its aim is to search for ultimate standard of life. Philosophy owes its origin to that bent of man's mind which realized that man lives in a universe which has causes and consequences. Philosophy teaches us how to solve the contradiction of our existence which was forced into either by circumstances or error. It opens wide the door of narrow lives and awakens powers before unknown.

Philosophy makes one alive to the nature of things and one's place among them. It is a vision of a truth. It involves reflection of life and nature, not in their chaotic state, but in an order of reason, beauty and goodness. Thus, philosophy becomes self-conscious and self-critical.

The state owes its origin to the people it consists of. The character of the state depends upon the mood of the people and the idea and the values they hold. But nevertheless, the final aim of the state remains the same through out the world. This variation I due to the fact that there are divergent beliefs regarding human wellbeing. Let us see how Karal Marx has interpreted history. Communism I indeed a philosophy of life, in the deepest sense, which is based on the materialistic interpretation of history and on the laws of social change. Marx was convinced that the most important factor in the life of a community is its economic system, that is, the way in which a community organizes its economic life. Moral, political ideals and social institutions and even religious and cultural practices are not independent products of human creations, but reflect and result in part from the underlying economic structure of a society. He said that the economic forces are always present at every stage of man's historical evolution.

Whereas Democracy emphasizes upon the voice of man. Thus, it provide for the rights of man thus, thereby reverses the communists idea of absolutism of state. In democracy, the individual is given the scope to shape his destiny.

Philosophy interprets democracy in terms of concepts, concepts understood as ways and means to improve, to vitalize life. Hence, democracy has to be seen as a way of life, but not as an abstract theory. It is a means, which is an essential prerequisite tot eh continuing enlightenment of men. It is more than a political device. It is a way of



life that guarantees atmosphere of freedom in which all the enterprise of human mind and spirit may flourish. The culture can be fulfilled only when men are free enough to worship, to organize, to create.

For the full development of man a need arises for harnessing his impulses and canalizing them into proper channels. This need is met with by the educational institutions. This need is met with by the educational institutions. Education is a method which presents to the situations, a setting for analyzing complex wholes into manageable, understandable parts. The best teaching method, is one which emerges from situation, experience conscious effort on all levels need to be directed along two channels inward toward the with, its incidence, its validity its reliability and its integrity with respect to our total personality; and outward toward the circumstances which for the moment act as barriers to the fulfillment of life.

Religion too has great role to play in one' life. The theme of religion I, identification of the being with the becoming. Thus, by making the aim of one's life clear religion presents us with certain principles which are prerequisite for the self-realization. The theme of religion is social in nature. It aims at the realization of one's self. For instance, churches, the bodies of Christianity, forester's brotherhood and fellowship through the various missionary activities it undertakes. Thus, it prepares men for successful living in the society.

Philosophy recognizes the needs of our life and arrive at a new scale of values and a new standard of living. It gives a layman light and leadership in answering the question of a man who is not content with life and views it as a senseless event in the world.

The spirit of modernism ahs permeated the whole of our social, moral economic and religious life. Only philosophy can usher in a new spirit. Philosophy should develop a much needed valid positivism, a valid naturalism, a pragmatic, dualism which will teach that our world is something out of which something really can be made. ⁵

Men are suffering from fears and egotisms. Human salvation lies in inspiration, in the conception of nature of Man which rises above his daily life to become its ideal and its judge. Men always suffer when they lack philosophy. Hence philosophy can prove to be intellectual guides to mankind.

An average man can explore, he can follow out implications, he can become increasingly aware but he cannot always formulate and conclude. In all our confused state one factor is unpredictable and yet decisive, that is the human will. .



The changing civilization necessitates a simplification of worldly concept. We need concrete terms which can be easily grasped. The thinker who alone in solitude and meditation discovers a new truth can kindle our spirits and thought. Thus only philosophy can discover truth, confirm it and make it live.

Plato in his Republic, book one, speaks of justice as the performance by every faculty of its proper task. The man whose soul is inherently "Just" in the ideal sense of the term will also be just in ordinary relations of life. It has always been the hope of philosophy in annulling the divorce between all the interests of life and make us realize that they belong together; that they are best only when they function together and that we can do neither without the nor with any of them alone.

What the modern world can expect of philosophy is that it be useful and of value. Valuably useful in preserving democratic forms of government, useful in keeping dynamic, the ideals of liberty and freedom. Philosophy can be useful today in the explanation of political and economic trends, of an integrated educational system, of a common sense explanation of modern scientific discoveries and of contribution of a purposeful morality.

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