Volume : 2 | Issue : 4 | April 2013 • ISSN No 2277 - 8160



Research Paper | Literature

The Philosophy of Robert Browning

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to give an introduction to the poetry and philosophy of Browning through the careful study of a few typical and especially lofty expressions of his genius. Many of us can testify with deep gratitude to the unique influence of Browning over us. We love him peculiarly, not only as a poet, but because he has helped waken us to the deepest ends and meaning of human life. To our age he is a great spiritual teacher, not of the conventions of faith, but of that religion of personal life which the world is beginning faintly to understand.

KEYWORDS: Immortal, originality, Struggle, Faith

The Philosophy of Robert Browning

Prophet as he is with reference to modern life, expressing, not the conceptions that come and go with the hour, but those great ideas which come through the long unfolding of humanity, Browning is not easily understood until we saturate ourselves with a few great embodiments of his genius, and thus learn to read his poetry from the point of view of his own spirit. When we are able to do this, Browning is rarely more difficult to read than the range and depth of problems he attempts, necessitates. Instead of finding him obscure, we respond with increasing exhilaration to the rapid movement and deep suggestion of his thought , and to the strength, variety and harmonious adaptation of his virile and often exquisite poetic form.

The poetry of Browning is coloured by his optimistic attitude towards life. He sees every situation of life in a positive way. His philosophy does not come in direct preachings but revealed by his characters.

Robert browning did not identify himself with any particular school of philosophy. Critics often speak of 'the message of Browning' or 'the teachings of Browning'. However, Browning has no formal message, no church, no philosophy in the technical sense. But he had definite and firm views on human life and human nature and the relation of both to God. In his poetry, he offers us a distinct theory of the relation of man to the universe and exhibits his theory by means of imaginary character and scenes.

Browning may not have been a profound thinker, but he is a very consistent one. His views, taken together, present a philosophy of life, which is the result of his search for truth. His poetry is characterised by immense variety, but unity is imparted to it by his unchanging views of human destiny. He certainly does not challenge the old theological and metaphysical dogmas: on the other hand, he accepts the conventional view of God, the immortality of the soul and the Christian belief in incarnation. Still he is original in the sense that his cheerful optimism is in sharp contrast with the growing pessimism of the age. As Rylands puts it,

"He is one of those who rolled back, as far as England is concerned, the morbid pessimism, the sickly disdain of active life, which has infected so much of European literature during the present century."

Optimism is the core of Browning's teachings. Contrary to the views of some critics, his optimism is not blind: he does not shut his eyes to the sufferings and evils that is life. Compton Rickett says,

"Browning knows that life is a bewildering mixture of good and evil, of the lovely and ugly, of despair and hopefulness, but he derives hope from this very incompleteness and imperfections of life. The famous lines in Pippa Passes

God is in his heaven, All is right with the world"

are often cited as an example of Browning's cheap or blind optimism. In the face of such human suffering, misery and wickedness, how can we say that All is right with the world?'. Such views arise from faulty interpretation of his poetry.

When he says these words, he does not mean that there is no evil or suffering in the world: he means that divine governance is just and benevolent, and what appears to us as evil has its own place in the scheme of things. Thus in the words of Pope, "all partial evil, universal good".

According to Chesterton,

"Browning's optimism is founded on imperfections of man; he derives hope from human deficiency."

Browning thinks that this world is essentially good; whatever miseries and imperfections are therein it, are due to imperfections of Man and the presence of evil which stands in the way of his goal.

Man tries hard to achieve perfection by struggling hard against all imperfections and evils. He may not emerge victorious from the tough fight, but at least he becomes aware of his imperfection and this awareness implies an idea of perfection present in the mind of Man. This is enough to make him push forward and rise. Thus Browning's view is that the whole world of life, the whole purpose of love which gave it birth, lies not in perfection but in the effort to become perfect.

Browning's attitude towards evil, pain and misery is not merely theoretical and abstract like that of 18th Century thinkers. He does not accept evil merely as a philosophical counterpart of good; rather he regards evil as a practical instrument of human advancement.

His approach to the problem is pragmatic, it is based on is experience of life. He lays stress on practical experience and tests every theory by this touchstone. It is only by experience that we can wring knowledge from experience.

All men strive and who succeeds?

This famous line of 'The Last ride together' shows Browning's faith in struggle.

Man must struggle and strive to come as close to the attainment of his ideals as possible. Man was sent for struggle and fight heavy odds of life rather than for weak surrender before the might and majesty of difficulties. He inspires his readers to fight and not to submit or yield:

Strive and thrive, cry speed, fight on for ever Was his message. In Rabbi Ben Ezra he gave advice

'Youth should strive through acts uncouth Toward making.'

Browning admonished the readers of his poetry to be warriors and fighters, strong and indomitable strugglers, never allowing thoughts of cowardice and cravenness to distract them from their chosen path of heroism and bravery.

Evil is a hindrance in the way of perfection and achievement of good. Browning was never discouraged by the presence and power of evil, but considered it necessary for the progress of man in his life. Evil prevented man from attaining perfection. It was essential to struggle for reaching to the. Hence evil provided the necessary balancing force in life. Evil was man's foe, no doubt, but it was a foe without whose presence progress could never have been possible. Evil was as permanent as good and it was man's duty to fight and struggle against the forces of evil.

The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound, What was good shall be good, with evil so much, good more.

The presence of evil should not check men from aspiring for higher ideals. Man's ideals should always be higher than his grasp. He should march steadily onwards, unmindful of eye on his unattainable ideals. Browning emphasised the necessity of keeping high ideal in lines

A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's heaven for?

The other firmly grounded belief of Browning is the immortality of the soul. He believes that man lives in two worlds, the finite and the infinite. He is conscious of the spiritual world, by the enthusiasms, longings and aspirations in the soul, where they exist like imprisoned splendours. He could never believe that death extinguishes the divine spark eradicating human life. The faith of the poet is expressed in Rabbi Ben Ezra,

' fool! all that is at all,
Lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure
Time's wheel runs back or stops potter and clay endure'.

According to him, the body may die, but the soul lives on the infinite. It has an after life or lives; it has experiences not only in the world and this life but also in countless lives to come. Life in other life is more valuable than life in infinite world. The ideals which remain unattained here can be attained in heaven.

Rylands writes;

"Browning never questions the existence of supreme authority or God, controlling the manifold energies of the world"

He did not conceive God as a cruel and tyrannical being unmindful of he lot of the creative universe, or a sinister intelligence bent on punishing mankind. He conceived God as a benignant and sympathetic power helping men in their endeavour if they respond faith in him and his mercy.

God made all the creatures and gave them
Our love and our fear
We and they are his children
One family here.

For Browning, it is love which kindles and exalts both knowledge and power, and as love is common to both God and Man, it is through love that Man touches the infinite. It is love which harmonies and unites all living beings; and it is on love that all Browning's character builds their faith.

'God, Thou art Love I build my faith on thee' And further,
'So the All Great were Loving too.'

The world is beautiful, for God created it out of the fullness of His love:

'O, world as God has made it, all is beauty,

And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.'

Love is the philosophic principle which binds all beings in harmony and unity. Life in this world is worth living, for both life and the world are the expressions of Devine Love.

For Browning, Death is not the herald of extinction but
'A Groom
That brings a taper to the outward room'.

Where the soul may pursue its designs unfettered and unhindered. This is the faith which inspires 'The Epilogue to Asolande' and 'Prospice'.

According to Browning, the aim of Life was to acquire power, and since the power of knowledge was the mightiest of all power, one must pursue it with ardour and enthusiasm. But soon he realised that mere love for power, even power of knowledge was not enough unless it is accompanied with love. Knowledge by itself was arid and barren.

Browning's optimism is further seen in the fact that he finds the passion of joy running in all Nature. Joy is at the very core of nature, and Browning is never tired of emphasising this fact. This joy is derived from the creative joy of God, the delight he takes in the workof creation.

Browning's ecstasy in mere living, his rapturous joy in his own life and in the life of Nature, results from his faith in the creative joy of the supreme. He has sung the delight of life more fervently than any other poet.

Browning's message is in his invincible faith and optimism. He spoke to the strongest word of faith in the age of doubt and pessimism. Of all English poets, no other is so completely, so consciously, so magnificently a teacher of Man. He retained his faith and courage in a world of doubt and timidity. For thirty years, he faced cheerfully the indifference of his age and ultimately made the world recognise and follow him. His thought has been surely and steadily taking possession of the hearts of educated men and women, and this accounts for his popularity both at home and abroad.

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