



Destiny sans Predetermination : Understanding The Nature of Human Destiny

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History, Culture, Destiny, Predetermination

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ABSTRACT *The paper proposes to understand the nature and concept of human destiny by undertaking a critical evaluation of Spengler's concept of destiny. First section seeks to give a brief description of his conception of destiny. In the next section a critical appraisal of Spengler's concept of destiny is undertaken. This churning is used for differentiating the concept of destiny from predestiny, which is pursued in the subsequent section.*

Nature, History and Destiny

Oswald Spengler has perhaps been the first serious thinker studying the processes of history and culture to use the term destiny as an important category of analysis (1961, 92-101). He insisted that notion of destiny is applicable only to the thing-becoming as opposed to the thing-become. Hence it applies only to the domain of history as against the natural realm which falls in the domain of causality. Reality or the world has been demarcated by him into two domains : world-as-history and world-as-nature. Nature and history are opposite extreme terms in human range of possibilities of picturing and representing the world. Nature is considered to be the sum of necessities imposed by the laws. In this domain every thing cognised is considered to be timeless –having neither past nor future- simply there, and hence permanently valid. He insists that in this sense law in the domain of nature is a-historic.

Spengler holds that pure becoming on the other hand is irreversible as every happening in this realm is unique and incapable of being repeated. Becoming lies beyond the domain of cause and effect, and law and measurement. He contends that although history is not pure becoming, but it does not deal with the thing-become. It is an image radiated from the waking consciousness in which becoming dominates the become. He points out that history is the image which humans intuitively, intrinsically and rationally create in order to comprehend the world in relation to their own life. Nature on the other hand is the image in which humans synthesis and interpret the impressions of their senses.

Spengler insists that world-as-nature follows the logic of space, whereas world-as-history follows the logic of time. Every culture is born in a particular space and time, and there is a deep relation between the two. Space is the extension from which a culture emerges. Time is the direction and destiny to which it points. Space is the thing-become and realised actuality; whereas time points to thing-becoming that has potentiality and has to fulfill itself as yet. Time cannot be thought of categorically but space can be so conceived. Time is a discovery which is made only after thinking. We create it as an idea and later on realise that we are time in as much as we live. Spengler points out that corresponding to space and time is the differentiation of nature and history; or the causality and destiny.

The cognition of world-as-nature refers to the totality of knowledge by systematic reasoning which seeks strict laws that are universal and a-historical. It deals with timeless and directionless thing-become. Whereas knowledge in the realm of world-as-history is based on concept of time. As such both these forms of knowing are different from one another. The reality known as nature can be categorised in terms of universal causal laws whereas the idea of history cannot be laid

down in terms of cause and effect. It points to some thing beyond-through the directionality of time to the idea of destiny. So time is the direction and destiny to which a culture points. Thus the idea of destiny is associated with the form of knowing the world-as-history and to the direction of time towards which a culture points. World-as-nature is independent of the idea of destiny and it aims only at formulating universal laws pertaining to the nature of external world. Form of knowing associated with world-as-nature seeks to discover truths that are considered to be universally valid whereas knowing associated with world-as-history aims to reveal facts that have a necessary relation with time and indicate a direction, a future and a destiny.

Destiny, Metaphors and Pre-determination

It is evident that in the works and thought of Oswald Spengler we find a serious effort to differentiate the notion of destiny from the concept of causality. But he doesn't go far enough and fails to remove the traces of pre-determination from his conception of destiny as he retains the possibility of prediction of future phenomena. This has found expression in the very beginning of *The Decline of the West*. In the first line of the introduction itself he writes : "in this book is attempted for the first time the venture of predetermining history, of following the still untravelled stages in the destiny of a culture..." (1961, 29).

The prediction of phenomena yet to come is usually and necessarily associated with the concept of causation and falls in the domain of causality primarily associated with natural phenomena. We have seen that Spengler differentiated between causation and destiny on the basis of difference in cognising nature and history. However in his thinking differentiation of history and nature is not always maintained, and based upon that the differentiation between two ways of comprehending the reality -i.e. the world-as-history and world-as-nature- is also demolished. He considers history to be primary, and forming the basis for knowing the world-as-nature. He argues that "No 'Nature' is pure -there is always something of history in it" (1961, 199), as it is the same values, same soul or the prime-symbol that is manifested in all domains and realms of a culture.

Spengler considers cultures to be like organisms. And like organisms, argues Spengler, they have their souls as well. As soul, every culture has its own prime-symbol which is a set of values that are central to it. These values define a culture's attitude towards space and time and constitute the world image of that culture. It is expressed symbolically in all manifestations of the culture and distinguishes it from other cultures. He points out that prime-symbol of a culture "is operative through the form-sense of every man, every community, age and epoch and it dictates the style of every life-expression. It is inherent in the form of state, the religious myths and cults,

the ethical ideals, the form of painting and music and poetry, the fundamental notions of each science" (1961,107-8).

Thus each culture is like an organism and prime-symbol is like its soul. The prime-symbol, like soul has its inherent potentialities, and like a soul a culture sets out in the course of its life to fulfill and actualize its potentialities. It can be seen from these metaphorical expressions that culture according to Spengler refers both to its potentialities as well as embodiments of these potentialities. The actual aspects and potentialities together constitute the body and soul of the culture.

It can be seen that in order to understand phenomena related to culture Spengler is making extensive use of metaphors. Culture is an area where metaphors are so commonly used that more often than not our thinking becomes a prisoner of metaphors. It needs to be stressed that thinking in terms of metaphors is extremely dangerous as it deludes us sometimes with false difficulties and at others, with false solutions.

Lipson has pointed out three principal types of metaphors that have constituted the frame of reference for most of the writings aimed at understanding processes related to culture -these are biological, geophysical and geometrical. The metaphors of biological sort interpret a culture or civilization as an organism and, once that is decided, traces its supposed life cycles. Geophysical type, on the other hand, conceives of our subject in terms of the earth's motion either during the day or through the year (1993, 71). Lipson points out that both these types of metaphors focus on the passage of culture or civilization through time, whereas in case of metaphors pertaining to geometrical sort, changes are illustrated by figures in space such as the circle, the spiral and the line. He argues that both biological and geophysical types have the same flaw as they imply that change in certain predetermined direction is inevitable and that it proceeds through the same stages, in the same sequence. Thus it is necessary for birth to be succeeded by growth, maturity, decay, and death. Similarly dawn starts a process that must continue on to the darkness, as spring must eventually lead to winter.

It would be pertinent to note that Spengler's thought contains almost all these elements. Even in the passage most quoted from *The Decline of the West* "A Culture ... in the grave" (1961, 90-91), we find many such metaphorical expressions being used for culture, e.g. age phase of individual man, childhood, youth, manhood and old age, morning, noon, day light, darkness, plant wise, decaying branches, spring, ripening, sweetness of late October days, dawn, etc. It can be seen that Spengler uses both, the biological as well as geophysical metaphors, and hence his thought contains the above mentioned flaws associated with the use of metaphors. Like any other idea or thought based on metaphors, they in fact are oversimplifications, and as such, fail to do justice to the phenomena that they are supposed to comprehend. The phenomena of culture and civilization are far more complex and it is not possible to subsume them under any pre-decided, compartmentalised, prefabricated schemata of a-priori categories. The metaphorical interpretations fail to comprehend the true nature of subject-matter as they amount to cognizing them as something which they in fact are not. As Lipson has put it rather elegantly, to treat human society, culture and civilization "as if it were organism or a geophysical process ... is a mistaken starting point that cannot lead to other than distorted conclusions" (1993, 72-73).

It seems reasonable to conclude that it is due to use of metaphors that despite an effort to differentiate the concept of destiny from the concept of causation, Spengler fails to dissociate destiny from the idea of pre-destination as a-priori conceptualisation is detrimental to comprehension of true nature of the phenomena.

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It has been seen that a-priori conceptualisation is detrimental

to true and valid comprehension of phenomena belonging to the domain of history, culture and civilization. Being caught in the web of a-priori schemetas we become prisoners of those prefabricated structures and fail to look at the phenomena as they actually are. But it is equally true that history is not an illusion as it is not a figment of our imagination. It does not study a realm in which anything goes or that can be magically transformed for which all that we have to do is to switch over to a mode of consciousness which believes that the world is governed by our will only. It is in this sense that phenomena related to human destiny have a necessary relation with the present as well as past of the culture and civilization. Phenomena related to human destiny have a necessary linkage with history whereas phenomena governed by causation do not have any such necessary relation as they are about mere happenings. As Prof. Goel has put it rather elegantly, "history deals with events. But by itself an event is not history" (1967, 34). Events studied by history are not without past and future as in the domain of culture past merges into present, and present merges into future. Unlike causal phenomena of nature human destiny is directed towards future. It has its seeds in the present and roots in the past. Underlying any conception of history one can always decipher a perspective that forms the backdrop of studies as history is great deal more than a mere recording of dead events by a machine. It involves acts of human interpretation, which is an activity of a different class as compared to mere recording or picturing.

It seems plausible to say that it is possible to discern some logic in the course of history as this course is not capricious, laden with chaos and disorder. But it needs to be stressed that this logic does not belong to the realm of a-priori conceptualisation. Thus a perspective of human destiny that is not connected to the idea of coercive pre-determination through the relation of entailment or conjunction is possible to be conceived. Such a conception recognises the prime importance of reflexive character of human activities based on the idea of freewill, and does not brush aside the idea of human freedom in search of uniformities in the historical phenomena. It seeks to discern some pattern in the historical course not despite human freewill, but through acts based on the freewill. This conception rules out the possibility of listing in advance a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that entail or determine the direction of history. But it accepts that there are certain necessary conditions that must be fulfilled if a certain course of history is to be sought, or a particular direction is to be pursued as destiny. But such a course is only suggestive and tentative as no set of sufficient conditions can elicit any pre-determination in this domain. Such factors rather than being determinants of historical course are of the nature of influences that effect human destiny. More often than not actual actors remain oblivious of such influences, the existence of which can only be found by rigorous analysis.

Thus it can be said that although there are no predetermined universal uniformities in human history, but since human affairs are governed by similar kinds of factors, history has patterns and it is possible to decipher the tentative course of human destiny. Kroeber -who responded by giving a categorical no as answer to the question of inferring any must with respect to all activities appearing regularly in all civilisations- insists that absence of such uniformity does not mean that there are no patterns. He suggests that "turning to the field of culture as a whole we may say with assurance that clearly some patterns productive of high values have been developed with astonishing rapidity and that there have been others in which such productivity fell off and ceased with equal rapidity" (1944, 776).

So, there are patterns which influence human destiny in a positive direction, whereas certain other patterns influence human destiny in a negative way. The reflexive nature of human consciousness makes it possible for humans to intervene meaningfully in such processes and imbibe creatively

on signboards on the road leading to the future –towards human destiny. There are no sentences or words pre-imbibed on the inscription of time. These inscriptions are to be created by the humans themselves.

The signboards pointing the direction of human destiny get created in the interplay of values with culture and civilization. Now we propose to take up that exploration.

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