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Philosophy

SARVEPALLI RADHAKRISHNAN AND THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN PREDICAMENT

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

The predicament is that the population and "standard of living" of the human species have already grown beyond the long-range carrying capacity of the earth. *The Human Predicament* engages life's big questions. Are our lives meaningless? Is death bad? Would immortality be better? Alternatively, should we hasten our deaths by acts of suicide? Many people are tempted to offer comforting, optimistic answers to these existential questions. *The Human Predicament* offers a less sanguine assessment and defends a substantial, but not unmitigated, pessimism. It is argued that while our lives can have some meaning, we are ultimately the insignificant beings that we fear we are. There is no point to human life as a whole, and individual human lives have no cosmic purpose. Nor is meaning the only way in which our lives are deficient. A candid appraisal reveals that the quality of life, although less bad for some people than for others, leaves much to be desired in even the best cases. Death, however, is not generally the solution. It exacerbates rather than mitigates our cosmic meaninglessness. It can release us from suffering but even when it does, it imposes another cost—annihilation. The human predicament is thus forged by both life and death.

INTRODUCTION

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was a great philosopher, philanthropist, great teacher, scholar par-excellence, creative genius, great humanist, spiritualist, man of vision, mission and principles, an idealist, orator with gift of the gab, original thinker, renowned diplomat etc. Dr. Radhakrishnan is a pioneer in philosophical, ethical, theological, social, religious and cultural subjects. Though he was a multi-faceted personality and distinguished scholar, his contribution towards education has been stupendous. He felt that education plays an important role in solving many ills of the society. Dr. Radhakrishnan's educational and religious philosophy flagged on the heart of the elite. A multi-dimensional creative genius, he made his original contributions in diverse fields of human life. The philosophy of Radhakrishnan is an attempt to reinterpret and reconstruct the Advaita Vedanta of Sankara in the light of scientific knowledge and techniques of modern time. Existentialism is an attitude and outlook that emphasizes human existence. For Radhakrishnan, the human is essentially subject, not object. The existentialists assert that the human is not an object to be known, but a subject. Both Radhakrishnan and the existentialists emphasize the immense potential and present day condition of humanity. Radhakrishnan greatly acknowledges the reality of suffering and misery of worldly existence. The existentialists maintain that there are antinomies, contradictions and distresses at the root of existence. Radhakrishnan is concerned with liberation as a state of freedom. Freedom is the central concept around which the existential enquiry revolves. Though Radhakrishnan has certain affinities with existentialism, he regards it as a stage in the human's pilgrimage through life. God offers a transformative response to the human predicament in the form of divine help. Shin Buddhism and the Reformed Christian tradition articulate a conceptually analogous understanding of the human predicament — as depraved, disordered, defiled, and filled with impurities.

HUMAN PREDICAMENT

Meaning of "human predicament"

Only humans have some knowledge and understanding of the universe. No other animal species seem to have this knowledge. Apes may recognize themselves in a mirror but do they really know that they all will die some day! Animals can live without meaning, value, or purpose for they seem to always be living in the present moment. Humans can live in the past or the future and that future is a sure death! Humans have a problem living consistently and happily even when life may ultimately be without meaning, value or purpose. Existential nihilism argues that life is without objective meaning, purpose or intrinsic value. Moral nihilists assert that there is no inherent morality, and that accepted moral values are abstractly contrived. Nihilism may also say that in some aspects,

knowledge is not possible or reality does not actually exist. We seem to be the only animal that asks the question, "Are our lives meaningful, or meaningless?" While we may give our lives some meaning, when we look at the vastness of space, we are ultimately just insignificant beings on an insignificant planet going around an insignificant star! Predicament means a dilemma, plight or quandary that refers to an unpleasant or puzzling situation. The human predicament is that we know and understand all of the above with no solution.

Decision: The Human Predicament

If choice is originative, it can be effective, it can give a thrust to the course of things intended to secure its ends. In order to secure its ends, choice must apply knowledge of what will be the consequence of what. But the sequel of an action chosen by one man will be shaped by circumstance, and its circumstances will include the actions chosen now and actions to be chosen in time to come by other man. If, therefore, choice is effective, it is unpredictable and thus defeats, in some degree, the power of choice itself to secure exact ends. This is the human predicament. Information is necessarily about fragments of the cosmos and of history. At any time a man has some collection of pieces of information, fitted into various systems of thought or accepted stereotypes of experience. He cannot know, except in regard to the most immediate physical effects, whether his information is all that exists that bears on his choice of action. If there are gaps, the filling of these gaps by inventive thought with one or another set of suppositions can radically affect the implications of even his well-founded information. He must select among contrary suggestions. What the decision-maker wants is access to hope. The greater the possible loss or misfortune, the more exhilarating may be the success which is then brought within imaginative reach. Decision is not, in its ultimate nature, calculation, but origination.

According to Radhakrishnan, man is more than matter, life or mind or all these taken. He speaks of the 'individual existence' in a sense in which a man is not simply a biological, psychological or social animal, but in which a man is a 'human being.' In Radhakrishnan, we often find that "Man is always more than he is able to comprehend of himself." Radhakrishnan is quite akin to Jaspers as Jaspers also holds the view that man is always more than himself.

Both Radhakrishnan and the existentialists emphasize on the immense potentialities of man. Radhakrishnan maintains that man must be transformed and transmuted to a higher level of existence in course of evolution. Man's greatness is not in what, he is but in what he can be. **Jean Paul Sartre** asserts about man that- "it-is-what-it-is-not and that it is not what-it-is." Man exists and makes himself develop into what he wants to be. Radhakrishnan realises

deeply the present-day condition of man. The present period is a period of uncertainty. Man has lost his happiness and peace. The life becomes artificial and mechanical. Radhakrishnan writes, "We live in a period of agonizing strain, of grave anxiety, of manifold disillusionment. The world is in a condition of trance." Existentialism is also deeply concerned with the condition of man in the modern age. At present man has lost his freedom, individuality, humanity. Man is reduced to a machine. Different disciplines treat man not as an individual, but as an object. Existentialism points out that a type of thought which dominates the treatment of objects is inadequate to the existing individual.

Radhakrishnan, in spite of the crisis of present time maintains an optimistic attitude. According to him, man's unrest is not a mere negative force. He is not only oppressed by new doubts but is inspired by new horizons, new perspectives and a thirst for new relations with fellowmen. We are in the beginning of a new age. Jaspers also believes that present discontents and unrest indicate the birth of a future. He expresses, "we live, so to speak, in a seething cauldron of possibilities, continually threatened by confusion, but always ready in spite of everything to rise up again."

Radhakrishnan acknowledges the reality of suffering and misery of worldly existence. This empirical world is the source of all kinds of sorrows and sufferings. Man is the victim of suffering so long as he confines himself to this world. Like other Advaitin thinkers, Radhakrishnan affirms the inevitability of death and transitoriness of human existence. But he also affirms that the suffering of life can be transcended. Man is intended for something greater than confinement in this world. He can rise above it. Radhakrishnan makes suffering and misery of worldly existence an aspect of the process of spiritual growth. Again, death is not a denial of life. It is only a condition. Death is only a change from one life to another. Death terminates the present life of man in order to substitute a new life for it. It is not possible for man to exhaust all the potentialities of life in a single life. Hence, we must accept some possible forms of life after death.

The existentialists depict a gloomy picture of life. There are antinomies, contradictions and distresses at the root of existence. The feeling of anxiety or anguish or dread (angst, angoisse) is a peculiar feature that characterizes the outlook of the existentialist thinkers. We have to face all these otherwise we evade the truth of our own being. Existentialists think that an important fact of life is death. Death is an inevitable end of man. **Heidegger** has carried out the detailed study of the existential meaning of death. It pulls man up into authentic existence out of his inauthentic existence. Jaspers refers to death, chance, guilt, suffering struggle as boundary situations. These boundary situations reveal to us our 'Existenz'-the authentic self.

Radhakrishnan, like the existentialists, distinguishes between the inauthentic and the authentic existence as between bondage and liberation. The bondage is the self-alienation of man from his real being. The liberation results from the realisation of the real nature of man. Inauthentic existence is the life of worldliness. It signifies the ignorance of man's real nature. The authentic existence is the way of man who wants liberation. It signifies the attempt of man for his liberation from egocentric limitations and the realisation of the real-self. Like other Advaitin thinkers, Radhakrishnan is primarily concerned with liberation. Liberation is a state of freedom. It means the realisation of the self in its pure nature. Freedom is the central concept around which the existential enquiry revolves. Freedom constitutes man's basic nature. Freedom is inherent to human existence. The practice of freedom is man's authentic existence. It is to be lived through responsible decision and action.

According to Radhakrishnan, moksa, nirvana and eternal life are not an escape from life but the realisation of life's fullest possibilities. Each one's life is a road to him and to self-realization. In the existentialists we find that man seeks to liberate himself from his state of 'fallenness' and direct it towards the realisation of his highest potentialities. Herein lays man's freedom. In his later

writings, Radhakrishnan often refers to existentialism. He maintains that existentialism is one of the basic types of thought. It appears in the history of philosophy whenever we stress the difference between the individual being of man and the being of objects in nature. Though Radhakrishnan has much more in common with existentialism, he regards it as a transitional phase of individual development. He states, "Existentialism is a stage in man's pilgrimage through life. It has to transcend itself: for an analysis of the human predicament reveals the fact of God as Being and God as perfection."

According to Radhakrishnan, the human predicament being best characterized as inherently impure due to "original" conditioning actions, namely, past karma (*shukug*) and original sin. Religious traditions have responded to a common sense of the human predicament. The human condition is one of existential estrangements from one's essential nature and the ground of being. This state of estrangement, results in a sense of insecurity, inner conflict, and alienation. The state of the human condition, often thought of as the "human predicament," has been variously understood within the Christian tradition, but it has nearly always centered upon the nature or quality of humanity's relationship with God. It gives scope to the nature of the human predicament, the past conditioning action(s) that led to this human condition and the futility of any human effort to change the human predicament. Thus, the human condition can be understood to "involve a *predicament* [of existential estrangement] that religions address as a problem.

The human predicament in the midst of the omnipresent and universal change and suffering is often expressed in Vedanta and Buddhism by the image of the wheel. Lord Krishna speaks of the terrible wheel of birth and death which binds the individual down to the phenomenal world of time and circumstance: "The spirit of man when in nature feels the ever-changing conditions of nature. When he binds himself to things ever-changing, a good or evil fate whirls him round through life-to-death. Even Gautam Buddha alludes to the wheel of existence, which he calls **samsara**. In Europe, during the Renaissance, the wheel was absorbed into a popular adage - God is a Circle, whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere *Samsara, karma and liberation*. The notion that existence is best understood as a continuous cycle of birth-death-and-rebirth with no beginning and no end is an ancient one. Appearing in the Upanishads, this conception of existence has been around since nearly 800 BCE and is foundational to a majority of the religions of South Asia.

Solving the Human Predicament

Fixed human behaviour tendencies have blocked action toward a sustainable future. Despite over 50 years of effort by scientists and environmentalists, the future of the human endeavour can no longer be taken for granted. This is due primarily to our nature. We have failed to realize our own behaviour patterns are the root cause of our predicament and have mistakenly believed that mountains of evidence would make the difference. For decades, scientists have produced evidence describing the serious environmental threats we face. Their work has failed to ignite a significant public response because our message has not been delivered in a manner that addresses the drivers of human behaviour. We now understand humans are confronted with subconscious behaviour tendencies that served us well at an earlier period, but still remain in our incomplete evolutionary development. At our present stage of intellectual development, lingering malignant social constructs, especially capitalism and economic growth, impede our ability to move forward on environmental issues.

Humans have the most highly developed brain of all living species. The cognitive part of the brain is responsible for our remarkable progress in technology and science. By contrast, when human relationships induce conflict or stress, the limbic and reptilian parts of the brain dominate, overriding rational cognitive thought processes. The innate survival instincts so essential in the past still tend to overwhelm our unique reasoning capacity. Emotional factors such as fear and anger hamper rational thinking. We

overestimate the human intellectual capacity when the cognitive process is undermined by our regression to subconscious influences.

Human behaviour is strongly influenced by well-established norms. Ideas extending beyond broadly accepted patterns are frequently rejected because they do not conform to preconceived beliefs that, once established, are extremely difficult to dislodge. Once locked in place, they are obstacles to change. Human behaviour contains a strong element of competitiveness, a natural occurrence in past times when survival was a daily struggle. Humans operated in a context where obtaining food and shelter were the key factors of living. Hardships bred a short-term view of life with little regard for the future. In today's society the same characteristics can be seen in our seemingly insatiable consumption of resources and in our tendency to discount the future. These predispositions are displayed by our destructive treatment of the natural world, all in the name of unsustainable economic growth. We are caught in the trap of immediate self-gratification at the expense of our own life-support system.

The unique reasoning ability of humans has brought many benefits, but has also provided us with a problem with which we must cope. We are equipped with certain abstract knowledge unlikely to be possessed by most other animal species. Humans have a sense of self-awareness and are aware of their own mortality. We are constantly reminded by daily events around us that we are not immutable. By necessity, we have learned to deal with this knowledge by creating a number of defensive structures. We have subconsciously learned to deny reality. The denial may take the form of refuting or ignoring painful information that helps us avoid facing the issue. Denial often employs rationalization as an escape mechanism by finding reasons to discredit the information. Humans are capable of denial most frequently when the issue in question has a controversial aspect, but also occurs even when the information is widely accepted. The melting of the Arctic sea ice is a powerful example. It is recognized there is dire essential for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Despite this, oil companies and some governments are actively laying claim to areas believed to contain oil or gas reserves. The risk of potential global warming disaster is denied. Greed and vested interests prevail.

If we expect to move forward on environmental issues we will need to frame our message in a way that reaches the real drivers of human behaviour and removes the obstacles blocking change. Predicting disaster is not a driver because creating fear produces denial and paralysis. Providing more scientific evidence is helpful, but is not a driver because it has been tested for decades and found to be ineffective. At present a plan does not exist, but we now have an understanding of the elements influencing human behaviour that could be utilized in developing a blueprint for action. These elements would focus on the many positive attributes of human nature such as our proven ability to cooperate, our innate desire to protect our children, and our empathy for other creatures that share the earth with us. We have the intellectual capacity to create a plan using these and other human qualities. It is our moral responsibility to do so. The question is: "Are we brave enough to do it?"

CONCLUSION

Human Predicament offers a less sanguine assessment and defends a substantial, but not unmitigated, pessimism. Existentialism is an attitude and outlook that emphasizes human existence. For Radhakrishnan, the human is essentially subject, not object. Humans have a problem living consistently and happily even when life may ultimately be without meaning, value, or purpose. Existential nihilism, argues that life is without objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value. Radhakrishnan, in spite of the crisis of present time maintains and preaches an optimistic attitude. According to him, man's unrest is not a mere negative force. He is not only oppressed by new doubts but is inspired by new horizons, new perspective and a thirst for new relations with fellowmen.

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