
Freeing Philosophy from the 'Prison-House' of 'I-Centricity'

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Philosophical thinking has generally been rooted in self-consciousness as it has arisen from that 'reflexive' activity of consciousness which only explicates what is involved in self-consciousness, even though the latter is not identical with it. This, however, has given rise to that fundamental problem which it has not known how to solve, as once the thought, or rather the 'thinking', has become reflexively centred in itself, it does not know how to 'think' of anything else that is 'independent' of it or 'unrelated' to it in its essentiality, as even for that it has to be made an 'object' of 'thought' or 'thinking'.

The dilemma is well known to philosophical thought, as also the 'failure' of almost all the 'desperate' attempts to get out of it. Descartes had to lean on the 'idea of God' to get out of the prison of 'self-certitude' he had built for himself and Husserl who thought he would be cleverer and leave the door 'open' for coming out whenever he wished by adopting the strategy of self-willed 'bracketing' or 'phenomenological reduction' found that once the step was taken he could not, for some reason, do so and ultimately was led to see everything as being 'constituted' by the 'constituting acts' of the ego. It was perhaps only Śaṅkara who decided that the attempt was not worthwhile as once the 'self' was made central by the reflexive act of self-consciousness, there could be no 'other' or even the 'appearance' or 'illusion' of the 'other'.

The problem, in fact, occurs at two levels: the first relates to everything that appears as 'object' or, to use Fichte's comprehensive term, 'not-self' or rather that which is essentially different from and 'opposed' to the 'I' that is sensed or felt in self-consciousness. The second relates to the fact that not only no distinction is made amongst

'objects' of different kinds, but that objects are not seen in terms of their own nature or *svabhāva* which makes them 'resistant' to consciousness both in its enterprise of knowledge and action. It seems to have been taken for granted that to be apprehended as an 'object' was the same as its 'being known' and that there was no difference between the two. Kant did try to articulate the distinction but did not see that it did not help matters, as the necessary application of the categories did not help in any way in finding what the 'specific' nature or *svarūpa* of the 'object' was. He did not even see that the nature of the self as 'object' was found to consist of almost contradictory predicates when seen in the context of 'knowledge' or 'action', that is, as a 'knowing' or 'acting being'.

The 'resistance' that the 'object' offers proclaims its 'independent' being, and yet the truth of this self-evident fact is denied by the reflexive act of self-consciousness in philosophical reflection as it can 'negate' or 'deny' all 'objectivity' by withdrawing from it or by shutting it out of consciousness by an act of withdrawal whose paradigmatic example was said to be 'deep sleep' in the Indian tradition and which, according to it, could be voluntarily achieved in waking consciousness also, if it so desired.

This is the implicit presupposition of *all* philosophical thought which starts from the reflexive activity of self-consciousness and regards it as the only thing that is self-certifying, and hence is indubitable. But it forgets that, at least some of the 'objects' amongst those that appear to be such also evince this capacity and hence will have to be granted this same 'subject-hood' as one grants to oneself. One 'feels' this capacity of the 'other' in relation to oneself in almost all 'living' beings with whom one has any 'feeling-relationship', as it is in this relationship alone that one becomes acutely aware of the freedom of the 'other' to relate or not to relate, to withdraw or not to withdraw. But then, this is also the relationship which makes one feel oneself to have become an 'object' to some other 'subject', just as everything else was supposed to be to ones own 'subjecthood'. This is a commonplace experience known to everybody in the situation described as 'love', but even in relation to children and pets, it is well known. A child's turning away or that of a pet, is as much a 'rejection' or 'withdrawal' as that we

ascribe to an adult or even God as the lovers and mystics have moaned all the world over. The dark night of the soul has been known to everybody and Christ has not been the only person who has cried in anguish 'O God, why hast thou forsaken me?'

To feel oneself to be an object, a 'forsaken object' is not an unusual 'experience' and if philosophers have to be reminded of it, there is truly something wrong with philosophy, or rather with those who philosophize. It may be said that the reflexive turning away of consciousness in self-consciousness in the direction of pure subjectivity is epistemologically and ontologically different from the one we are pointing to, and that there *are* thinkers like Kierkegaard who have written existentially of *Fear and Trembling* before God who ultimately perhaps is the only 'pure subject' that we can think of.

The objections or rather 'reminders', though well-meant, fail to see that even if they are taken into account, they do not affect in any way the point that was being made by drawing attention to the implication of certain facts which, though commonly known, have not been seen for the far-reaching significance they have for the epistemological and metaphysical thinking that philosophers are generally supposed to pursue. The 'resistance' offered by the 'objectivity' *proves* its ontological independence from the 'subject' to whom it is an 'object', while the 'turning away' proves simultaneously its epistemological independence, along with the fact that one was an 'object' to that which one mistakenly considered *only* an 'object' and nothing more, that is, a being who was a 'subject' in his or her own right, and to whom ones own 'subjectivity' meant nothing more than his or her own 'subjectivity' meant to oneself. The relation between 'subjectivities' could not perhaps be better illustrated than by this tragi-comic situation where each thinks and feels oneself to be a 'subject' and all the others to be 'objects' whose very 'being' is supposed to be dependent on ones being conscious of them and which would dissolve or disappear the moment one would turn ones consciousness away from them. But there is, and can be, no privileged subjectivity as the 'other's turning away' proves to oneself. It is only an illusion superimposed on oneself by the fact of self-consciousness, and elevated to the status of the most indubitable

foundational certainty by the rope-trick of the philosopher, be his name Descartes or Fichte or Śaṅkara or any one else.

As for Kierkegaard, it is true that he imaginatively identified himself with Abraham, but he forgot that the 'God' of Christianity is not the 'God' of Judaism, and that even in Judaism, there *is* such a thing as Jewish mysticism which is close to mysticism as found in other religious traditions of the world. Also, he perhaps did not understand the symbolic import of the story as the 'sacrifice' that was demanded, was of that which was 'dearest' to one, that is, of oneself and that not at the gross physical level, but at the level of that 'identification' which follows from the sense of 'I-ness' and makes it mistakenly turn everything into 'mine'. Also, the relationship with 'God', or whatever be called by that name, has to be the same, that is, as both 'subject' and 'object', a fact known to all the religious traditions of the world and brought to clearest consciousness in what has been called the *bhakti* tradition in India.

The 'object' as 'other' and the 'other' as 'object' has in fact, not been seen the way it is because of the 'I-centricity' of self-consciousness in which the philosophical thinking takes its birth. The 'object' has been seen primarily in epistemological terms and hence has been defined in terms of that to which it is an 'object'. But to see the 'object' as the 'other', is to see it in metaphysical terms, that is, as 'real' or rather 'coordinately real' with oneself. The diverse relationship which consciousness has with the 'other' would easily have revealed it, if reflected upon, for understanding the nature of the 'other' or what the Indians call, its *svarūpa* and *svabhāva*. This call for understanding, or even the 'demand' for it, has not been 'understood' by those who have dismissed all that 'appears' as 'object' to be epistemologically dependent and hence as ontologically subservient or even 'unreal' when compared with the self-certifying, self-luminous character of that to which it appears as 'object'. And this, in face of the unbelievable 'knowledge enterprise' of man which has tried to know the 'object' in all its diversity for millennia and find itself baffled before its mystery that seems so inexhaustible that he finds himself as far away from 'knowing' it as he ever was. Nor has he seen that in this process of 'knowing' he has brought 'objects' into being which, in turn, demand to be understood

and are discovered to be as difficult to understand and almost as opaque and inexhaustible as those which are supposed to have been there before he appeared on the scene. The organized systems of knowledge called the 'sciences' or the '*śāstras*' and the works of art and literature that he has created are the pre-eminent examples of this. So also is that which is known as 'history' where man looks back to see and understand what collectively he has created over time.

The so-called 'object', then, is not an object in the sense in which philosophers have usually understood it, but rather something in its own right, as mysterious and as inexhaustible as the 'subject' which has been so 'dear' to the philosophers that they have held nothing else as 'real' when compared to it.

The anomalous and ambiguous character of all that appears as 'object' becomes perhaps most clearly visible in what is called 'language'. Language is as much an 'object' as anything can be, and yet it is not clear in what its 'objectivity' consists in. It has to be 'understood' in a sense in which most of the so-called 'objects' are not, and it has an essential inter-subjective aspect which comes out vividly in the fact that in its context one is always either 'addressing' someone or is being 'addressed' by someone. This is transparent in the case of speech, while in the case of language that is written it is there, but only in a veiled or hidden or subterranean manner. All that is written has to be 'seen' as written by someone who intended to communicate or convey something and hence demands or seeks to be understood in a sense in which most other 'objects' are not, unless they also are 'seen' as the creation of someone with an in-built or immanent intentionality in them which has become 'freed' of the intentionality of their author, even though it was 'dependent' on it for its coming into being or 'origination'. The understanding, then, is primarily of this immanent intentionality embedded and embodied in that which has been created and only secondarily through that of the other intentionality without which it would not have come into being.

The cycle is unending as the attempt to understand itself brings something into being which has to be understood in its turn, but what is important in the context of what we are discussing is to understand that a very large class of 'objects' we encounter or apprehend have a

transparent, obvious, immanent 'subjectivity' in them which philosophical discussion on the subject has deliberately chosen to ignore. The epistemological and ontological primacy and indubitability of the 'subject' or the 'self' have followed from this, along with the puzzling and bewildering spectacle of philosopher after philosopher trying to get out of the 'I-centric' prison-house of his own making for the last two-and-a-half millennia or so.

In fact, if the philosophers had reflected on their own activity, they would have seen that it effectively negated their own contention as in the very process of doing what they were doing, they were not only referring to thinkers, but submitting what they were thinking before 'others' for their appreciation and acceptance, an act which could not be done without assuming their 'subjectivity' which was completely independent from that of their own. Without this 'assumption', human action ceases to make sense as is evidenced by the insatiable desire of all those who engage in any creative, or even seemingly creative, activity to be appreciated, applauded, admired, fawned upon and followed by the multitude, no matter whether it be discerning or undiscerning. This is as true of spiritual masters as of others, and the 'doubting' or sceptical philosopher imprisoned in his own 'I-centricity' seems no exception to it.

The inalienable and irreducible 'subjectivity' of the 'other' is, however, encountered in a more intractable manner by its non-acceptance or opposition or rejection of what one communicates even after the 'other' has 'understood' it. Many a time one deludes oneself into thinking that if the other had 'really' understood what one is saying, one could not but have agreed to it. But this is to forget that one has oneself disagreed or rejected someone else's contention after having 'claimed' to understand it as otherwise one would not, or could not, have done so. The continuous and continuing refutation of views and counter-views thus proclaims aloud the plurality of 'subjectivities' in 'inter-subjective' interaction, as nothing else could.

The phenomenon, in fact, is even more transparently known in the realm of feeling and action where the 'other' can always 'turn away' and by doing so negate one's own very being or, as in action, offer resistance to what one is trying to achieve. The 'denial' in the former

is perhaps deeper than in the case of the latter, as the resistance offered in the case of action acknowledges ones reality as nothing else could. The capacity for inertial resistance is almost the very definition of 'being' in the context of inert matter, but it is only in realms where 'feeling' begins to be 'felt' that one knows what the 'free' subjectivity of the other can do to ones own subjectivity and make it 'bonded' or 'free' at its own sweet will. The experience of 'captive subjectivity' is known almost to everybody in relations where feelings and emotions constitute ones being but, at a still deeper level, this is the experience of consciousness or 'subjectivity' as it finds itself in the world.

The 'world', or as the Sāṃkhyans call it *Prakṛti*, not only entices, entangles, seduces and binds through the promise of *rasa* and *ānanda* in the context of life as 'felt' and 'lived' in the world of emotions, or 'resists' as in the realm of action, but also challenges one to understand and know it as it *is*. The knowledge, however, is a two-edged affair as in knowing the world, one 'knows' oneself also; as the former changes, so does the latter, just as the changes in the latter cannot but bring about a change in the former. The same is, in a sense, true of the realms of feeling and action, but as the philosophical problem arises primarily in the context of knowledge and the asymmetry in terms of 'certainty' involved in it, it has to be understood primarily in that context also. In 'knowing' the world, the self knows itself and the way it knows itself affects the way it knows the world.

This is not usually seen this way for two reasons; first, knowledge is seen primarily in terms of its content, and not its modality or the way the 'context' is seen or formed or organized; and second, the 'I' or the 'subject' is seen not only as bereft of all content, but also of all modality and thus talked of, as Śaṅkara did, as the bare, self-referential reflexivity of the term 'I', a pure linguistic projection of the indexical expression resulting in an ontological illusion of a substantive self or *ātman* devoid of all predicates or properties, treating them as what is called *upādhi* in the advaitic tradition of philosophizing in India.

But both the reasons, when seen for what they are, would be found unacceptable as the moment we remind ourselves that we are talking of consciousness and self-consciousness at the human level where alone philosophy has its abode, their falsity would become transparently self-

evident. Knowledge is not a bare inventory of discrete, disparate, itemized contents and the indexical 'I' is not the self with its inexhaustible richness which is almost impossible to fathom or imagine.

This 'richness' of that which is referred to by the 'I' has generally not been seen because of a strange prejudice or blindness amongst philosophers regarding the question as to what the ontological 'being' of that which is 'real' consists in. Somehow, it is thought that what is ontologically 'real' should have no 'relational' properties at all and that if it has any properties it should have them always and forever, and always in the same form without the least little change in them whatsoever. This has seemed so self-evident to most philosophers that they have not seen the manifest problem which the phenomenon of 'knowledge' or 'being known' would create in such a situation. That the situation would become worse if 'feeling' or 'action' are brought in is scarcely considered at all. The ontologically 'real' is reduced to almost an utter 'nullity' about which not only nothing can be said, but which literally can have nothing in it as it is 'nothing', thought of only as a residual necessity left after everything has been taken away from it because of a supposed necessity of thought, something that is still thought of as a sub-stratum even when there is nothing to which, or in respect of which, it can perform that function.

The view that 'reality' has to be completely and absolutely 'unchanging' and that all characterization necessarily involves 'exclusion' have been given as 'rational' grounds for the belief in the reality of the illusion imposed by the reflexivity of self-consciousness in which philosophy is rooted, and from which it necessarily arises. But once the illusoriness of the illusion is theoretically apprehended, its hold on one lessens as is the case with all structural and transcendental illusions, a contention argued for at length in the author's still unpublished work entitled *Towards a Theory of Structural and Transcendental Illusions*. The former are well known in the field of optics and other physiological sensory realms while the latter have been well known, at least to philosophers, since Kant exposed them through his transcendental critique of experience in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But neither Kant nor anybody else has exhausted the unearthing and unveiling of these illusions, nor has anyone seen that the philosophical enterprise as it has

been practiced up till now is rooted in such an illusion. It is time that philosophy 'frees' itself and gets 'liberated' to achieve that for itself which it has been prescribing as the *summum bonum* or *param puruṣārtha* for others. The dawn of such freedom may herald a new revolution in the field of thought freeing man from that prison of 'I'-centricity' in which it has been held since reflexive reflection on self-consciousness gave birth to it a long time ago.

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