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Madness, Reason and Truth

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Philosophers are said to be 'specialists' in the 'business' of 'truth' and 'reality' which, for some reason, are supposed to be closely related to each other. Also, they are supposed to determine each of these by the use of something called 'reason' which is said to provide the criteria for distinguishing between the 'real' from the 'unreal' and the 'true' from the 'false'. But reason itself is divided between that which is 'pure' and that which is 'practical' and has 'uses' whose diversity is determined by his purposes.

The Indian tradition called this *prayojana* and seemed to have argued that unless this is specified, one cannot 'talk' or understand the notions of 'truth' or 'reality' as they are intrinsically related to what man 'seeks'. Hence it has to be seen not only as a human enterprise that seeks something specific for itself, but as related to the other enterprises of man.

This is the theory of *puruṣārthas*, or the theory of the diverse enterprises of man. Seeking for truth and reality happens to be only one of them. But if this 'seeking' is only one amongst the many that man seeks them how can it claim any 'precedence' of 'primacy' amongst them. One can only do so by asserting either the foundational or the basic character of this 'seeking' in the sense that unless it is realized to some extent, the other 'seekings' cannot be pursued at all, or that what is sought through this 'seeking' is the final end, or fruit of all other 'seekings' which, consciously, or unconsciously are seeking just this, even if they do not describe or conceive it in these terms. In the first alternative, both 'truth' and 'reality' are conceived of as 'what is the case' and it is held that unless one's knowledge of 'reality' is 'true' in this sense, one cannot even meaningfully engage in the pursuit of any

other seeking, let alone being successful in this pursuit even in the minimal sense of the term. The second alternative stretches and widens the concepts in such a way as to include whatever man seeks or may seek in future in it.

Both the alternatives are rooted in an ambiguity and a delusion that the terms 'real' and 'true' can, or 'ought' to, have one meaning only. Furthermore, the contentions rest on two assumptions that do not seem to be supported either by evidence or argument required for them. The belief that 'truth' in the so-called 'scientific' sense and the 'reality' supposedly corresponding to it are the foundation for all other 'seekings' of man may be held *only* if one ignores the fact that 'truth' in this sense is continuously changing and is 'revisable' in principle. Hence, the 'reality' corresponding to 'it' also has to be necessarily so. The popular idea that 'revisability' of 'truth' is rooted in its not being in accordance with 'reality', rests on two beliefs which seem to be equally mistaken. The first considers 'reality' as something completely independent of knowledge, something like Kant's 'thing-in-itself' or Aristotle's 'Being-qua-Being', or what in the Advaitic tradition has been called the 'Nirguṇa Brahman' or 'Reality without any attributes whatsoever', perhaps more appropriately designated as Śūnya or 'Pure Absolute Nothing' by the Mādhyamika Buddhists. The second belief seems to relate to the strange notion that knowledge does not bring any 'reality' into 'being', either through the fact of knowing itself or through the activity based on it.

The first belief results, paradoxically, in the contention that the 'real' is 'unknowable' in principle; hence the human enterprise of knowledge is based on a delusion that what is 'real' can be known. The second notion, equally strangely, results in the view that whatever has been brought into being by the successive acts of knowing of the human race cannot be considered as 'real' in any sense of the term. And this, inspite of the fact that it has itself been the 'object' of knowledge or understanding, for without it, the enterprise of 'knowing' cannot be carried, or even engaged in by any human being at all. The self-suicidal character of such a view is too obvious, yet philosophers seem to have been driven to espouse it. Indians have tried to work around this dilemma by formulating the notions of *avidyā* or primeval ignorance or even mistake, which was *māyā* and may be understood to be characterized

as neither 'real' nor 'unreal', but still has all the 'effectivity' that 'real' is supposed to have and perhaps even more. But the emotive and the cognitive attitudes associated with these terms by their 'use' are primarily a result of the presupposition which have little to support them in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The generally unquestioned acceptance of the view that what is 'real' must be so, not only to be totally unaffected by the fact of its being brought into relationship with anything else, including what is generally designated by the term 'human being', but that it has necessarily to be of such a nature as not to have even the *possibility* of anything being 'added' to it, is a result not of anything in the concept itself, but because of the structure of the thinking consciousness that 'thinks' it. Kant tried to uncover and articulate the structural presuppositions involved in the act of 'knowing' but he did not see that 'knowing' was only *one* of the modulations of consciousness even in the context we call 'cognitive', and that for any 'real' understanding of the human situation, man finds himself in one will have to try to understand the structure of consciousness and self-consciousness involved in it. Consciousness, it should be remembered, cannot differentiate between the 'real' and the 'imaginary', as both appear equally as 'appearances' to it. As for self-consciousness, which is everywhere at the human level, everything that 'appears' is equally 'dubitable' and necessarily so. But, by a strange twist, philosophical thinking which occurs at the level of self-consciousness sees the self or the sense of the 'I' alone as indubitable and treats all the rest, including itself, as 'objectively' given, and hence 'essentially dubitable' and that too in the sense that it is contingent in principle. It demands and requires that whatever appears as 'object', including itself, can only be regarded as 'real' if, and only if, it has the same indubitability as self-consciousness or the 'I' consciousness. But this is to suffer from an illusion generated by the fact of 'self-consciousness' itself. Once the source of this illusion is realized, the 'dubitable' character of all that is 'object' and the 'indubitability' of the self, i.e. the subject, will disappear and philosophical thinking be 'freed' from the delusion that has characterized it since its beginning, as it is the reflexive activity of self-consciousness in its purest form that we know at the human level.

The 'freedom' from this delusion, however, will itself remain illusory unless its structural and transcendental roots are 'seen' along with the devastating consequences it has had in the history of human civilizations. The former we have explored and articulated at length in *Towards a Theory of Structural and Transcendental Illusions* (unpublished). The latter have to be seen both in their 'religious' and 'wordly' dimensions in order to realize the enormity of what man has done to himself as a result of the delusions generated by self-consciousness.

Self-consciousness is reflected best in philosophy and it is reason that is supposed to have shaped and formed this 'reflection'. The history of reason as also of this reflection has yet to be written, but what is important to note is the fact that the 'reflection' is a double reflection, reflecting simultaneously the consciousness with all the objects it is conscious of and the so-called 'self' with *all* the modalities that it can have towards this consciousness of the object which is its 'object'. The awareness or 'knowledge' of both the self and the world is, thus, based on this foundation and constructed on its basis. The construction or constructions, in turn, are particularly effective because self-consciousness tends to embody itself in symbolic forms that are quasi-permanent and whose primary example is found in language itself.

The delusions then that self-consciousness generates just because it is; what it is of the fact that permeates and infects all Realms of Knowledge, Action and Feeling as these themselves become the 'objects' of self-consciousness and thus are 'informal' by the structure that it has. Also, though 'reason' and self-consciousness are not identical, the former functions as a determinant of what is to be regarded as 'real' in these realms. This is relatively clear in the realm of knowledge where the 'real' is the function of the 'knowledge' we are supposed to have. This knowledge, it should be remembered, takes the esoteric form of *Śāstra* or science at the human level, a form which rejects much that was 'known' earlier, at least in the form in which it was known, and many a time just calls it 'belief' or 'superstition', depending upon the way one feels about it at that point of time.

The distinction between knowledge that is really 'knowledge' and that which is only spuriously so is brought into being the moment it takes the form of a *Śāstra* or a science in any civilization. Science,

however, is continuously changing as, by definition, it is subject to revision, for it seeks both 'internal' and 'external' coherence and 'completeness' which, in principle, it can never have. Yet, at every moment of its empirical existence, it believes itself to be the 'real' truth and proclaims it as such, forgetting that what it characterizes as 'false' was the 'science' of yesterday and that what it is so certain of today may meet the same fate tomorrow.

The error is so obvious that it is difficult to believe how anyone could be guilty of it. But it is a mistake only if one forgets that it reflects what reason has always claimed for itself. In other words, the exclusive right to 'know' the truth and determine what is 'real' on the basis of criteria that are inherent and immanent in it. This, it would be said to have been a characteristic of reason as it functioned in philosophy, but certainly not of that which functions in science as is understood today. Sensory experience plays an essential part in it, just as perhaps imagination does. But, since both are ultimately judged on the basis of reason, particularly as knowledge systematized in a 'system' increases, the difference steadily decreases as is evidenced by the increasing role of pure theory in disciplines that are deemed most 'scientific' and the mathematical formation that occurs therein. With this there occurs the increasing arrogance in knowledge-claims, brushing aside inconvenient facts and arguments with the statement that they too will be taken care of, accommodated and explained with further increase in knowledge. But no one asks how far, and how much further the 'knowledge' has to increase in order to do so. Nor does one ask what is exactly meant by 'increase' in knowledge, or how shall it be measured, or whether there shall ever be a time when there will be no inadequacies and imperfections in the knowledge attained till then. The fact that 'knowledge' has a 'temporal tag' tied to it does not seem to mean anything to reason when it reflects on itself as it treats itself as atemporal in nature, particularly as it can, if it so likes, treat 'time' itself as an object of reflection.

Reason, thus, seems to have an inbuilt structure or mechanism driving it towards delusions of illusory claims to knowledge, which cannot be sustained by any fair 'objective' and impartial consideration of things. Yet, rooted as it is in the self-consciousness of man and buttressed as

it is by it, the delusion only reflects what is proclaimed aloud by religion and spirituality in the history of man upto now. The unbelievable certainties of faith and the self-justified wars against heretics and unbelievers have ensured that they are there for everyone to see. What is surprising is that no one seems ashamed of them, or even to think they were wrong. Why does one not do so, is the question one should ask oneself. If one does so, then one might find the answer in the structure of one's own self-consciousness. The most profound identity perhaps lies in the sense of 'rightness' or 'wrongness' that one has, something which the Indians designated by the term *dharma* which, surprisingly, means both religion and morality.

The ages of Faith, it would be said, have long passed and philosophy itself has been infected by ineradicable doubt since the beginning of 'modernity' as, say, in Descartes. Further, just as science has replaced philosophy in the domain of knowledge, so has reason replaced faith in the working and institutions of society and polity. Secularism is the name usually given to this phenomenon, both in respect of the ideal that it seeks and the actuality that obtains amongst those societies and polities which profess to practice it.

But reason is 'reason' and the faith in it can be as devastating as 'faith' in anything else. The heart of 'reason' is logic and the unrelenting nature of the latter in its abstract, uncompromising, impersonality can be as 'inhuman', or even 'anti-human' as anything else. It is, of course, true that logic allows one the freedom to choose, or start from any premises or postulations or presuppositions one wants or prefers, but one has done so, one is no more free to accept or not accept the consequences following from them if one wants to remain rational. The logic of belief, the logic of faith and the logic of reason are not three different logics. They are one and the same, only the ends pursued or that which is assumed are different. Instrumental rationality is no different from the 'rationality' that is supposed to deal with 'ends' or even derive from them. The so-called 'ends', when reason deals with them, make no difference to the functioning of reason than does anything else. And, when they do, reason ceases to function as 'reason' in the ordinary and accepted sense of the term.

The dominance of reason, or rather being 'determined' by reason which is supposed to make man 'rational', leads one to the compulsions of accepting, and even acting upon, all that 'follows from' what was accepted, even if one does not want to do so. This is the paradox of rationality which has been sought to be mitigated by formulating restrictions on the rule of derivation, so that conclusions that are 'unacceptable' on any grounds whatsoever may not follow, without being forced to give up the premises which had appeared self-evident or as necessary to reason itself. Alternatively, one may opt to revise the premises but one generally does not do so as it usually results in far more inconveniences than if one adopts the earlier alternative.

Both in the realm of thought and action, reason confronts the absurdities which its unbridled authority leads towards, and though science and common sense have tried in diverse ways to mitigate the effect and impose restrictions of many kinds, the institutionalization of 'reason' has played a role opposed to that which is sought to be achieved by these restrictions.

The problem of the foundation of institutions and the principles on which they are based has not been much investigated, even though it is well known that human society lives and perpetuates itself through, and in, institutions. There is, of course, the distinction between those institutions which seem to have grown naturally and others which have been the result of deliberate; 'self-constitution' which is supposed to have brought them 'performatively' into being.

The differentiation of polity from society is perhaps the most obvious example of the latter and so also is that of law from custom at another level. The formation of cognitive disciplines or *Śāstras* provides yet another example, just as the emergence of the distinction between the *mārgi* and the *deśi* or the classical and the folk does in the context of the arts and becomes the foundation of the distinction between cultures and civilizations.

The institutionalization of reason in these diverse domains objectifies reason and gives a free 'reign' to 'rationality' to pursue itself to its logical extreme, the limits of which it itself does not know. At the level of pure thought embodied in 'philosophy', paradoxes and absurdities resulting from the necessary compulsions of logic result only in a

'puzzlement' for thought which it tries to deal with in some way or the other. But, when logic becomes 'objective' and determines both 'feeling' and 'action', the result is disastrous, as there seems no way to save oneself from it.

The compulsions of logic can only be matched by compulsions of 'force', the latter often in the service of the former, particularly when it gets institutionalized legitimacy as it does when it gets objectified in them. The 'madness' of embodied reason could perhaps be seen most vividly in the attempt to realize a rational utopia in the erstwhile Soviet Union, and its 'irrational' version in what has come to be called 'Nazi Germany'. The latter would hardly be considered to be an example of 'irrational rationality' by most persons, but it would be so only because they do not understand the nature of 'logical reason' which consists only in drawing conclusions from the premises that one accepts and not on the nature of the premises themselves. This has been obvious after the development of non-Euclidean Geometries, and the denial of 'self-evident axioms' in logic, and their replacement by what have come to be called 'postulates', drawing attention to the idea of 'arbitrariness' involved in their choice. The fact that many a time the 'choice' is governed by the conclusions we want to derive from them only reveals the spuriousness of the veneer of rationality, which the formal character of deductive format is supposed to hide.

Reason, thus, brings a new 'necessity' into being and superimposes this on the 'necessities' of nature in the bondage of which man's biological life is lived. The feeling that the former necessity is not 'necessity' at all, and that in the voluntary submission to it lies one's freedom, is the illusion foisted on man by philosophers down the ages. Hegel's perhaps is the clearest formulation, though he did not formulate it the way he should have. 'To be free' is to be determined by the Form of Reason and not as he puts it; 'Freedom is the consciousness of necessity'. Kant's formulation masks the issue as, for him, freedom consists in being determined by the form of the 'good will' which itself is defined in terms of 'universality', on the one hand, and 'intrinsicity', on the other. Both these characteristics derive from the 'rationality' of reason and not from its 'practicality', as Kant seems to think, or at least would have us believe.

Strangely, the contention that 'to be free *is* to be determined by reason' is said to be the same as 'being determined by truth' for, at the human level, 'truth' *is* what is known by reason and even determined by it. But reason itself can never determine what is 'true'. At best, it can play only a negative role by making us suspicious that what proclaims itself as true may not really be so. On the positive side, it can only suggest 'possibilities', but cannot determine or decide which is actually the case. Not only this; 'truth', as we have already said, is closely related to 'reality', and 'reality' is continuously being brought into being not only by action but also by 'knowledge', whether it be true or false, correct or incorrect.

The claim of reason to know 'reality', let alone determine what is its nature, is circumscribed on all sides, and yet it persists in its claim to do so in spite of all the evidence and the argument to the contrary. The history of thought in general and the history of philosophy in particular attest to this. The latter has tried to determine what is 'really real' on the basis of pure argument, forgetting that this is not the triumph of 'reason' but its madness. Megalomania need not always be a personality disorder; it can be an aberration of reason itself. But such a 'madness', when 'objectified' and 'institutionalized', does not appear as madness to anybody nor is *felt* to be such by anyone.

The 'madness', however, results not so much from 'reason' as from 'logic', which is supposed to be its essence. But the roots of logic perhaps lie elsewhere, just as the compulsive drive towards self-suicidal extremes are also found elsewhere. Who has not heard of the denial of the 'textuality' of the text or of the 'authorship' of the author? But realms still exist where theoretical argument may be said to hold sway. The real madness becomes palpably visible in art where there is a deliberate, self-conscious attempt to deny and destroy the very 'being' of that which was supposed to define it and make it what it purports to be. One may not be able to physically destroy a canvas, or language or that which constitutes music, but much of modern creations in art come as close to doing that as possible. The almost blank canvases of a painter publicly exhibited at the Guggenheim in New York and Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* may be said to be extreme examples of this. But one can find one's own examples which should not be difficult if

one looks around at what goes by the name of 'happenings' these days in the world of art. Perhaps, it has always been like that, for Henry James is supposed to have said in one of his novels, 'We work in the Dark—We do what we can—We give what we have'. 'Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art'.¹ The phrase 'logic of imagination' is not unknown to those who have thought an written. So also, perhaps, is the immanent logic that permeates the men of faith in all religions, or those who live in a world of passion and feeling, and are moved by it, something which cannot be even put in conceptual terms which the former, many a time, can be.

But the logic in all these fields, or in any others, is driven by two different roots which seem, at least *prima facie*, to be totally opposed to each other. One emanates from the transcendental value immanent in the realm and 'defining' it to be what it is, and which one vaguely apprehends and tries to embody in the work that one creates. This is perhaps what James was talking about. The other, on the other hand, springs from a desire to overcome or even destroy the limitations and constraints imposed by the material and conditions of 'creation' itself. The impulse to destroy, so obviously 'suicidal' in nature, arises perhaps from the desire for 'absolute' freedom which may take bizarre forms, as they have done in modern times. But the very idea of 'pure' or 'absolute' freedom is an absurdity, as without the idea of something to realize or actualize or embody, 'freedom' has no meaning.

Freedom, as everyone knows, is closely related to action, whether it be conceived as 'freedom from' or 'freedom to', even though it may not be so obviously visible in the former case as in that of the latter. There is supposed to be yet another sense, radically different from these two, which is conceived of as a state of being in which consciousness just 'is', having no relation either to knowledge or action, sufficient unto itself. This is what is generally meant by liberation or *mokṣa* or freedom in the Indian context. But even here, 'unrelatedness' does not mean the denial of the possibility of being related. It is not a disability or an empowerment, but rather, a deeper and richer state of 'being' where it feels or finds itself 'freed' from those 'bondages' in which its engagement with 'knowledge' or 'action' generally lands it. The two notions of 'freedom' explored and elaborated in western thought lead

to increasing 'unfreedom' and 'bondage', a fact that has not been seen by these thinkers. The third alternative, explored in the Indian tradition, by-passes the difficulty as it turns a blind eye to it and treats the problem in a tangential manner suggesting, perhaps, that the problem was no problem at all as it arose out of a misconstrual or wrong definition of the situation.

The 'blindness' in all the three alternatives emanates from a presupposition bequeathed by human reason to the self-consciousness of man that 'reality' is to be 'known' and that 'truth' consists in 'knowing' it as 'it is', and that only that action is 'rational' which follows from this presupposition. But as we have argued and tried to show, the presupposition is manifestly unwarranted as man himself is continuously bringing new 'reality' into being, both by his knowledge and action. For this to happen, it is irrelevant whether the so-called 'knowledge' is true or false.

The tragic irony of the situation, however, is that action based on the presupposition which regards itself as 'rational' has a self-justified self-righteousness about it which may lead to institutionalized collective madness whose results are there aplenty in history for everyone to see. The fact is generally not noticed, and most thinkers have failed to see, what we have pointed out earlier, that the 'logic' underlying reason that drives it relentlessly to self-suicidal absurdity is found elsewhere also. In this respect, at least, there seems little to choose between the madness of 'faith' and the madness of 'reason', as both share the same presupposition, and unless the presupposition itself is given up, there can be little hope of escaping from the madness that humanity has been involved in up till now.

NOTE AND REFERENCE

1. Quoted in Ben-Ami Scharfstein's *The Dilemma of Context*, New York University Press, 1989, p. XIV.

Reprint from

JOURNAL OF
INDIAN COUNCIL OF PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH

Volume XXI Number 2
April–June 2004

Editor DAYA KRISHNA
Associate Editor R.C. PRADHAN