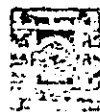


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ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION



THE HUMAN situation is structured in many directions, both vertical and horizontal. On each plane and in each direction, values can be realised and life made significant if one has the talent and the effort to will it so. Bounded by limits — biological, psychological and social — it still is essentially 'open' in its nature. Self-conscious in its very being, it is conscious of the present as well as the future and thus a constant prey to both hope and fear. Free imagination and ideation release man from his present sense-bound consciousness and present to him probable chains of causality challenging to a choice between alternative courses of action in the light of their probable consequences for the personality-system in particular and the social system in general.

Consciousness of causality creates the consciousness of time — time for which one has to wait so that events may take place and things materialise. The necessity of choice between alternatives creates the necessity for norms in terms of which one may usually exercise the choice. Further, as a large part of action is oriented to other persons the necessity for interpersonal norms, in terms of which the mutual interaction between persons may be stabilised, arises.

Action may be oriented to persons, things or even to one's own self. In each orientation values are involved. Without values, it falls to the level of animal action which, even when not completely dominated by instinct, hardly ever attains the conscious orientation to action in terms of values. Action, ungoverned by value-considerations, is felt to be insignificant at the human level. This, perhaps, is the reason why even

the purely biological activities of eating, defecating and copulating have been structured in terms of values in all societies. The structuring, of course, appears as 'taboos' to members of all alien cultures who, however, are blind to those that are prevalent within their own societies.

The attempt to achieve significance at all levels of human action provides the permanent necessity for value-standards in all fields of human life. Whether it be the field of cognition, feeling or interpersonal interrelationships, the value-standards are and can never be absent. However, the functional necessities of personal and social systems to survive provide the counter-pole to the value-standards creating the tension between them and defining, thus, the essential feature of human life. No value-standards can be completely realised, but without them there will be no straining towards *something beyond* which so obviously characterises the human situation. In any case, the necessity for choosing between alternatives with diverse consequences for the ego, the existence of other persons with whom one has to come to some sort of agreement concerning the reasonable expectations which the ego and the alter can entertain with respect to each other, and also the existence of goals which cannot be reached except in cooperation with others, create the urgency for value-standards without which neither goal-seeking nor social interaction would be possible at the human level.

Action may be oriented towards the future or be confined to the present. In the former case, it is primarily its instrumental nature, defined in terms of the probable chains of causality as conceived by the person or the society concerned, that is important. In the latter case, it is the intrinsic character of the action concerned that is significant for the actor. It is not that the action does not have consequences, but only that they are not regarded sufficiently significant to be taken into

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account by the actor. Every action, in fact, has an instrumental and an intrinsic aspect. The distinction between the two is one of dominance and emphasis. Still, the distinction is vital for every life as one's experience of significance is *directly* realised in the realm of action that is primarily intrinsic in character and only indirectly in that which is instrumental in nature.

Direct realisation of significance occurs at the immediate, intuitive level of experience. The indirect realisation at the level of instrumental action depends on its success in achieving the goal for which it is undertaken. This, in its turn, depends, to a certain extent, on the correctness of the causal knowledge held by the person concerned. But, only to a certain extent — for, the effectivity of action is determined more by the *de facto* appropriateness of the means adopted than on the consciously held ideas about them. The ideas about the causal interrelationships may obviously be wrong and yet the action undertaken may, in most cases, be adequate to bring about the desired goal.

The theoretic knowledge about the causal relationships is continuously changing and, thus, challenging us to a reorientation of our instrumental action. The causal chains get more and more complicated and the realisation of ends comes to depend more on other persons and groups and nations than on one's own effort and endeavour. The necessity of collective co-operation even for the achievement of individual ends in a mass society of present dimensions raises problems of individual dependence deriving from the inevitable hierarchical organisation of interlocking role-specialisations requiring integrating functions within some institutional set-up or other.

The problem is, of course, not new. Man has always been dependent on others for his existence and living and society has always been structured in terms of functional institutions which achieve their ends only through interlocking role-

specialisations of innumerable persons. But never before has the day-to-day existence of persons come to depend so much on the activities of those whom he will hardly ever come to know *directly*. The proper discharge by others of their specific role-functions is the *necessary pre-condition* for the achievement of an individual's *own* goals. Not only this, there are goals that are collective and which can be realised only by the joint effort of many people seeking the *same* goal.

Another aspect of action, besides the social dimension, that needs be emphasised, is its orientation to time on the one hand and to *postulated* causal relations on the other. The seeking for ends requires 'waiting' as well as the initiation of action which would presumably lead to the desired result. The time-barrier that stands in the way of the realisation of ends and the probabilistic nature of the postulated causal relations define the essential structure of instrumental action. The bondage of ends is the bondage of time. The bondage of time is the bondage of action. The attitudes to ends are reflected in the attitudes to time and the valuational significance of action to a person will be a function of his attitudes to both. The probabilistic and the postulated character of causal relations in the field of nature and their essential dependence on the relative fulfilment of their role-obligations by others in the field of society, gives to human action a contingent dimension which it can never escape.

The relation between motive and action, between action done and the ends achieved, is so tenuous, so indeterminate, so multiple in nature that the individual feels baffled before the complexity of it all. Bound by the horizons of birth and death, vaguely aware of the curving hemisphere beyond, set among a society without which he could neither have existed nor become what he is, in intimate relation with persons who have been the source of some of his greatest moments of

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significance, lured by the desire to know and the impulse to create, dissatisfied and disgusted at the mass of anxious, aching, straining desires that he finds himself he is, caught in the web of time and life and matter — his consciousness feels alien to to it all, the silent observer, the detached center to which nothing happens in the revolving whirl of the wheel of life.

The consciousness is confined to the present — the 'specious present'. Past and future are there too, but only as moments of theoretic awareness. One hardly feels the years one has lived or the years one has to live. Day to day, hour to hour, even minute to minute — that is how we live. It is only when we look back at our lives and try to understand it or somebody else tries to do it for us that we find the web of causal chains that we wove for ourselves. Life as subjectively lived and life as objectively understood are two entirely different things and the confusion between them is perhaps the greatest barrier to the leading of a 'significant' life.

The consciousness is not only confined to the present, but is inevitably one's own. The 'ego-centric predicament' is not a predicament but the inalienable condition of all consciousness. The realisation of even the greatest saint is *his own* realisation and, obviously, it could not be otherwise. The foundational structural limitations are thus set for consciousness in which and for which alone the problems of 'significance' or 'value' can arise.

Further, the consciousness seems formless in itself. It takes its hue and shape and colour and form from the object or image or idea to which it attends. Concentration is its unique capacity and whatever it concentrates upon becomes supremely real for it. The 'psychically real' is the only real that matters to consciousness, and 'significance' or 'value', it should be remembered, is realised only in terms of the

'psychically real'. The problem of 'meaning' is closely related to that of 'significance' and thus intimately concerned with what is 'psychically real'.

The point-centric, ego-centric and formless character of consciousness gives it a detachment from its own past, from other persons and from all objects in general. Equally it makes it a slave of every passing presence — an impulse, an idea, an image, a mood, an object — and turns it into a constantly changing kaleidoscope of momentary satisfactions and dissatisfactions. The detachment is there as a possibility that can be actualised any moment by a turning away from the world of objects to the transcendental, formless centrality of the self. Detachment is freedom. The freedom from bondage to the passing moment is given eternally to man in his capacity for self-consciousness which can be actualised any time.

Detachment is freedom. But detachment is alienation too. And the evidence of Existentialist writing and the 'outsider literature' seems to suggest that, at least, the Western man is not able to bear it well. It does not give him joy. It gives nausea. Not serenity, not calm but a schizophrenic split has been the result of the West's encounter with detachment. The fall into objectivity must really have been very great for such a result to have taken place. The East, particularly India, has had a long acquaintance with detachment with results that have always been described as quiet, calm, serene, joyous. Freedom has never been felt as a burden or a cross to be borne, but as liberation from the bondage into which one had somehow fallen.

Detachment has been felt as alienation and freedom a burden perhaps because the West did not know the secret of contemplation. The detachment was felt as the rootlessness of will which, after the transcendence, could rest neither in values nor in objectivity. Not governed by instinct, it rushed into crime

or self-destruction or clutched at any passing value and called it 'engagement'. The nobler souls turned to humanity, not to help it to lift itself out of the bondage into which it had fallen, but for a 100 per cent increase in the per capita consumption of goods and services which the 'free beings' themselves had found neither significant nor satisfying.

The 'withdrawal' seems to have been no withdrawal and the 'return' no return, for the fountains of creativity remain closed and the cry that has echoed through the globe has the ring not of joy but despair. There seems to have been a mistake somewhere; a wrong turning that leads not to the heights, but the byss. The withdrawal had either been into a will that is ever hungry and ever desirous or into a consciousness that feels alien and accidental and does not know what to do with itself. Not knowing what to will, it wills only sensation and finds it meaningless, for nothing is more meaningless than a bare sensation or a mass of sensations. When the withdrawal is into a consciousness that feels alien and accidental and does not know what to do with itself and cannot give up this feeling, this knowledge is condemned to the eternal feeling of the absurd unless it returns and drowns itself in drink, sex, suicide, crime or political activity.

The withdrawal does not give freedom nor does the return result in effectivity. The will is not purified; the consciousness grows neither still nor calm. The will is the movement towards objectivity; consciousness the return into subjectivity. An unoriented will is no will. It can end only in murder or suicide. Consciousness that is not rooted in subjectivity, feels precarious and is neither detached nor free.

The withdrawal into the will is, therefore, wrong, for active will is a movement towards ends and its ultimate end is only the widening and deepening of consciousness. The will, when it withdraws, withdraws only into the silent self and sleeps

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there, innocently like the female cobra which folds its hood and the two-forked tongue and coils itself into coils of sleep. Unless therefore, the withdrawal into will is undertaken to seek intensively the widening and deepening of consciousness, it would result in bondage rather than freedom. The return into the 'outsider-consciousness', on the other hand, should be a return into the consciousness — established-in-itself, self-sufficient and, therefore, calm and stable in its very nature. Otherwise, it would only be a vacuous, alienated consciousness rooted neither in itself nor in objectivity and hankering, therefore, to lose itself in violent sensation or activity.

The return could either be to a predominantly contemplative or to a predominantly active orientation towards objectivity. Contemplative enjoyment of an object always gives freedom, but ordinarily it cannot last long as anxious hopes and fears and impulses clamouring for their satisfaction break through the enchanted moment where time seemed to have stopped. Action can give freedom of many types, but it also can enmesh one in greater coils of bondage. There is the freedom that comes from the effective achievement of ends and there is the freedom that comes from the effective exercise of one's capacities. Play is the creation of the aesthetic moment in action and even the goal-oriented action becomes more significant for the actors as it approaches the play character. Whether playful or goal-oriented, action becomes meaningful only when rooted in rhythm or done in the context of rules or values. Though giving freedom of their own type, they may still result in bondage of a deeper and subtler sort. Success may corrupt the will and play become an escape from the problems that face one in the internal or the external world. The purification of the will in action is achieved through its commitment to values, and the foundational freedom in action is achieved by the basic detachment, achieved through the withdrawal into the transcendent self.

The transcendence is not a transcendence from values in the field of *action*. Even action oriented towards values cannot, on the other hand, give the basic and foundational freedom which can come only through detachment from all objectivity, including values. The detachment, however, must be rooted in the transcendental centrality and self-sufficiency of the self. Otherwise, it would be merely bored with itself and try to escape from it as soon as possible or, if it cannot do so, accept it as an inalienable *burden* of its destiny and try to feel superior about it to the common bourgeoisie immersed in objectivity.

The *good life* has usually been conceived in terms of obligations to others — so much so that Toynbee in his Gifford Lectures has singled out Mahayana Buddhism and Christianity just for this reason. But however much it be true that there are obligations to others, it is equally true that there are obligations to one's own self and to values that have little directly to do either with one's own self or with other people. The good life is a pursuit of all of these together and not of one at the expense of others. There can, of course, be conflicts between different obligations and it may be difficult to decide in any particular case as to the priority between them. However, the ultimate obligation is perhaps only to one's own self. But as man cannot live in 'ultimacies' always, and as the realisation of 'ultimacies' itself depends on the realisation of so many other things, and as the realisation of other values is, after all, the realisation of values, man may primarily and predominantly fulfil obligations other than those arising from one's own self.

The life that is to be made good, it should be remembered, is not an eternal life. Nor is it a life lived by a person who remains the same throughout his living. Nor does everyone who lives have the same capacities and needs or the same place in the social or family structure with its privileges and

obligations. Equally, it should not be forgotten that man, like all living beings, is always liable to accidents and that neither individually nor collectively can he ever achieve all the goals that he sets for himself. Whatever ideals he may choose, the functional imperatives of individual and social systems will make compromise inevitable. The scarcity of time, the conflicting claims of different values, the mutually instrumental relation between the individual and the society — all provide the perspective in which alone the problem of *good life* must be considered.

The biological rhythm of life — infancy, childhood, boyhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood, middle age, early old age, late old age and death — provides the setting in which the dialectical movement of 'withdrawal-and-return' on the plane of contemplation and action takes place. By nature, man cannot be much of a contemplative being till his adulthood, and as he nears old age he cannot but withdraw a little from the world. Till youth, it is primarily the period of acculturation and learning. After that, there is active contribution to the society's functioning by responsible role-undertaking in familial, occupational and ritual institutions. As one grows old the active participation gradually ceases till death overtakes and writes a finale to the life that once was.

At each of these stages, 'being good' is different and the good of one stage may not be the good of another. Youth may grow neurotic by not taking sufficient interest in objectivity while age may become so by being too much in the world. Contemplation is suspect in the present-day West. It tends to be equated with schizophrenia or neurosis. "Gazing at one's navel" epitomizes this attitude. Too much action is suspect in the East. It smacks of hysteria. Driven by desire or passion, it forges the chains of man's slavery to the external world. Action motivated by reformist zeal arouses respect, but not of

the highest kind. The man is respected for what he *does*, not for what he *is*. The highest respect, however, is always to the man who *is*, the man of God or the one who is rooted in his own self — the *sthitaprajna*.

The dichotomy between *East* and *West* is fashionable. The denial of the dichotomy is growing fashionable too. Stereotypes are dangerous ; but the denial of differences rooted in thousands of years of differing cultural traditions may be equally so. Neither the East nor the West is so homogenous as the stereotypes make us think. And in any case they are not so unchangeable as some seem to make out. The human situation has a basic structural theme on which a hundred cultures and a billion individualities play their own variations. The self-conscious man of to-day is the witness of all variations, and faces the challenge of life once more in a new and more complex setting. But if he is overwhelmed by the dazzling decor and the magical lighting and forgets that the drama that is going on is the old one, he would have lost his soul for a few pieces of silver, till life shocks him once more into the realisation that the world is not all and that he is not all in the world.