

The Realms of Between : Some Reflections
on Murty's *The Realm of Between*

Professor K. Satchidananda Murty's *The Realm of Between*¹ is an extraordinary book by any standard. One is dazzled by the wide range of reading of the author, not only in the field of philosophy but in that of literature also spanning all centuries and both the Eastern and the Western traditions. He also displays a deep insight and understanding of philosophical traditions both of India and the West, a combination which is rare indeed. Almost on every page one is startled by the aptness of the quotations and the diversity of sources from which they have been culled. The beautiful bouquet of quotations, which, in a sense, the book is, however, does not overshadow the deeply detached, critical intellect with respect to what others have said. His remarks on the usual criticism of the ontological argument and his discussion of Sartre and Dostoevsky are illuminating examples of these. Few philosophers in India seem so much at home in literature as Murty seems to be.

Yet, the dazzling brilliance of the book and its occasional penetrating, critical comments on what others have said, hide a deep yawning deficiency which, to my mind, emanates from the brilliance itself and is its darker shadow which normally would not be noticed by any reader who is bound to be enchanted by the surface magic of the book.

The structure of the book itself shows an uncritical acceptance of the usual moves made in the philosophy of religion which have been repeated so often that they have begun to be taken as axiomatic truths by everybody who thinks or writes on the subject. Murty opens his book by talking of suffering (what else did you

expect?) and then, as I am sure you will expect, there is salvation and then, religious action, that is, means adopted by man to escape suffering and to achieve salvation. The last, an irrelevant addition called "Transcendental Philosophy" which, though interesting to the philosophical mind, is obviously irrelevant to anyone who is seeking to escape suffering and trying to achieve salvation. The Buddha, with whose words Murty opens his work, had declared long ago the irrelevance of all epistemological and metaphysical discussion if one were really concerned with the ending of suffering. But Murty is a philosopher and though he plays the usual game of the philosopher of religion, he is not totally immune to the lure of conceptual puzzles and paradoxes and the attempts at their resolution or dissolution.

Surprisingly, the second person whom Murty quotes is Hegel and one is astounded to read that Hegel's view of philosophy was almost the same as that of the Buddha and that he viewed the task of philosophy in almost the same terms as the Sāṅkhya or some other schools of Indian philosophy are said to have formulated it. Yet, Murty does not feel any incongruence in the juxtaposition and does not attempt to point out, even in a footnote, as to how the quotation from Hegel squares with his conception of philosophy as explicated in either the *Phenomenology of Mind* or the way he looked at the whole history of philosophy, as culminating in his own philosophy.

What is more disturbing still is Murty's unquestioning acceptance of the equation of suffering with the transience of phenomena. Even a little reflection on his own experience would have revealed that transience *qua* transience involves neither suffering nor joy and that when one is suffering it brings hope that it too shall pass away and though when one is in a state of happiness or joy or bliss or pleasure one does have the illusion that it would be wonderful if it were to last forever yet, if it were actually to do so, there will not only be diminishing utility, but an increasing desire for something different. That was perhaps the reason why the creative *pratibhā* was characterised as "Śālini" by theoreticians of Sanskrit literature.

It is, of course, true that one wants it to change because it has begun to fall, or one has started to be bored by it, but the fact of the matter is that this has nothing to do with transience and that one *wants it to be transient* so that one may have something novel, something different from the experience that one has had.

There is the other objection made by Jayanta that pleasures themselves are infected by "suffering" and that they are like poison which seems to taste sweet and thus appears to be desirable. But this is to confuse between "pleasure" and "pleasure". Hence it is not transience which needs to be equated with suffering or permanence with joy and thus the very first move that the Great Buddha made is, to ordinary individuals, totally mistaken.

Furthermore, sufferings are not of one kind and there are "sufferings" and "sufferings". It is thus a slur on humanity to suggest that it always wants to avoid suffering and that its sole concern is with happiness. In fact, the problem of suffering is not so much the problem of transience as of the fact that much of the suffering of man is avoidable as it is either caused by his or her own self or by others who could easily have avoided causing it. The suffering that man has imposed on other human beings is well known to every student of history and the suffering that man has imposed willingly and deliberately on other living beings can easily be seen in the slaughter houses of the world.

To talk of suffering in terms of transience is therefore to misunderstand the human situation and though the move is made by all religious preachers, the other corollary of the contention that man seeks only happiness is equally mistaken. And, no one seeks what the Indian theoreticians have taken for granted, that is, the removal of the very *possibility* of ever suffering again in any form whatsoever.

If the issue of suffering has hardly received any critical analysis or evaluation from Murty, his discussion of salvation seems equally limited to traditional formulations. The concept of salvation has been so much tied to the usual analysis of the human situation in terms of suffering and the seeking of happiness that the generally accepted descriptions of the state of salvation appear only as infantile fantasies to any adult mind. One has either pictures of heaven which are generally painted from the male point of view and where one neither seeks knowledge nor good or even engages in the creation of beautiful objects, but perpetually enjoys all the objects of the senses and none of the mind or intellect or even of imagination. Those who do not think of salvation in terms of heavens, also cannot rid themselves of the habit of conceiving it as a state of perpetual bliss as if that were the only thing desirable in life.

However, the basic problem with *The Realm of Between* is perhaps the way the realm itself has been conceived. Murty has taken the line from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* which says "One sees both those conditions, namely being in this world and being in the other world." But there is not just one "other" world. The "other worlds" are too many and hence to conceive of them as being defined by the fact of their being just 'other' to one's own self seems to be mistaken. Similarly, the idea of "this world" gives it a false unity which it does not have. Firstly, "this world" itself is the "other" to the self as the Sāṃkhyaans saw very well. Secondly, it is largely an unknown world and consists of such radical diversities as the world of inanimate matter about the unimaginable constitution of which we are only discovering a little now, the world of living matter with its incredible variety, both of plant and animal life, and the world of human beings which is perhaps the most mysterious and tantalising of them all. The "worlds" that man creates are themselves so variegated and diverse that to classify them all and subsume them under the term "this world" is hardly to do justice to them. The usual recourse of understanding the realms of between is to conceive of them as the worlds of transcendence and immanence and to think of man as sharing in both the worlds and hence as standing between them, belonging to neither, and yet being attracted by both. But, if man is really conceived of in this way, then he transcends, in a very fundamental sense, both the world of transcendence and immanence, for both of them become "objects" to his consciousness. Moreover, the relations between transcendence and immanence can themselves be conceived of in many ways and in case whatever is regarded as transcendent is also considered to be immanent, though not exhausted by it, then that which is immanent will have to be regarded as having an element of transcendence within it.

The basic point is that the concepts of transcendence and immanence need further analysis, and that the idea of "between" needs to be elucidated further. Perhaps a more fruitful direction of thought might be to take the "realm of between" seriously and forget, at least for some time, the terms transcendence and immanence as it might open new directions for thought in this context. The reality of the "realm of between" is not merely between man and God, but also between man and nature and between man and man and, what perhaps is more surprising still, between man and

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his own creations. Perhaps the "realm of between" becomes most clearly visible in relations of friendship, love and affection. Even in the relationship between man and nature this quiet realm emerges into prominence. The encounter with great works of art and masterpieces of literary creations brings into being a world which, without their mediation, would not have been possible. Beyond these, there is the world of caring and concern, compassion and forgiveness, promise and responsibility which not only create a "realm of between" but bind people together and help them in creating a more meaningful world together.

In fact, the concept of "between" is usually interpreted in binary terms as if it could only be a relationship between two entities, but logically it is generally treated as a three-term relation where something is supposed to be between two other things. In the latter case, it is regarded as the relationship which one thing has simultaneously with two other things, for if there were only two things in the world, there could be no relationship of "between" in that world. In the usual technical jargon, it is a triadic relation, i.e., a relation requiring a minimum of at least three things in the world for it to obtain. But, in case this logical analysis of the relation of "between" is accepted, the self would have to be seen as a third entity between the worlds of the immanent and the transcendent. It is obvious that Murty would not want the term "between" to be understood in this sense. For him, perhaps, the relationship is "between" two aspects of the self itself. And, as the self is constituted essentially by the fact of self-consciousness, it can think of itself either as an object and be attracted by all that appears as an object and identify itself to some extent with them or see itself as detached from all objectivity and conceive of itself in terms of total and absolute de-identification with any object whatsoever. This, of course, is the classical Sāṃkhya position but the relation of "between" in this sense would itself be illusory as both within the Sāṃkhyan and the Advaitic perspectives the relation of "between" can only arise because of a primeval ignorance or *avidyā*, even though it may be conceived in radically different ways in the two systems. On the other hand, if the relationship of "between" around which Murty has woven the whole fabric of his thought is to be taken as real, then he would have to opt for a view of ontology which will grant reality to at least three entities, however differently they may be conceived.

However, the point that I would like to emphasize is not the ontological issue which also has some interest in this connection. The important thing, to my mind, is that the relationship of "between" need not obtain only between three entities but that it may occur between a larger number of entities and thus bring into being a far more complex and multiple world than the relationship would give rise to if conceived in a minimal manner only. A society or a community can only be conceived as the creative result of a plurality of "betweens" and the conflict and the tensions within it will be because of the conflicting nature of these relationships between its different constituent units. The trouble with the model of the "between relation," as usually formulated in the spiritual literature of the world, including India, seems to be that it conceives of the relation only between man and God rather than between God and an indefinite plurality of men and women or between all human beings or even the whole world of living beings which constitutes the Realm in which the relationship of "between" may arise.

There is an even deeper problem with regard to the relationship of "between" which Murty has not even touched and yet which seems crucial to any discussion of this relationship in order that it may be philosophically significant. There seems to be a radical asymmetry between the relationship of "between" obtaining amongst objects that occupy space and those that are temporally related. The temporal relationship cannot but be conceived in terms of past, present and future where not only the relationship of the present to the past is continuously changing but also there seems to be an essential asymmetry between its relationship with the past on the one hand and the future on the other. The past is in a fundamental sense irrevocable. One may develop different attitudes to it but one cannot do anything about it. On the other hand, the future is not only uncertain but at least seemingly indeterminate in the sense that it can be affected by one's actions and hence invites one to act in one way rather than another, in case one wants it to be of a certain kind. The whole notion of action, at least at the human plane, cannot be understood without this essential and irrevocable asymmetry between the past and the future. Moreover, as most entities we know of are located both in space and time, they share this dual characteristic of the relationship of "between" which itself raises problems of a different kind. In other words, man is not merely between the world of immanence and

that of transcendence but also between the world of space and the world of time.

Time in fact introduces the notion of transcendence in the human situation in a sense which is radically different from the one which is introduced by the notion of timelessness or eternity in the sense of atemporality. It is time that provides the foundation for the infinity of all the ideal pursuits of man and thus provides a meaningfulness to his life in time. On the other hand, through the unfolding of that which was hidden and implicit in all seemingly completed entities encountered in empirical reality, it reveals the transcendence immanent in all phenomena. The usual attempt to see transcendence only in terms of atemporality and eternity is to do injustice not only to the human situation which, as far as we know, essentially exists in time, but also to all those ideal pursuits in which one engages and which make one distinctively human and which can never be completed in any finite amount of time, however, large it may be. Murty forgets, as do many others, that if transience, temporality and cessation produce a feeling of terror and meaninglessness in many, so may a state where there is immortality implying no change whatsoever. Even the Lord himself is supposed to have been "tired" of his "lonely" state and is supposed to have said, "I am one, let me be many" (*Ekoham, bahum syām*).

Murty's confinement of religious action to sacrifice and worship or *yajña* and *pūjā* alone is, even in the traditional framework, too limited and somewhat misleading as it seems to suggest that these are the only two strategies that man has adopted to cope with the "realm of between" and to try to get beyond it, if possible. Not only the whole world of meditative practices cannot be reduced either to *yajña* or to *pūjā* except by some forced interpretations, but even the realm of *dharma* which involves action primarily of a moral kind leading to purification of consciousness, cannot be subsumed under them. Thus even within the traditional framework of thought on the subject, Murty does not seem to have paid attention to all the elements within it or the tensions and the dilemmas in the thought relating to them as would have been evident in case he had discussed the relation between *dharma* and *mokṣa* in their traditional formulation or that between *upāsana* and *karma* within the Advaitic tradition.

Yet, in spite of these deficiencies, the work is a highly forceful and original presentation within the limits set by the traditional

approach to the philosophy of religion. Normally, one does not, or ought not, quibble about what an author has not done or even not attempted to do. But when the work is from the pen of such a great scholar and keen philosophical mind as that of Murty, one perhaps has to articulate one's expectations in the hope that in case the author returns to the subject, he may take them into account and fulfil them in the light of his own vision of the realm and the understanding of the subject.

NOTE AND REFERENCE

1. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1973.

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