

TOWARDS A THEORY OF PERSON*

While science aims mainly at prediction and control of phenomena by studying correlations of, or causal relations among, relevant variables, philosophy seeks to comprehend complexes of meanings interesting by virtue of their qualitative peculiarities. These meaning complexes have no essential reference to observable phenomena, they generally achieve ontological being through their expression or embodiment in symbols. Examples of such complexes are : arguments and theories; statements and interrelations of problems; works of art; human actions, attitudes and beliefs insofar as these exhibit qualitative--e. g. moral, aesthetic or logical--characteristics; etc. In fact philosophy does not, inquire into the origin of this or that observable event or state of affairs; its primary and ultimate concern is the comprehension of the quality or degree of excellence of a complex of meanings produced by man. Thus conceived philosophy would appear to be the self-awareness or critical awareness of the activities whereby civilised human agents produce value--bearing forms of consciousness. The products of these activities equally interest the philosopher. It may be underlined here that both the activities and products in question actualize themselves in public symbols.

The qualitative aspect of an activity or its product can have meaning only as associated with one or other conscious being i.e., man. Civilised man takes immense pains to present or produce good arguments, theories, works of art, etc. and to accomplish noble and virtuous deeds because he believes or feels that these

* Paper presented at a colloquium held under joint auspices of Delhi University and International Society for Metaphysics in November, 1982.

contribute to the excellence of his own person; he also believes that, directly or indirectly, they also benefit those others who care to contemplate and / or share the values expressed or produced by aforesaid activities of his. If these and kindred activities may properly be characterized as spiritual or cultural then their implicit aim may be fitly described as being the production of the cultured personality or person. It is in virtue of being the end product of man's pursuit of values that the person constitutes himself into an object of philosophic inquiry.

We may now attempt a definition of person. A person is a being given to conscious pursuit of values. It may be objected that this definition is a persuasive or prescriptive one. The reply is : any definition in any field concerned with values, e. g. ethics, aesthetics or a legal system, is likely to appear to be prescriptive, though not necessarily persuasive. However, a prescriptive definition is neither arbitrary nor cognitively pointless in the sense of being devoid of explanatory power or function. A prescriptive definition in a normative discipline is, in fact, comparable to, and a counterpart of, an empirical hypothesis in a positive science, its special aim being the structuring or systematisation of a number of the evaluative statements relating to the field prevalent in a society or culture or in an age represented by the enlightened section of mankind. Another peculiarity of a definition of this type may be noted; the definition contains indirect suggestions for the formulation of qualitative-evaluating criteria, which may be looked upon as corresponding to scales for quantitative measurement in the sciences. Such a definition may also be viewed as a proposal. Thus the Verification Principle of the logical positivists, which seeks to define meaningful discourse in a prescriptive spirit, may be taken to be a proposal. A philosophical system is mostly constituted by such definitions or proposals connected by logical relations or relations of other types of relevance.

The conscious pursuit of values characteristic of a person involves the capacity to use language that enable him to communicate with his fellow-beings for the purpose of cooperation. Skills needed for higher forms of activity are also acquired through language, oral or written, used by instructors. The need for instruction and cooperation on the one hand and that for receiving and extending appreciation or comment on the other makes the person a social being. According to this description of person a perfect being that has no need either to pursue any value or to associate with other beings does not deserve to be called a person. Animals, infants and madmen, no less than idiots and morons, are, in terms of our definition, excluded from the class of persons.

As a conscious member of a social group the person has to have the sense of responsibility, which implies his being a moral agent. As we have shown elsewhere moral behaviour has necessary reference to the proper or just distribution of utilities; such distribution involves consideration of rights and deserts on one side and obligations and duties on the other side. An irresponsible and immoral person is still a person, but he is an inferior person. His inferiority consists, in being self-centred or selfish. All conscious pursuit of values depends on creative manipulation either of objects and situations or of ideas and symbols. The moral man aims at achieving his ends without injuring the interests and claims of others: the immoral and narrowly selfish man, on the contrary, being deficient in creative intelligence and ability, finds it difficult to succeed in his enterprise except at the cost of others. Here it may be noted that even an intelligent person with honourable intentions may find it difficult to achieve success under an unjust social order or a badly managed state.

We call a man virtuous if he is more than just or moral in his dealings with and general attitude towards others. Not only is he not selfish, he is inclined to be positively helpful to others even if it costs him time, energy, money or comfort. Now a person may

I. P. Q.-7

practise benevolent virtues either because he has resources of intelligence and energy in excess of his own needs; or because he is indifferent to a degree to merely utilitarian goods and comforts. Both types of virtuous persons should also have the attitude of loving solicitude for the wellbeing of others. The reward of such virtuous life is the affection, admiration and thankful reverence it provokes in the tribe of the beneficiaries. The culmination of the first type of virtue is seen in the life of the political reformer and revolutionary, or the heroic saviour; that of the other type in the life of the detached and compassionate saint, a Ramkrishna or a Buddha. In our own times, Gandhi was a supreme example of the saviour who combined the ardour of the heroic revolutionary with the detachment and compassion of the saint.

While the moral order, or the order of justice, is a necessary condition of the survival of man as a civilized citizen inhabiting the zone of utilities, the capacity to transcend and rise above that zone in the creative quest of truth, beauty and contemplative serenity constitutes his peculiar glory as a spiritual being. The goods and values that man seeks may be grouped under two heads, the competitive or exclusive and the non-competitive or shareable. Living beings including animals and men are constantly engaged in the struggle to acquire means of subsistence; man also seeks innumerable kinds of other utilities and commodities such as money, power and influence that, directly or indirectly, support his quest of utilities. In a society that glorifies wealth and power most people use their creative energies for the attainment of these. A minority of them, however, driven by their higher spiritual nature, undergo the arduous but pleasurable discipline involved in the quest and creation of truth and beauty. It happens though that the enjoyment of the works of art and thought, and not only their creation, requires disciplined training or preparation and a measure of detachment from purely utilitarian preoccupations.

It is a noteworthy fact that the scientists whose discoveries have made possible our technological advances leading to the

creation of the modern industrial societies, and the socio-political thinkers and ideologists who have defined and inspired the ideals and values for our welfare states, democratic and socialistic, were men and women devoted to disinterested quest and advocacy of truth and justice other than to the pursuit of material comforts and luxuries. It is spiritually less heroic, ordinary spirits that hanker after competitive material goods and values at the cost of developing their potentialities for the enjoyment of higher spiritual, universally shareable commodities or values.

The distinctive character of man is his capacity to use language and symbolism. This capacity also ensures and enhances his freedom for creative action. We cannot change or interfere with the nature of physical objects and forces; however, we can manipulate them in ways subservient to our needs and purposes which are often formulated with the aid of symbols. It is interesting to note in this connection that the scientist is able to understand or acquire workable knowledge of natural phenomena and subsequently to manipulate them by representing their modes of operation in mathematical symbols, and later on, by issuing oral, practical instructions in one or other language. Here it may be remarked that all creative activity is directed towards the production of values (or disvalues) of one or other sort. Thus the creative activity of man in every field has a qualitative side, relative to the success achieved in terms of a chosen end or purpose. The qualitative distinctions in the several spheres of non-utilitarian values, e. g. cognitive, moral and aesthetic values, have ever claimed attention and reflection by philosophic thinkers. This may serve to define the role of philosophy in man's pursuit of non-utilitarian values.

To sum up: the person is a being given to conscious, creative pursuit of values. The peculiar worth of a person or his personality may be determined by the sorts of values that he seeks and is able to realize through creative action. The pursuit of values tends to

make a man social as the validation of his activities involves sharing and approval by like-minded fellow-beings. It also leads to the creation of the bonds of fellowship and love, for man as creative stands in need not only of encouragement and cooperation but also of appreciation in the form of shared attitudes, and of loving care and solicitude for sustaining his creative labours. All these needs tend to make persons social in the deeper sense of that term--though not necessarily sociable in gay society. Having secured the means of subsistence even the men who cares only for material goods or utilitarian values learns to aspire for social recognition, prestige and the like. The sentiments of resentment, anger and jealousy tend no less to tie us to society than do those of friendship and love. While the practice of morality and the pursuit of virtue have reference to social living at the plane of everyday needs and utilities, the quest of beauty and truth tends to induct us into the society of the select few who are, or have been in the remembered past, able to move above and beyond the needs of our creaturely existence. Even the religious saint who rejects the goods and honours the world can offer him and aspires to dwell in the realm of transcendence, seeks the company of kindred souls, likewise, the prophet, a restless and active type of saintly teacher, desires and hopes to have adherents and missionaries to follow and propagate his message or gospel. The conclusion is that a person's being and life have essential reference to a society of fellow beings or kindred spirits.

This reference may be viewed as a necessary condition or as a form of dependence. The progress towards achieving excellence as person is, for this reason, also indirectly, a progress towards liberation from egoistic impulses and egotism, and hence toward that superior kind of happiness which has been described as the state of blessedness or 'jivamukti' in religious literature. In a different idiom it may be asserted that a man attains higher forms of happiness by living for causes greater than and transcending his utilitarian concerns.