INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND HUMAN DIGNITY

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In this paper we will explore the possibility of realizing harmonious interpersonal relationships. Twentieth century philosophy has witnessed a growing interest in the problem of human relationships. Importance attached to behavioral sciences in the curriculum of western educational institutions is far greater than that attached to theology. Although preoccupation with the problem of human relationship is an important characteristic of contemporary philosophy, many thinkers had drawn attention to it long before the present century. Both Plato and Aristotle had emphasized the fact that man is basically a social animal, a communal being. Humanist philosophers of the nineteenth century, too, had laid emphasis on the same truth. But the earlier approach and the contemporary approach differ in an important respect. Not only were the earlier philosophers less interested in man than in nature, they hardly saw any *problem*, so far as human relationships are concerned. They had greater faith in the harmony of interpersonal relationships. Many contemporary thinkers, on the other hand, do not have faith in the possibility of realizing harmounious interpersonal relationships. However, there are some contemporary thinkers, who have great faith in harmonious human relationships. To the former group belong thinkers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre, while the latter group has Buber, Jaspers and G. H. Mead among others.

Let us first consider the views of the former group of thinkers. That interpersonal relationships of our everyday life are not authentic and harmonious is a point on which nearly all existentialists agree. Our everyday being-with-others, they believe, does not truly involve our inner selves,

despite the fact that we are in continuous interaction with one another. Although we continue to live and act together, the true spirit of community life is said to be missing. Kierkegaard believes that other human beings can act as obstacles if one tries to develop a relation with God or tries to realize his own individual being. He believes that everyone should be cautious of having interaction with others and that basically conversation should take place only with God and oneself. Thus he feels that to have an authentic relation with God, one must become a 'Single One'. Indeed this conviction was reflected in his own life. It is well known that he was engaged to a lady called Regina Olsen but he broke off the engagement because he felt that God had claim on him as an extraordinary individual, and that this engagement conflicted with that claim. Kierkegaard had very little respect for the herd sentiment or the 'crowd' or the 'public'. He hardly got any sympathy from them in his own life and career. As an individual, Kierkegaard was strongly opposed to collectivism and institutionalism, the stifling effect of which he felt in his own life. It appears then, that to Kierkegaard, there can be no question of human dignity, so far as interpersonal relationships are concerned. One can realize one's true dignity only when one is a solitary individual. He summons the individual to come out from the crowd and take responsibility for his own being.

Similar observations have been made by another existentialist thinker, viz. Nietzsche, who uses the term 'herd' to denote the interactions between different human beings. Nietzsch, too, believes that the life of the individual is controlled by a value- system devised by the herd, and that the herd has replaced the prerogatives of God. So to Nietzsche also there can be no question of human dignity so long as an individual is merely a part of the crowd and thus fails to realize his true individual being.

What Nietzsche describes as 'herd', Heidegger describes as 'they' (*das man*)[1]. The 'they' is an anonymous power that controls the lives of individuals-it prevents the individual from makng his own decisions and thus frees him from the burden of responsibility. Hence the common tendency to evade responsibility by taking refuge in the anonymous 'they'. Although Heidegger's view is similar to the views of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in this regard, it would be wrong to conclude that Heidegger has no faith in the existence of human dignity in interpersonal relationships.

Heidegger draws an important distinction between the 'they-self', i.e. the self of our everyday life, and the 'authentic self' that we must strive to become. He believes that an individual has daily interaction with other individuals, but these interactions deprive him of his true selfhood. This, however, does not imply that Heidegger considered all interpersonal relationships to be devoid of human dignity. The term used by Heidegger to describe the relation between one individual and another is *Füsorge* which has been translated in English as 'solicitude'. Solicitude may manifest itself in two opposite ways. One is the dominating mode, which we have noted above to be widely prevalent in our everyday interactions with other human beings. Here the other is used as an instrument for the attainment of our own well-being. This mode of solicitude fails to give due recognition to human dignity. The other mode is one where we respect the other as a person and treat him as an end in himself. It is in this mode of interpersonal relationship that human dignity gets its due recognition.

Both Kierkegaard and Sartre seem to offer the same reason when they consider other people to be obstacles, although they do so from two different points of view[2]. To Kierkegaard, the other appears as an obstacle when we try to relate ourselves to God. Sartre, on the other hand, is an atheist to whom God is only a name standing for a perfection, a goal that everyone of us tries to attain. As a finite being, every man wants to be God. But this desire meets with frustration because the world is full of many finite beings. Hence the other appears as an obstacle to the fulfilment of existence. Our body plays an important role in interpersonal relationships. Our interaction with others is possible only through our having a body. My body can become an object for the other just as much as his body can become an object for me. If another person looks at me, I become aware not only of his existence as the other, but also of my own existence, as the object of his look or gaze. This is the common experience of shame or shyness.

Sartre thus believes that it is the look of the other which constitutes my self. My being for myself is constituted by my being-for-others. It is the existence of the other which is my 'original fall'. It is when the other looks at me that I feel guilty, feel alienated from myself. I also feel guilty when I, in turn, look at the other, when the other is constituted as an object

for me and the other has to accept it. That Sartre had very little faith in the possibility of harmonious interpersonal relationships or of the role of dignity in human interactions becomes explicit when he speaks of the 'original sin' or of the 'original theme of guilt' from which there can be no escape. He believes that the fact that I exist in a world where there are others is what constitutes the original sin.

Sartre considers interpersonal relationships to be inherently frustrating. We will understand this point better if we discuss the concept of inauthenticity that Sartre refers to in this context. The duality of my being-for-myself and my being-for-others, Sartre believes, can give rise to inauthenticity in two different ways. The first kind has its extreme manifestation in masochism. A masochist is one who desires to be an object for the other, to be manipulated and humiliated in order to experience the weight and solidity of being-in-itself which our freedom prevents us from experiencing. A masochist enjoys being seen as an object, because when he exists in the presence of a look, he feels that he is becoming more compact and concentrated. To him this is a relief that he welcomes, because he does not have to bear the responsibility of his 'disintegrating self' any longer. The second kind of inauthenticity finds expression in sadistic tendencies of man. A sadist enjoys looking at others, manipulating and humiliating them. He tries to reduce them to objects, treats them as mere instruments and as such robs them of their freedom. It may be noted that this form of inauthenticity has been recognized by all existentialists, but Sartre is the only one to recognize that as a kind of inauthenticity, sadism has an opposite pole, viz. mascochism and that masochistic tendencies are equally common and undesirable[3].

Interpersonal relationships, Sartre observes, give rise to frustrations and unending ambiguities. Persons interacting with one another often oscillate between love and hate. They want both to possess and be possessed by the other. If I do not want to become an object in the eyes of the other, that is to say, if I want to be treated as a person, I will try to possess the other through love. But this can happen only when the other person too loves me, and the other can love me only if I allow myself to become an object of the other's love. Thus the relationship becomes endlessly ambiguous.

Some commentators of Sartre believe that Sartre does not deny the possibility of respecting dignity in human relationships. Olsen[4], for example has argued that Sartre explicitly says in *Being and Nothingness* that he does believe that interpersonal relationships can be authentic. Sartre is said to have reaffirmed this in the introduction to a book on his philosophy by Francis Jeanson. To Sartre, authenticity in the context of human relationship does not imply an absence of conflict. Olsen observes that Sartre considers conflict to be not only an essential element in human relationship, but to be also the very foundation on which human relationships can develop.

Olsen's observations seem to suggest that one must be cautious of making any sweeping statement about Sartre in this context. Any serious view of human relationships must take note of the fact that there is a possibility of conflict whenever human beings interact with one another. The real challenge that lies before us is how to minimize that possibility and make room for harmony as much as possible.

We now proceed to consider the views of those philosophers who have great faith in harmounious human interaction. Let us see why some thinkers consider respect for human dignity to be essential for any interpersonal relationship. To Buber, the fundamental fact of human existence is neither the 'single one' nor the social aggregate, but man with man. Human existence is basically a dialogue, and it is by relating to another self that man becomes a whole self. Whoever truly experiences the world, experiences it as a duality, and to overcome this duality by action is the real problem that man has to face. Buber believes that life is essentially a complex of interpersonal relationships, and that man can build up personal relationship with different things be it nature, other human beings or God. Love, which is the basic fact of life, means directing one's life towards the being and needs of the other. These two poles of interpersonal relationship, according to Buber, are *I* and *Thou*. A relationship can be perfect only when it is mutual. *Thou* must affect *I*, as *I* must affect *Thou*[5]. Human experience has two dimensions: one is *personal response* made towards our fellow beings and the other is manipulative *adjustments* made towards different things that we confront. Buber calls the former an *I - Thou*

relationship and the latter an *I - It* relationship. In the latter there is greater emphasis on possessing and using something, and the *I* is separated from the *It* in the subject object antithesis. The *I-It* mentality violates human dignity when it applies to man's interactions with other human beings. We do not respect human dignity when we treat man as things, as instruments for furthering our own ends. A man sees a prostitute as a mere sex object, who can be used and discarded as situations arise, but he may see his wife as the beloved person, playing a unique role in his life. Dealing with people is different from having relation with them, and it is this *relation between person* that characterizes the *I - Thou* would.

Buber, however, points out that the Thou is bound to become an *It*, a thing for us at one time or another, that man cannot continue to exist in the *I-Thou* relationship, and that he has to leave it again and again. As we have already said, Buber considers this to be the basic problem of man. This does not, however, mean that Buber considers the world of *I-It* to be an evil in itself. He does not regard the world of *Thou* and the world of *It* to be totally incompatible. But he firmly believes that it is-not worthy of man to live in the world of *It* alone, that it is beneath one's dignity to let oneself remain confined within the walls of the *I - It* world. "Without *It* man cannot live, but he who lives with *It* alone, is not a man".[6] It is only when the *I* meets the *Thou*, that life becomes truly meaningful. Yet man has a tendency to treat other men as *It*, and it is then that evil results. Many examples of this situation can be given and human dignity, Buber believes, is violated in all such cases. A scientist may treat human beings as things when he studies them for research and investigation, a politician or a propagandist may treat human beings as means for furthering his own ends, an employer may treat human beings as mere commodities or pawns. In all these cases, human beings are not treated as existing in their own right.

Buber is right so far as politicians, propagandists or ruthless employers are concerned, but the case of the scientist is somewhat different. It is undoubtedly true that when a psychologist studies an individual, he studies him or her as an object of research. An individual *qua* individual is unique, and the scientist fails to do justice to this uniqueness. But what distinguishes the case of the scientist from that of the politician or the propagandist is

that the scientist's selection of the different human subjects of his experiment is based on a prior consent of the subjects themselves, whereas no such prior consent is involved in the other cases. It may be noted, however, that the question of taking prior consent of the human subjects does not arise in some cases. Mentally unsound people, extremely senile people and very young children are some examples.

The role of dignity in interpersonal relationships has also been studied by Gabriel Marcel. 'Availability' and 'fidelity' are the two concepts that he uses in this context. Availability stands for man's capacity to place himself at the disposal of others. It is a deplorable fact that human beings do not make themselves available to one another. Man's existence, Marcel believes, is something which he has, and it is because he is anxious to maintain his own existence, that he makes himself unavailable to others. Human dignity is violated when men lead 'closed' lives and do not make themselves available to others. Man's dignity lies in making himself 'open' to others.

Marcel further believes that it is availability that enables a person to be *present* to another. Here 'presence' stands for something more than mere physical proximity. To be 'present' to another means coming out of oneself or transcending oneself towards the other. Here we are tempted to draw a parallel between Marcel and Ravindranath Tagore. Tagore, too, feels that true humanity lies in making oneself available to others. In one of his poems[7] he asks man to come out of himself and stand outside. This coming out of oneself, he feels, would evoke response from the world at large.

How precisely do we transcend ourselves and make ourselves 'open' to others? Marcel thinks that one of the most typical ways of doing this is by making pledges, promises or engagements. These are all basically human activities and the structure of our social life rests on man's capacity to make commitments and keep them. Anyone who fails to keep commitments also fails to act with dignity. This is what Marcel calls 'fidelity'. A life of dignity is thus a life of fidelity.

Belief in harmonious interpersonal relationships can also be found in the philosophy of G. H. Mead, though Mead was not an existentialist like

Buber or Marcel. Mead[8] believes that man is basically a 'social self'. A human being truly develops as a person only through interpersonal communication. The feeling of selfhood or self-identity develops only when man stands over against another. The more an individual participates in his group, the more is he able to take on the attitudes of his society, and the more highly conscious of himself does he become. An individual is born into a world of other persons, into a group which has culture. Mead has great faith in the possibility of harmonizing individual interest and social welfare. Conflict among different human beings, he believes, is due not to lack of goodness or good will on the part of man, but to ignorance or immaturity. Mead's confidence in man's intelligence and good will is understandable. He believes that the human self is basically social and has taken the values of the social process. Thus for Mead, the problem of human dignity being violated in human interactions hardly arises.

Critics have accused Mead of holding an unduly optimistic view of human nature, and we think that to a certain extent their criticism is valid. Mead, indeed, seems to be not fully aware of the strife and conflict, failures and frustrations that are quite common in human interactions. As we have pointed out earlier, any serious view of human relationship will have to take into account that there is always a possibility of conflict and disharmony. It is true that human life is not and cannot be solitary, that it is always lived in a community. However autonomous an individual is, he cannot see himself as detached from all social particularity, because the very idea of seeing oneself as detached from all social particularity can develop only in one particular setting or another. An individual cannot speak of himself as distinct from other individuals unless he has grown up in a social environment, unless he is a particular 'individual' with a particular history. His growing up from childhood to maturity is a slow and gradual process. The family in which he grows up, the groups outside the family in which he participates-all contribute to shape and fashion in various ways his beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. The language in which he expresses himself, the moral concepts that he uses, the moral judgments that he makes are all capable of being developed in a social environment alone. An individual cannot be an autonomous moral agent unless he is an empirical agent, with certain social particularity as his past. We believe that both Buber and Mead deserve

merit for drawing our attention to this truth which we are apt to forget, whenever we lay excessive emphasis on individual autonomy. But to bring home this truth does not mean that the path of human interaction will always be smooth and free from strife and conflict. We have seen that both Buber and Sartre believe conflict to be inevitable, and indeed, therein lies our challenge : how to make room for human dignity in the midst of conflict and disharmony. We are inclined to think that a recognition of the fact that we are all biologically distinct individuals, with diferent capacities, tendencies and inclinations, along with a sincere faith in self-respect and respect for others would go a long way in minimizing the friction that characterizes our interactions. Indeed this is basically what Plato long ago described as minding one's own business, while he was explaining the nature of justice in the *Republic*. A just man, Plato says, is one who is at peace with himself. We feel that a lot of human conflict would be minimized if we try to be at peace with ourselves, because it is only then that we can let others be in peace.

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time, trans.* J. Macquarrie & E. S. Robinson (New York & London, 1962), p 163 ff.

2. J. Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973), p 120

3. Robert J. Olsen, *An Introduction to Existentialism* (Dover Publication Inc. New York.) 1962), p 180.

4. *Ibid*

5. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R. Gregor Smith (Edinburgh, 1937), p 28.

6. *Ibid., p 34*

7. Tagore, Ravindra-*Rachanavali*, Vol. 4, Centenary edition (Govt. of West Bengal, 1961), p 113.

8. G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1934).

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