

IN SEARCH OF PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL LIFE*

I have been asked to write on "Philosophical Concepts in Contemporary Social Life". The topic is rather vaguely indetermined. However the practice of supplying 'vague' and 'indeterminate' subject to a philosopher for the exercise of his talent is neither new nor unexpected. If the function of philosophy is to make our ideas (thoughts, language) clear then it would be quite wrong to provide clean water to a philosopher; he should be provided only with muddy water. (Fishes do not survive in clean water). Let the philosopher do the sanitary job; it is what philosophy teaches him to do. Therefore, one need not be apologetic about one's failure to provide a clean topic. But one's should know exactly what I am going to do. How to begin? From where to begin? Which corner to sweep, and, what kind of broom to use? The question 'how to end' would arise only if one succeeds in making a beginning. My power to write and my ability to express ideas has been put to test. Let me appear for the test.

The subject, philosophical concepts in contemporary social life, brings before me the picture of a drowning man. I have seen his head, and, I have seen his legs, and, I have seen his arms. Though I have seen only the bits of him at different times, they are sufficient for my belief that what I have before me is a drowning man, and not simply the drowning bits. Before me is occurring the death of a man, and not simply the death of a head or a leg or an arm. The expression 'philosophical concepts' stands for the head of the topic, 'in' stands for its arms and 'contemporary social life' for its legs. One can reverse the order if it pleases him. One may not follow the pattern I have evolved. One is quite free to treat contemporary social life as the head of the topic and philosophical concepts as one or both the legs. The pattern can be changed, for 'drowning men' are unlike drowning topics. The topics of seminars may not be found drowning in the same fashion as men are found drowning. We are making use of an analogy, and no analogy is perfect. (Basic teaching in philosophy). It is an

ideal situation if one is free from analogy. It is my misfortune that I happen to be a man and not a topic. Had I been a topic, i. e., Had I been free from analogy, I would have certainly succeeded in getting the whole sense, the whole picture, of the topic of our seminar (of any topic under any seminar). All topics have something in common as all men have something in common. (An appeal to Plato).

Am I really as helpless as I appear to myself? Cannot I understand the sense of such a trifling entity as a topic? It seems to me that my worries and anxieties are unnecessary. (Invitation to second thoughts). These worries and anxieties are the outcome of getting myself muddled in the process of cleaning the furniture of my mind. In order to know the nature of a hairpin or a teacup I am certainly not required to be (become) a hairpin or a teacup. There is no doubt that some poets (I don't remember their names at the moment) have considered themselves as beings of an inferior quality than hairpins and teacups. Had they been hairpins and teacups rather than men with flesh and blood, they would have possibly reached those hairs and lips that they desired to reach. But the expression of these wishes and desires presupposes that it is possible for us to know what a hairpin or a teacup is without ourselves becoming a hairpin or a teacup. So also, in order to know the sense of a topic I am not required to be a topic.

Nature has planted (evolved) man in this universe to know its own secrets, (Hegelian thought). Therefore, he has been given powers not only to know the creatures of his own kind, but also those items of the universe which are not of his own kind. And the philosopher (a special product of nature) has taken on himself the responsibility of devising strategies, methods and plans to know whatever item falls under the hot Sun or the cold Moon. "Philosophical speculation is the creation of the rich. Down with it" says Nabokov. (Despair, p. 1). "Philosophical speculation is the highest achievement of nature. Up with it" say I in my Hegelian frame. Isn't it true that the philosopher is an academic superman? Isn't it true that the philosopher has a telepathic, telephonic and telescopic (perhaps also microscopic) mind? (Is it a tragedy or a comedy?)

Let me do my job. Consider the head of our topic, i.e. 'philosophical concepts'. The question arises: Are there any such

things as 'philosophical concepts'? And if there are such things, what is their nature and mode of operation? (Do I really see the head of a drowning man ?) One possible answer to the question is that there must be such things as philosophical concepts, however vague we may be about them. Vagueness is associated with the very notion of a concept, so there is no surprise that it is associated with the notion of a philosophical concept. But to accept that there are philosophical concepts and at the same time to accept that there is vagueness associated with them makes the status of philosophical concepts extremely dubious. How dubious are philosophical concepts? Consider the operation of 'slums', 'beauty competitions', 'horse races' and 'tight pants' in contemporary social life. One may express one's pleasure or displeasure over (about) them. The psychological (also physiological) reactions expressed by people have both qualitative and quantitative variations. But philosophical concepts are quite unlike slums, beauty competitions, horse races and tight pants. No smile on the lips and no tears in the eyes occur when one entertains a philosophical concept. The reception given to a philosophical concept is unlike the reception given to a beautiful person or a dirty politician. Perhaps there may be conceptual smiles and conceptual tears. But conceptual smiles do not require lips to be moved or facial expression to be made, and conceptual tears do not fall from the eyes. Entertaining philosophical concepts is certainly not a matter of entertainment. Not because no entertainment tax is levied on them, but because they are not objects of sensibility and perception, hence not objects of everyday transaction. (Thanks to Plato for giving us a clue).

The above discussion has landed us directly into the arms of the topic of our seminar, the metaphor of 'in'. Even if there are such things as philosophical concepts they are certainly not objects of social transaction. Slums require slum-dwellers. And there can be no beauty competition if there is only one beauty. Similarly, it is impossible for one horse to succeed in a race if there are no other horses. And tight pants have not been tailored according to the bodily needs of a conceptual person. (Concepts presuppose unity or oneness). If concepts are different from things and events, then it would be a fruitless attempt on our part to search for concepts in slums, beauty competitions,

horse races and tight pants. Though philosophers have attempted to institutionalize concepts (as ordinary men have institutionalized slums and horse races) they have not suggested that the institution of concepts be established near a slum or a racecourse. The institution of concepts is an affair of the underworld. And one who knows concepts, knows how to handle them, is a man of the underworld. Philosophers are unlike, but not quite unlike, the agents of Mafia.

The emergence of Mafia is a new feature of society, therefore, the consideration of Mafia has naturally brought us to the legs of the topic of our seminar, i. e., to 'contemporary social life'. The mode in which an agent of Mafia operates and the mode in which an agent of philosophy operates have certain comparable features. Mafia men smuggle themselves into our everyday society. They do not keep any label on their faces that they belong to the Mafia. It is only when you hear the shot of a gun or the roar of an engine or the prick of a knife that you know that he is not just your neighbour, having such and such a house number, but a man from the Mafia. (You are certainly a fortunate person if you survive to tell your tale). Similarly, a philosopher is an ordinary person so far as his basic needs are concerned. He laughs and he weeps and he eats and he drinks and he stands in the queues for entering into cinema-houses, public buses and railway carriages. It is not written on the face of a man that he is a philosopher. It is only when one starts shooting you that you know that you are in a situation of having an encounter with a philosopher. Of course, the philosopher's bullets, trucks and knives are not made of metal and wood; they are made of ideas and ideals; they have conceptual stuff inside them.

The survival of Mafia depends on its Godfathers. And the survival of a Godfather depends on his alertness and efficiency in handling two fronts, an external and an internal front. The external front is connected with the survival of his underworld, the place from where the Godfather operates. This front is easier to handle. So long as corruption and nepotism remain the sustaining pillars of our society there is no danger to the existence of Mafia, to the existence of any kind of secret criminal society. But the real challenge to the Godfather is posed by the internal front. A Godfather has to see that there exists no other God-

father in his underworld. God is one, therefore, Godfather is also one.

Philosophy too these days has its own Godfathers. And its Godfathers are in a similar situation. Contemporary social life is unique in every respect. How could it spare philosophers from being influenced by its respectable institutions like corruption and nepotism. These institutions deserve to be democratised. And in making use of these institutions we would simply be quickening the process of democratisation of these institutions. Why should only the politicians and the Mafia-men be allowed to take advantage of these institutions. The underworld of philosophy has its own victories and defeats, its own feuds and treaties and its own joys and sorrows. Blessed are they who are ignorant of what is going on in the underworld of philosophy. Without ignorance it is impossible to have illusion. And without illusion it is impossible to survive. (Something like this was Sankara's-view). Let us opt for survival.

But what after all is being done in the underworld of philosophy over and above the personal feuds of philosophers. One of the things that is being done is the invention of concepts (ideas and ideals) for the purpose of using them on the helpless men and women living in society. In the process of inventing concepts the Godfathers of philosophy have sometimes taken up a far more dangerous course than the Godfathers of Mafia. It is possible to survive a bullet or a knife injury. The possibility of survival exists even when one has been run over by a heavy vehicle. But there is no possibility of survival if one has been run over by a philosophical concept. And the philosophical infection is more dangerous than the bacterial infection. An agent of the Mafia can kill you; he can hold you for ransom. Isn't it a small scale operation? For, a philosopher can hold the whole society, the humanity as such, for ransom. (A clue from Karl Popper). Men and women for a philosopher are nothing but guinea-pigs; they are simply subjects meant for the verification of philosophical theses. Plato was certainly wrong if he meant that the world of concepts has no impact on the world of things and events. Though concepts are different from things and events, they do sometimes change the shape of things and events.

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The fact that the world of concepts has impact on the world of things and events should not however mislead you into thinking that concepts are not items of the underworld, that they occur in the same social reality in which occur the car-accidents and love-accidents, football-games and foul-games, battle of Bangladesh and battle of wits etc. (compare concepts with metaphors). There is no doubt that some philosophers, having Kant-like frame of mind, have attempted to smuggle concepts into our everyday life. A criminal thinks that there is nothing wrong in performing criminal acts, for all of us are basically criminals. Similarly, some philosophers think that there is nothing wrong in having concepts, for all of us have concepts. All human beings, in a sense, are philosophers as all human beings, in a sense, are criminals. One just cannot manage to survive if he is not equipped with concepts. (Is it modesty or mischief on the part of a philosopher?)

In order to know a thing or an event you must first have the concept of that thing or event. Thus, you are deprived of knowing hairpins and teacups if you are not equipped with the *concepts* of hairpins and teacups. Does it mean that in order to know what contemporary life is you must be equipped with *contemporiori* concepts, (Kantian model : *contemporiori* concepts – *a priori* concepts of contemporary life). Whatever sort of mental equipment is conceptual equipment, the view under consideration clearly implies that there are no such things as ‘philosophical concepts’ apart from ‘non-philosophical concepts’. There may be concepts subsumed under other concepts. The concepts of ‘hairpins’ and ‘teacups’ may be subsumed under the concept of a ‘substance’. One may further apply the distinction between ‘*a priori* concepts’, and ‘empirical concepts’, calling ‘teacup’ an empirical concept and ‘substance’ an *a priori* concept. To give more weightage to his *a priori* concepts one may describe them as ‘categories’. But none of these distinctions and descriptions has the implication that there are any such things as ‘philosophical concepts’. What is philosophicality about the concept of a ‘substance’ which is missing in the concept of a ‘teacup’?

The text books of philosophy have provided to philosophers a special set of concepts. It is said that the concepts such as

those of 'substance', 'self', 'immortality', 'good', 'evil', and there like have been invented by the philosopher. He is not only their inventor but also their guardian, hence these concepts deserve to be described as 'philosophical'. Neither an ordinary man nor a scientist of any repute is capable of handling these concepts. But in saying all this one forgets that all concepts have been invented by the philosopher. Even the notion of 'concept' is philosopher's invention. The philosopher is responsible, not only for the invention of the concept of 'substance' or 'self' but also for the invention of the concept of 'hairpin' or 'teacup'. The concept of a teacup is as much removed from the lips as is the concept of a self removed from the body. (This might have led Kant to think in terms of schematization of his a priori concepts; i. e., categories. Once the concept of a teacup is schematised, there is no difficulty for the teacup to reach the lips. Of course, the concept of a lip has also to be schematised). How misleading would it be to distinguish 'ordinary concepts' from 'philosophical concepts', for no concept is ordinary, it is an extraordinary achievement of the man from the underworld. (The philosopher is caught in his own web).

The topic of our seminar presupposes a distinction between 'philosophical' and 'non-philosophical' concepts. But if there is no such distinction then it is an exercise in futility to search for philosophical concepts in contemporary social life. This introduces a real difficulty. Suppose we allow that concepts are as much a part of our social reality as are hairpins and tight pants, how are we going to smuggle a philosopher into our social reality? Even sending concepts to the Platonic underworld does not solve the problem. The philosopher in that situation would be a manufacturer of concepts in **general** and not any **specific** brand of them. And if he is not a specialist of any sort then he is free from praises and blames. Perhaps he can be blamed only on the ground that he should not have manufactured certain concepts which he did really manufacture. He is in a similar situation as a scientist. The function of science is to expose the secrets of nature. It is unfortunate that the exposure of these secrets has led us to a dangerous situation. It has led us to the production of, say, the nuclear weapons. Similarly, it is unfortunate that the production

of certain concepts by philosophers exposes society and humanity to dangers. But how can we blame the philosopher for all this ? It is really we who are to be blamed; it is we who are destroying ourselves. Of course, we are destroying ourselves with the help of science and philosophy. Would it be a solution to banish either science or philosophy or both ? This is an issue which has recently been debated, and should certainly be debated, by our undergraduate students, seasoned politicians and professional book writers. (We should not enter into such debates).

The topic of our seminar is really not as muddled as it would appear to a philosopher. (Seeing muddles is a philosopher's disease). The topic raises a simple question for discussion. What are those concepts which make contemporary social life unique, which distinguish it from the past social life ? It does not matter much whether we do or do not call these concepts 'philosophical'. It is simply a terminological issue. For the concepts remain what they are, whether we do or do not call them philosophical. Similarly it also does not matter much whether the concepts in question influence social life from within or from the outside. So far as the residential situation of these concepts, both the words 'in' and 'out' with reference to 'contemporary social life' have a metaphorical use. We should not make fuss if we already know that these words have a metaphorical rather than a literal use. What matters is simply that we should divert our attention to those features of our contemporary social life which distinguish it from the past social life. What are the unique features of our contemporary social life ? Cannot we bring out these features, and then see the relevant concepts attached to these features ?

Unfortunately, even here we fail. We are late in raising questions about the unique features. We have already reached a stage in history where most of the features of our social life are unique. The right question to be raised at our time should have been what is not unique in our social life. Every thing has changed, even the fashion in which we philosophise has changed. We have reached the stage of total change, a change which has never been observed in the past. Some people even feel that we have reached the stage of total chaos. Life is not worth living in this chaos; it has lost its dignity. (How unsaintly ? Isn't it

wonderful to live in chaos? Why should one live in a dull and static society? Why should one accept monotony?)

The attempt on the part of man to expose the secrets of nature has certainly disturbed the balance of our social values. (Unless we talk about **values** our talk of social life remains incomplete). What sort of disturbance has occurred? Let us consider a few examples. Let us first consider the issue of dress, for it is this value that distinguishes man from the savage. What sort of relationship has the dress to the human body? People of the past exhibited poor intelligence, for they used to wear dresses over their bodies. How different we are, for we wear bodies over our dresses. It is the dress and not the body which should be hidden, for soul resides in the body and not in the dress.

Come now to the academic absurdity. Those books and papers which are being written for filling the garbage-cans fill the university library shelves. (Imagine the result yourself). Most of those who count in the academic world seem to be a part of air-crew. They seem to be in the service of airlines rather than the departments and the universities from which they derive their livelihood. And those who are engaged in research are often different from those who get national and interanational prizes. The caste of airborne (e) is different from the caste of earthborn. Teachers and students come closer to one another, not because of any academic bondage but because of the exhibition of physique and armament. It would be safer if I keep silence about our students, for I want to remain one piece. (Reflections with reference to the third world).

Why have these magnificent temples been constructed by the rich? Not because they are afraid of God, but because they are afraid of the income-tax officials. And our Yogees are so very different from the Yogees of the past. In the past they used to live in the deep forests like beasts. These savage-Yogees looked horrible. But the Yogees of our contemporary society are handsome people; they have their garden-ashrams in the posh city-suburbs. And their training in the art of magic succeeds in producing the same miracles which were produced by the savage-Yogees with the help of long-endured **sadhana**s. Our Yogees live like film-stars. They have telephones and they have cars and

they have air-conditioners and they have aeroplanes and they have rich disciples and beautiful secretaries. Isn't it more alluring to be an Yogee (or at least the disciple of an Yogee) rather than a Central Minister ?

How different is our daily life. Our offices, workshops, class and seminar rooms and even our market places sometimes give the impression that they are just different sorts of stages set for film-shooting. Reduction-sales are just like political promises; nothing is to be obtained on reduced rates as no political promise is to be fulfilled. Often shops behave like spinsters; whatever is worth buying is exhibited in the windows. And those shops which have nothing to exhibit, exhibit their sales girls. This is just like the university semester system. If we do not teach (either because we do not know teaching or because we do not have time for this extra-curricular activity) we poster the students with homework' surprise tests and moral discourses. Teachers are like salesmen without sellable goods. How complicated, how absurd, is our contemporary life. How can this life be governed by the dead and static things called 'concepts' ? And how can the old maids called 'values' be permitted to enter into it ?

We are free from concepts and we are free from values and we are free from all the traditional drudgery. (It is not denied that the static societies of the past were governed by the fixed concepts and dreary values). We are living in the age of affluence (omit the third world) and heading towards the age of freedom, the age of chaos, the age of absurdity (include the third world). We are not believers, but so also we are not heathens and pagans. We are not civilized, but so also we are not barbarians and savages. We do not like ourselves to be categorised in any fashion, for we reject categories.

It is not that we do not know our way out, that we have on values and ideals to guide us, but that we do not want a way and we do not want any value or ideal to guide us. We desire freedom, therefore we reject all kinds of impositions. If a choice is given to me for my next birth I would prefer to live in this age, the age of chaos, the age of absurdity. Of course with slight modifications here and there. But unfortunately talking about the next birth is utter nonsense. And it is so shocking that the dark

clouds of confusion and dirt do not allow us to have clear vision of freedom or absurdity or chaos.

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NOTES

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CORRECTION

The sentence beginning on the 10th line from the bottom of page number 657 in the article entitled "Substance, Monads and Particulars" by Mr. Frank Lucash published in Indian philosophical Quarterly Volume VI, No 4, July 1979, should be read as,

"He says that Leibnitz was not trying to reduce relation to non-relational predicates but rather to reduce relational statements to statements in which a complex predicate, possibly involving relations, is attributed a single subject."

The printing error is deeply regreted,

—Editors.