

The Philosophical Arena of Happiness

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I. GENERAL SURVEY

The ultimate aim of any philosophy or religion is supposed to be towards the welfare of the society showing a genuine concern for humanity as a whole. However one has to accept the fact that unfortunately some of the philosophies have nurtured themselves in such a way that they have emerged merely in an academic fashion exhibiting the scholarship of the propounder and further utilizing the language in a verbose style. Similarly most of the religions have also engrossed themselves in the rituals in an untiring manner which have taken foremost position and toll, surpassing the real Spiritual aspect along with Philosophy. It is sad that so many centuries have rolled down and still we are groping in darkness with same basic problems while as a contrast, Science with empirical proofs has shown in all its branches notable progress. In fact all living beings strive for comfort and further exert to crystallize the same into happiness and expect tranquility thereof. In fact happiness has many areas to encompass. Right from personal to social, individually psychological to the societal and then national to global everyone in some way or the other is automatically either influenced or enmeshed irreversibly. Therefore it cannot always remain a private affair. Even then much impetus is continuously laid down on one's own life and subsequently the happenings with a strong desire to have them always under own custody. As Socrates had said that an unexamined life is not worth living, we can conclude that only intelligent people can be happy because they can prioritize the living behavioral sciences to suit their circumstances. An unchecked flow of sentimentality would mean getting stuck up emotionally and expecting results as per one's own wistful thinking! Therefore, it is the practical wisdom or street smartness which is required to deal with the mundane affairs. Happiness is a necessary constituent of life for all irrespective of Caste, Creed and Religion that one follows. In all phases of life at any stage and age, man is consistently in the race to gain happiness with very little understanding of the very term so casually used by all. One must understand that Life is not a mathematical quiz that one can apply a formula to solve and gain happiness. Life most of the times with regard to all the strata of the society needless to say poses similar problems but in different shades and intensity. When we examine the circumstances in which we are living, honestly analyzing, we realize that we have not overcome our age old problems of Poverty, Racial discrimination and Segregation. We have not been very successful in controlling pollution- human as well as mechanical- of environment. Furthermore we have exponentially increasing psychological problems on personal as well as mass scale. The inequality, corruption, injustice... had been threatening in every field, in every decade and presently at least there does not seem to be any route or avenue to escape. With so many discouraging external factors seeking happiness on personal level is highly improbable. As Bertrand Russell in Conquest of Happiness thinks, Humanity has majority times mental level problems. Animals never think of past nor surmise future. We are somehow not comfortable anywhere. We have reasons to complain of the present, excuses for the past happenings and strong speculation of the future. With limited knowledge we are abnormally confident and yet most uncomfortable. This is how Happiness is eluding us. There have been many definitions or descriptions in text made available to us regarding man. Aristotle thought man is essentially a social animal. Later on he also thought man a political animal and cultured animal. But then now he seems to be a pretty weak animal on physical as well as mental planes. Culturally it is totally debatable issue. In fact man is unable to bear happiness or unhappiness alone easily. A sudden onslaught of either would put him under a sort burden which is quite unbearable to him. Much owing to this he prefers to share his mood and so indicates the social nature. Many a time it so happens that commonly we equate comfort or pleasure to happiness but in the course of time while advancing in life we do realize that this is indeed a faulty concept although at times it may be an illusionary type happiness. Another blunder committed mostly has been trying to acquire the absence of unhappiness imagining that would lead us to the province of happiness. It is a matter of common experience that merely absence of unhappiness never promotes or guarantees happiness. There are many occasions when we are neither happy nor unhappy. That could also lead to boredom or might create a damaging state of ennui. In other words happiness itself has a special domain wherein the usual practices would fail miserably to produce the desired results. Probably the unwanted memories of past and visualization of the

future which is not under control could be one of the potent reasons as to why most of us are striving so hard and yet failing to make an entry into the arena of happiness.” ‘Thought and Consciousness’, says Engels, are products of the human brain’. The truth of this, as George Thomson comments, ‘is so plain that it might almost seem to be obvious; yet philosophers have piled tome upon tome in order to deny, distort or obscure it.’ Thus a large section of the contemporary philosophers, while claiming to be specialists in the study of thought, continue their disputations without regard to what scientists have learnt about the actual mechanism of the human brain.”¹ No doubt external factors are very important and are strong enough to become a hindrance but there is something within us which demands more of our attention. When we look at the behavior of the constituents of the matter around us we very easily understand that Nature itself does not have any discipline. Most of the laws ascribed in an ideal fashion for the common states of matter are not followed. Therefore Solids, Liquids and Gases show their molecules also strive for perfection but they too under normal conditions prefer to have freedom. This is the reason as to why we have notable deviations in their behavior. In case we extend this theory and apply to human behavior then obviously we cannot expect any of the virtues ethically highly acclaimed as easily attainable. In other words happiness is not easily achieved unless we as human beings strive on the moral principles which have been acknowledged by all religions. The major problem with us is we have ideals always in vision but not in practice. In brief unless we release ourselves from the illusions happiness will ever remain a farfetched and merely a wishful thinking entertained without any periodic investigation.

II. EXPECTATIONS FROM RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

It is but natural that everyone looks to religion as well as philosophy for solace when in doubt or trouble. We have carried and further handed over our beliefs to the next generation without inspecting their true efficacy and suitability to the new circumstances. Frankly speaking we do understand that it is openly foolish to adopt past century principles and expect results in the present age. Nothing remains forever. That is a proven fact of life. At least on the physical plane no entity is granted eternity. There have been various belief systems which promise all fair results and mostly they are non-pragmatic. There is an effort to silence the mind and its queries than answering them properly to quench the thirst for true knowledge. It is also surprising that volumes have been penned down to explain a minor thing and therefore there is escapism or no concrete answer in brief. A common man has no intention to take on the rigors of the discipline to master a subject and become an acclaimed scientist or philosopher. All that he expects is to lead a normal life with his family. Unfortunately most of the tenets or the much publicized salient features of a theory or religious philosophy are always directed towards the secluded life of a saint. These principles miserably fail in the mart of life when someone adopts them enthusiastically and still there is insistence on the same set of beliefs proposed by religions and their philosophies. This is the basic reason as to why a common man is not comfortable and does not find total confidence in these principles. At the same time he cannot muster enough courage to protest or criticize. Therefore, one must make different zones like the orbits surrounding a nucleus of an atom to know exactly the proper working of these proposed principles and then seek happiness. Such a logical or to some extent scientific approach can only solve the mystery than merely proposing new theories with a minor alteration or in a repetitive form. With all the knowledge that is available to us in the modern age it should be adhering to the facts and need not carry unnecessarily emotive phrases or expressions to impress upon the gullible minds. It is indeed our prime duty to guide the upcoming generation than to make it crippled. The excesses present in any religion or philosophical approach requires pruning process, failing which again the same scenario will continue. There have been scores of philosophies from East as well as West which could be referred to for guidance but somehow not all seem to be feasible in practice. That could be one of the reasons as to why one gets a feeling that improvisation as a dire need to make them function and a periodic revision or renewal is a must. Having reverence for the old or ancestral time viewpoints is in a way tolerable but then taking that itself as eternal and workable for all generations indicates absolutely unscientific approach or rather anti-scientific approach.

III. WESTERN AND EASTERN APPROACHES

Generally it has been a practice to have a comparison by referring to both Eastern and Western philosophical outlooks, especially when it comes to metaphysics. The fact is that not always these two currents of thought differ totally but much owing to the historicity and the circumstances sometimes bound by cultural viewpoints, there have been different pathways for the same aim. It goes without saying that both try to provide in a nutshell the secret of gaining and further retaining happiness. Somehow in the Eastern approach there is the inclusion of God as the supreme being and naturally the unfailing source of all virtues. Everything for which human beings are striving for would be released by God and therefore generally nothing is convinced without an open reference to God and subsequently Godliness. Naturally much out of uncontrolled enthusiasm and a sort of competitive spirit every approach vigorously claims supremacy or the ultimate position.

In case of Western approach the firm base is virtue and most of the philosophers have claimed the same but without introducing God. Outwardly atleast it seems that the human limitations, temptations and inclinations are given complete consideration. One may even draw the conclusion that mostly the psychological aspect is given

utmost importance and the possible implications thereof are also dealt impartially. This is why in Western approach the philosophers on happiness have provided a moral, ethical and psychological platforms by taking into consideration human personality. If we take just a cursory look of a select few philosophers we realize that there had been the same ethical trend but at times with a minor deviation to claim independent status. Socrates entrusted happiness partly or wholly as the result of the working of the soul. It is always produced at the behest of the active state of the soul which is ever stuffed with ethical virtues. His student Plato always felt Pleasure also as a necessary constituent in addition to what his master said so vehemently about soul's activity. This shows that there had been an attempt to include the practical aspect or reflection of happiness. Aristotle following footsteps of Plato felt the necessity of adding the external goods to the morally and ethically recognized list of virtues."Aristotle summarized this manifold excellence in his famous doctrine of the "golden mean."The happy man, the virtuous man, is he who preserves the golden mean between the two extremes of ignoble conduct. He is the man who steers the middle course between the shoals that threaten on either side to wreck his happiness."² Epicurus who in fact was very keen in bringing out the connection between pleasure and happiness went on to propose pleasure as an utmost important constituent of happiness. Stoics maintained their stance of adhering to the ethical virtues because as others too felt that happiness comprises of such shades which none can dismiss. When we refer to The Socrates Paradox there is a very clear indication that there is always a necessity to take into consideration the circumstances of one's life and more than that the psychological mental make-up. It is always one's own ignorance owing to which immoral acts are carried out but never done deliberately. This obviously leads to unhappiness. Immanuel Kant felt happiness does include power, riches, honor and above all health. Therefore a complete personality is to be considered and erected to gain happiness in life. But then he also cautions about the possible hindrances which would stem out of our own insistence on the incentives pursued for own happiness. The danger is this may take us away from the moral platform as much of the seeking would be in catching the illusions. William James too cautions us regarding our over enthusiasm which may lead to a sort of disappointment if not corrected on time. To him Happiness is to achieved by preparing ourselves for a genuine and higher purpose though sometimes we ourselves and the society may also suspect feasibility. A little more philosophical treatment was given by Ralph Waldo Emerson to whom the very purpose of life need not be merely happiness. In fact happiness is the result of our purposeful disposition that includes utility, honor and becoming compassionate. Lastly if we refer to Arthur Schopenhauer we find yet another deviation because to him, there cannot be real happiness ever possible. At the most we can reduce the quantum of unhappiness bestowed on us by circumstances. As generally pessimists think, Schopenhauer thought the world at any rate is hostile. To the contrary optimists insist that this is possibly the best world to fulfill our aims and aspirations. Schopenhauer always felt happiness a rare possibility and absolutely on temporary basis. He thought it is a blunder in our habitual thinking that people can be ever happy in this world because in short happiness by itself is a perfect illusion.

IV. INDIAN SCENARIO

As said earlier most of the times an onlooker gets the impression that Indian philosophy has contribution from Hindu religion only and therefore it could be aptly referred to as Hindu philosophy. However, when we say Hindu philosophy it is a broad title having many contributions and currents of thought. However, there is a clear inclination in most of the philosophers working due to a sort of dependency on the religion. Therefore one needs to know the original temper with which the other extensions had been encouraged. "All religions are manmade. Moral principles which govern the society are also manmade and are meant for maintaining peace in the society God is responsible only for the cosmic laws and no one can violate them. During the first eight centuries there were many religions believing in many Gods. The credit of consolidating these different cults under the banner of Vedic verdicts goes to Shankara."³ It all starts from the Advaita Vedanta wherein commonly the word ANANDA is used for happiness throughout. In spite of this the English equivalent 'Happiness' does not cover all the aspects of the former. It has been always clubbed with religious sentiment and there is automatically an easy entry provided into Mysticism and also Spirituality. Human being as an independent entity is accompanied by different moods due to which it gets entangled in variety activities. As a result it combats with many of the vices or at times becomes voluntarily a victim. On a temporary basis it enjoys and much out of ignorance embraces such activities. In the course of time somehow with knowledge and slight enlightenment realizes the futility of such actions and the potency of the worldly traps. Therefore there is realization. However it is easily said than done. To release self from the shackles of such temptation is not an easy task. At this stage one requires the assistance of a higher force so that the true Ananda can be achieved. This is where one needs freedom from all the sins, periodic doubts, temptations, desires, sufferings and so on. But then there is a practical reality also. To live is to struggle and there is bound to be an attempt to reach the comfort zone and therefore getting trapped is but natural. Therefore getting a total and perfect release from the very cycle of rebirth would promise Ananda on a lasting basis. This is technically referred to Brahman or Brahman state wherein a perfect detachment towards the worldly affairs takes place and this is a concrete platform for true Happiness. In Dvaita philosophy there is a strong overtone over a requisition demanding a sort of semblance

between word and deed. Naturally the impetus is on thought process which eventually guides us for the deeds to be performed. Well, it all depends on our own control on mind which usually marches with confusion, doubt and always has lofty unchecked ideas which finally trap us. Therefore ultimately if we can develop uniformity or evenness in our disposition and temper, the very state of supreme bliss will be within our reach in any walk of life. This is to show that happiness for which we are harping depends more on our own control over the flighty nature or whims which we unnecessarily entertain. Another school of thought Vishishtadvaita has a total faith in the divine grace without which it is impossible to seek genuine happiness. Therefore all that the seeker has to do is to surrender the self before the Divine and get totally detached from the self promoted ego. It is the ego which causes all hindrance and under any condition there cannot be happiness when accompanied by the much nurtured ego. In fact total surrender is not that easy but one has to adopt a life style trusting totally the Divine force to guide. There have been various schools of thought in Hinduism though they all have the same aim but different routes. These routes should be looked upon as emerging out of various outlooks but at any point they do not compete nor have any animosity. The four major Yogas viz. Raja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Karma Yogas have been proposed to suit all human temperaments and capacity. Although commonly it is the Karma Yoga which is easily preferred there is no gradation because ultimate aim is same. One may find the divine grace from austere practices or devotion or knowledge or work ethics with consciously carried out deeds. These have been the significant avenues suggested for achieving happiness. If we just take a brief survey of select few modern philosophers from last century we find that there is not much difference in the approach and there is a tendency to lean towards the religious sentiment. For example Swami Vivekananda who laid a lot of emphasis on Karma Yoga always insisted that there need not be a single or isolated method to seek happiness as every person has different circumstances and obviously the level of comprehension, owing to which his option would be very private. Therefore he has to choose within his limits happiness than unnecessarily burdening self with highly imaginative picture. As Leo Tolstoy puts in his novel "Anna Karenina" in the beginning itself that 'All Happy families are alike but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way'. This is to indicate that unlike unhappiness, happiness need not be standardized. Shri Aurobindo has put happiness as a natural aspect of our personality or living beings. It is the delight of existence. The shift takes place much because of the limitations of human nature which always entertains the opposites and therefore happiness eludes. A total faith in the virtues can bring about happiness and one can get detached easily from the negativities. Therefore here happiness is taken for granted and the methods rather spiritual ones are recommended in retaining happiness in addition to understand what it means. Sri Raman Maharshi felt happiness is always within us. Trying to get it from external sources would never appease the thirst. Discovering the true self is of utmost importance because that can only promise happiness. Therefore as described in Upanishads, "He is the smallest of the small, the biggest of the big and a person who is free from temptations of the world can visualize the Supreme Being and becomes free from bondage."⁴

V. CONCLUSION

Different philosophers have opined on the term happiness with a hope that their outlooks may guide the humanity or drag out of the drudgery of unhappiness. Yet no philosophy seems to have a complete impact on the humanity. Negative terms or vices have gone far away and their presence with a driving force is an unarguable reality. Virtues always appeal to us but their timely presence with expected effect or result is fairly doubtful. Therefore no single philosophy would indicate perfection because of the circumstances we have around are varied from person to person. Mostly the external forces dictate terms. Under such a situation which had been prevalent from centuries the only way out would be to ardently stick on to the mixed form of a couple of living philosophies. From Western point of view it would be ever wise to adopt a Pragmatic approach and from the Eastern, particularly Indian, it is better to follow the path of Bhakti Yoga so that everything is entrusted or surrendered to one's own deity or God of choice. This would silence the mind and with an appeal to the higher force some hope would easily kindle. Referring to Schopenhauer we find he was exasperated with "false optimism" of the modern philosophers. Man is essentially a creature of pain. His will is constantly driving him on to desire one object in life. But the moment he obtains his desire what follows? A terrible boredom or void. Existence becomes again an unbearable burden. So he strives a new...Happiness is a negative state. The only positive state is pain. In such a scheme of things is there any place for hope?⁵ So ultimately we may come to the conclusion that there is a well defined but concealed arena of happiness, owing to which there had been so many viewpoints in past and now in present too. We need to adopt the pathway that suits our temperament, circumstances and as far as possible managing the virtuous life-style so that there is a smooth free passage to grow inwardly and experience happiness. Instead of searching for it, allowing the same to grow within would be always wise!

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