HISTORY IN PHILOSOPHY, PHILOSOPHY BEYOND HISTORY: SWAMI VIVEKĀNANDA'S CURIOUS PREDICAMENT

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The manner in which we do Philosophy involves an extensive engagement with the history of ideas, the ideas which shape political and social institutions, and sometimes the engagement is with the idea of history and writing itself. Philosophy develops through and in that engagement. While doing Philosophy, the ideas being engaged with need not be necessarily treated in chronological sequences. It may help one's thirst for narrative to set ideas in temporal order positing one as evolving as a reaction to another. But that ordering may not be a necessary exercise and may not have the obvious benefits that it may have in another discipline. The chronology does not add to the worth of the idea, although it may help us to understand the motivations. Its history cannot justify an idea, though it could excuse the agents for being led by a certain idea at a certain point in time.

In doing Philosophy, one could just engage with ideas as if they were atemporal, ahistorical, as if they were not there before one thought of it or one heard of it; one could deal with an idea just as it appears to one. What I am suggesting is that this also could be a legitimate way of doing philosophy; I am not suggesting that this is the only way or one that I approve of.

If someone argues that the historical, as in the wider socio-cultural context, is important for judging the worth of an idea, one could retort that the way you grasp an idea blooms with all those aspects at the moment of *your* grasping of the idea. If we take an idea to be like an onion with all its scales, then your holding it, standing at a certain time and place also becomes an inseparable part of the description of the onion. One often thinks that it is the onion which stands for the idea and that one needs to unravel it gradually by showing the historical tinges curled up inside it. But

actually what one ends up doing is gradually getting the idea tinged with one's own idea of history, of what must have happened, of possibilities that one can conceive of. In carefully historicizing the past, one necessarily fails to realize the implications of this act of historicizing itself. One does follow methods to avoid such a trap. But the problem here is that it may not be possible to grasp the trappings of the present. Even in doing History what we end up doing is studying our present.

Another point to ponder is that in doing a study of the extensively available writings, some formal (meant for publication) and others informal (letters, lecture notes, conversations, and anecdotes), of a certain philosopher/writer, one is liable to *find* what one is looking for. So one has to be careful and even then one may fail oneself.

With this entire caveat, let me get to Swami Vivekānanda (1863-1902). Nehru applauds repeated stress on reason in Vivekānanda and stakes him as the link between India's past and present in his *Discovery of India*. How did Vivekānanda understand the relation between philosophy (a philosophy aspiring to timeless truth: *maha kaalik satya*) and history (in the sense of a certain time: *khaṇḍa kāl*)? How does time influence the reception of timeless truths? How could one access such truths? Is reason a suitable tool? And, what would be the status of the historical truths from a meta-historical plane? Vivekananda expresses his awareness about the import of history, and how every idea needs preparation, when he says:

> There come periods in the history of the human race when, as it were, whole nations are seized with a sort of world-weariness, when they find that all their plans are slipping between their fingers, that old institutions and systems are crumbling into dust, that their hopes are all blighted and everything seems to be out of joint (vol. 3: 156). [1]

> That you are here today to welcome one who went to Europe to preach Vedanta would have been impossible had not the materialism from Europe opened the way for it (vol. 3: 157).

Vivekananda's philosophy was deliberately historically grounded in the sense that he was reacting to his contemporary situation and recasting the philosophy of his own religion, viz. Hinduism along the discourse of 'being relevant'. This attempt at updating a belief system necessitates attributing certain significance to history. He was trying to contemporize while at the same time believing that the truth in Hinduism was timeless. He ordains, "Let us be as progressive as any nation that existed, and at the same time as faithful

and conservative towards our traditions as Hindus alone know how to be" (vol. 3: 174-5). One could resolve the seeming paradox here by stating that however timeless be the claims of the philosophico-religious position being propagated, the methods of communicating the message as well as the message *per se* would need tweaking as per the demands of the time. The crucial issue here is regarding the complexity and the viability of an exercise to do the tweaking at the surface level without affecting the essence of the thought presumed to be ahistorically true. The predicament for him was how to reconcile the pressures of the contemporary with the everlasting truth. History seeps in and influences the phrasing and the project of his praxis-oriented philosophy, the essence of which in the end has to be discovered as being beyond history.

Does having to reform take away from the timelessness? One has to argue that what needs reform is the misperception of the truth; the truth itself being timeless requires no alteration. Vivekananda projects himself as a reactionary, a radical, but only in the task of rediscovering the truth already in the system. Similar to many of the other reformers, he uses the strategy of connecting the present with the gems of the old hidden by a middle period of ignorance and ritualism. Vivekananda was aware that just connecting the present with the past was not enough as he had his reservations even about the then 'imagined past' which included the ills of the 'then present' like casteism. So the past had to be created not in terms of the prevalent imagination of the past but in terms of a certain reading of the authoritative texts.

Another argument for the timeless basis for changes, according to Vivekananda, is grounded in the belief that:

> Now a changing something can never be understood, without the idea of something unchanging; and if it be said that that unchanging something, to which the changing is referred is also a changing phenomenon only relatively unchanging, and is therefore to be referred to something else, and so on, we say that however infinitely long this series be, the very fact of our inability to understand a changeable without an unchangeable forces us to postulate one as the background of all the changeable (vol. 4: 382).

When is reform warranted? Reform implies a reformulation, the change in formulation, a shift to another formulation of the beliefs. The change is justified in terms of the felt unease with the contemporary way in which the belief system presents itself. There might be three kinds of people: those who feel the unease and want a change, those who feel the unease but are not ready to change and those who do not feel the unease. For the first category of

people, the felt unease is sufficient justification to reform. For the second category, the felt unease may not be a good enough reason; they would be ready to endure the unease for doing what they think is the right thing to do. This understanding of the right action or way of life is usually in accordance with their (or the dominant) reception of the authoritative text or the prevailing reading of the spirit of the tradition. Pointing out the contemporary deviations from the original message of the text or the original spirit of the tradition can be an argument in favour of reform in the belief system communicable to all three categories of people. Even the third category of people may be motivated to feel a sense of unease due to a reminder that their comfort with the present is not in line with the original message. This kind of move in reformulating a belief system requires, first, a discovery and a formulation of the original, or some might even argue an invention of the original, and secondly, suggesting reforms towards ways of being in conformity with that formulation.

On the other hand, Vivekananda might have been a reformer of the second order, propagating a more radical change in the very essence of his religion. He does float the idea of universal religion wherein all religions need to be accepted as true and not simply tolerated.[2] In tune with the talk of Universal religion go such statements as 'Truth alone is my God; the entire world is my country' (vol. 7: 193). Sometimes the aim seems narrower, that of dissolving the cracks among Hindus, a call for Brotherhood among all Hindus—Brahmins and chaṇḍāls and sometimes among all religions; at others, he says, 'Our main concern is his (i.e. Shri Ramkrishna's) religion. Let the Hindus call it Hindu religion – and let others similarly name it (what they like)' (vol. 7: 246-47). But in the end he is also reluctant and cautious about being too radical. He is always wary about how much can be achieved. He says, 'The history of the world teaches us that wherever there have been fanatical reforms, the only result has been that they have defeated their own ends' (vol. 3: 214) Vivekananda was quite convinced about the significance of the project of educating people about the need for reform. He says:

> The whole problem of social reform, therefore, resolves itself into this: where are those who want reform? Make them first. Where are the people? The tyranny of a minority is the worst tyranny that the world ever sees. A few men who think that certain things are evil will not make a nation move. ...even for social reform, the first duty is to educate the people, and you will have to wait till that time comes. Most of the reforms that have

> been agitated for during the past century have been ornamental. ...The question of widow marriage would not touch seventy per cent of the Indian women. (vol. 3: 216)

The other clash that worried Swami Vivekananda was the one between spirituality and reason in the discourse of being practical, an upshot of Utilitarianism. The contrast between spirituality and reason was also linked in his mind to the deeper predicament of being true to philosophy (timeless spiritual truths) or to history (the current, the then contemporary pressures of being rational, utility-oriented). This dichotomy, he reads at times, also as one between theorizing (rationalizing) and action (the zest to make a dent in history). In this dichotomy, he reads the tendency towards endless theorising unfavourably and calls for real effort to drag people out of suffering (through love and sympathy). According to him:

> Everybody can show what evil is, but he is the friend of mankind who finds a way out of the difficulty. ..."We have had lectures enough, societies enough, papers enough; where is the man who will lend us a hand to drag us out? Where is the man who really loves us? Where is the man who has sympathy for us?" Ay, that man is wanted (vol. 3: 215).

However, he is aware that in this duality between reason and spirituality, the application of reason and knowledge acquired through rational methods may seem to be more practical and scientific as opposed to the spiritual which gets tagged with/as Philosophy. In this discourse of being practical, he argues that there could be different views of life and being practical would then be graded according to the scales of those life worlds. Vivekananda in this tension between the ordinarily contradictory epithets of being practical and being spiritual proposes that being spiritual could be one of the most practical things to do for someone; that there are different ways to being practical, that being spiritual and being practical are not contraries. However, in doing so he often groups Hindus as spiritual, and Westerners as upholders of reason; setting himself/getting himself into that easy trap of colonizing discourse, becoming a representative of the mystic east, the irrational east.

> The Hindu is just as practical as the Western, only we differ in our views of life (vol. 2: 185).

> Your idea that only the West is practical is nonsense. You are practical in one way, and I in another. There are different types of men and minds (vol. 2: 187).

On the other hand, one could argue that Vivekananda actually is

aware of the trap, is cleverly challenging the discourse and initiating a talk about the politics of reason: the subtle ways in which certain pursuits are termed unreasonable, irrational. He, in a sense, confronts from within the discourse of being rational, the dichotomy of reason and spiritualism, and breaks it down by pointing out that the latter has its own rationality.

Another argument against the utilitarian branding of 'the struggle towards the infinite' as impracticable and absurd is through his connecting such pursuits with the possibility of being ethical. Vivekananda says:

> ...we cannot derive any ethical laws from considerations of utility. Without the supernatural sanction as it is called or the perception of the Superconscious... there can be no ethics... The Utilitarian wants us to give up the struggle after the Infinite, the reaching-out for the Supersensuous, as impracticable and absurd, and in the same breath, asks us to take up ethics and do good to society. Why should we do that? (vol. 2: 63)

Now what constitutes Vivekananda's kind of spirituality is a thirst of the spirit to know the why of everything and this he thinks cannot be achieved ultimately by science which deals with the manifestations rather than with the deeper unity, the *raison d'etre* of life.

> Generally all knowledge is divided into two classes, the aparā, secular, and the parā, spiritual. One pertains to perishable things, and the other to the realm of spirit...this difference is one of degree and not of kind. It is not that secular and spiritual knowledge are two opposite and contradictory things...they are the same knowledge in its different stages of gradual development. This one infinite knowledge. We call secular when it is in its lower process of manifestation and spiritual when it reaches to corresponding higher phases (vol. 4: 433)

> I must know the heart of this life, its very essence, what it is, not only how it works and what are its manifestations. I want the why of everything ... It is good and great to be scientific, God bless them in their search; but when a man says that is all, he is talking foolishly, not caring to know the raison d'etre of life, never studying existence itself (vol. 2: 186)

The difference between reason and realisation, as conceived by him, is again another formulation of the difference between history-determined philosophy and a timeless truth-giving-philosophy, a difference between *ānvikshiki* and *darṣan* (seeing). He is unable to let go of the former and yet aspires to the latter. The justification of the first, i.e. reason is in its preparatory role for the second i.e. realisation to take place. He says, in the mould of Wittgenstein of

Tractatus Logico Philosophicus, how reason can take us only to a certain point; Wittgenstein refers to his book as the ladder which has to be let go and in understanding the book you discover it to be meaningless. Vivekananda says that the ultimate truth cannot be achieved through reason, but has to be realised, experienced. 'The intellect is only the street-cleaner, cleansing the path for us'. (vol. 2: 306) This is also the strategy of Advaita Vedanta.

> Talking is one thing, and realising is another. Philosophies, and doctrines, and arguments, and books, and theories, and churches, and sects, and all these things are good in their own way; but when that realisation comes, these things drop away. For instance, maps are good, but when you see the country itself, and look again at the maps, what a great difference you find! So those that have realised truth do not require the ratiocinations of logic and all other gymnastics of the intellect to make them understand the truth (vol. 2: 284).

> Suppose you have seen a country, and another man comes to you and tries to argue with you that that country never existed, he may go on arguing indefinitely, but your only attitude of mind towards him must be to hold that the man is fit for a lunatic asylum (vol. 2: 285).

> Do you not know from the history of the world where the power of the prophets lay? Where was it? In the intellect? Did any of them write a fine book on philosophy, on the most intricate ratiocinations of logic? Not one of them. They only spoke a few words. Feel like Christ and you will be a Christ; feel like Buddha and you will be a Buddha. It is feeling that is the life, the strength, the vitality, without which no amount of intellectual activity can reach God (vol. 2: 307).

The tendency in much of Vivekananda's writing as well as writings on him is to somehow accommodate these different radical strands within the broad sweep of his kind of Advaita Vedanta Philosophy, upon which he tries to re-establish Hinduism. The general understanding of Vivekananda's message comes out as a call back to Vedanta; to the original message of the Vedas which form the cornerstone of Hinduism. By instituting the Vedas as the essential and timeless truth, he goes on to find a way out of his predicament of being in history, being receptive to the demands of the contemporary as well as sticking on to the ageless and eternal. According to him:

> There are two sorts of truth we find in our Shastras, one that is based upon the eternal nature of man-the one that deals with the eternal relation of God, soul, and nature; the other, with local circumstances, environments

> of the time, social institutions of the period, and so forth. The first class of truths is chiefly embodied in our Vedas, our scriptures; the second in the Smritis, the Puranas, etc. (vol. 3: 173)
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> ...the Vedas being eternal will be one and the same throughout all ages, but the Smritis will have an end. As time rolls on, more and more of the Smritis will go, sages will come, and they will change and direct society into better channels, into duties and into paths which accord with the necessity of the age, and without which it is impossible that society can live...
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> In plain words, we have first to learn the distinction between the essentials and the non-essentials in everything. The essentials are eternal, the non-essentials have value only for a certain time; and if after a time, they are not replaced by something essential, they are positively dangerous (vol. 3: 174-75).

At the very core of Vivekananda's ability to balance the demands of the historical and the philosophical is the distinction between the *vyavahārikā* (historical) and the *pāramārthikā* (transcendental) levels of knowledge present in Vedanta. However, unlike the *Vedāntin*s, who believe that the *vyāvaharikā* is *māyā* and non-existent from the *paramārthikā* level, Vivekananda believes that *Maya* is not unreal, but a fact about the nature of the world and its contradictions. The *Vedanta* dictum- *Jagat mithyā* is usually translated as 'world is illusory, unreal'; however Vivekananda interprets *mithyā* as temporal, changing, not as unreal.

> ...Maya is not a theory for the explanation of the world: it is simply a statement of facts as they exist, that the very basis of our being is contradiction... that wherever there is good, there must also be evil ... life and death, smile and weeping (Jnāna Yoga: 64).
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> This eternal play of light and darkness – indiscriminate, indistinguishable, inseparable – is always there ... this is a statement of fact and this is what is called Māyā (vol. 2: 112).

If we try to understand his search for the experience of God which got him to Sri Ramkrishna, his initial skepticism, his, in a sense, wanting to verify the existence of God, empirically, are desires difficult to connect with Vedanta's view of *Brahman*. God is conceived as reality from a religious point of view, metaphysically it is absolute *Brahman*; for the Advaitins God is *Maya*, with *Pāramārthika dṛśti* it disappears; but for Vivekananda, ultimately the distinction between them is dissolved. We should remember that Vivekananda had flirted

with Brahmoism and its *nirākārvāda*, founded on the principles of Advaita Vedanta, without satisfaction before he encountered Ramkrishna. Ramkrishna, his own eccentricities notwithstanding, on the other hand, was a priest posted at Rani Rashmoni-supported Dakshineswar temple, following a regular version of Hindu ritualistic practices, engaging in idolatry and, in fact, reporting to have viewings of the Goddess Kali. Vivekananda found Ramkrishna initially searching for the experience of God, of seeing God and gradually moved from idol worship to realization of *Nirvikāra Parabrahma* through meditation. Hence, he went on to condemn those reformers who denounced idol worship. He says, 'Brothers if you are fit to worship God without form discarding all external help, do so, but why do you condemn others who cannot do the same?' (vol. 3: 460) He keeps maintaining the reality of the religious as well as the metaphysical Beings: the god as well as the *Brahman* through the ultimate experience of their non-duality. In this way the truth of common religious experience is protected.

Vivekananda sees religion as central to the Indian consciousness and the best way of communicating even progressive ideas to an audience immersed in poverty, discrimination and lack of education and other opportunities. He says, 'Each nation has a main current in life, in India it is religion' (vol. 4: 372-73). He understands religion as a supplementary discourse to that of science. He says:

> The English can understand even religion through politics. The American can understand even religion through social reform. But the Hindu can understand even politics when it is given through religion; everything must come through religion (vol. 3: 314).
>
> In India, religion is the only ground along which we can move, everything must come through religion. For that is the theme, the rest are the variations in the national life music (vol. 3: 314).

With that realization of the centrality of religion and urge to use the selfless practitioners of religion, the *sannyasins*, for inclusive and egalitarian goals, Vivekananda formulates practical Vedanta which mixes the craving for social work with the world-transcending views of Advaita Vedanta. Vivekananda himself, in addition to his spiritual/religious inclinations, was also deeply disturbed by the material condition of people in India; the extreme poverty that he came across in his travels across India moved him. Hence, the reform that he aims for is not a mere doctrinal reformulation but a reform in the way in which religion connects to and improves the life of people, not just in a spiritual sense, but also in a material sense. It is

this social work oriented 'constructive' approach to reforms that he claims as distinctive of his project. He says:

> That is where I differ entirely from these reform movements. For a hundred years, they have been here. What good has been done except the creation of a most vituperative, a most condemnatory literature?' (vol. 3: 215)

In another context, he lauds certain earlier Hindu reformers like Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and Chaitanya as 'constructive ...according to the circumstances of their time'. And then he goes on to add that 'All the modern reformers take to European destructive reformation, which will never do good to anyone and never did...' (vol. 5: 217)

Vivekananda was also agitated by the deep contradiction between valuing the material and the spiritual aspects of life inherent in the popular discourse of religions. He says, 'We talk foolishly against material civilization. The grapes are sour' (vol. 4: 368). He developed a particular dislike for valorizing asceticism and lack in the human situation.

> I do not believe in a God, who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven...India is to be raised, the poor are to be fed, education is to be spread, and the evil of preistcraft is to be removed (vol. 4: 368).

Vivekananda was born Narendranath Dutta in an elite Bengali lawyer family of Calcutta with cross-cultural connections; but by the time he finished college his father had died and his family suddenly had become impoverished. Even while taking up the life of a *sannyasin* at the behest of Ramkrishna he was always worried about the financial upkeep of his family. He was directly aware, in a sense, of how important it is to be materially well placed in order to be comfortable on the road to spirituality and higher realizations. He does subscribe to the material/spiritual as features of the west/east civilizations dichotomy and understands the mode of exchange in terms of that dichotomy. In fact, one of the chief motivations for his taking on his journey to America was one of collecting money to work for the ambitions he had set up for himself here in India.

> A nation which is great in the possession of material power thinks that that is all to be coveted, that that is all meant by progress... On the other hand, another nation may think that mere material civilization is utterly useless... The present adjustment will be the harmonizing, the mingling of these two ideals. (vol. 4: 155)

I may conclude by pointing out that at every point in Vivekananda

there is this insistence on sustaining the reality of both the historical as well as the transcendental, to keep history in philosophy and yet have at the core a philosophy which is beyond history. He says that 'Man is man so long as he is struggling to rise above nature, and this nature is both internal and external' (vol. 2: 64-65). Although Vivekananda understands human existence in terms of this striving towards the transcendental, a-historical, he remains reluctant to neglect the reality of the daily grind. His philosophy connects the Non-dualist Vedanta of the Brahmos, the devotional insight of Sri Ramkrishna with his own social concerns. His prescription allows for timely interventions in conformity with the ideals of timeless truths.

Vivekananda tends to accommodate in his writings many of the apparently contrary practices of idolatry with a belief in formless *Brahman*, a spiritual quest with a concern for the material, a demand for reason with an ultimate spin achieved through realization. The tone in which Vivekananda talks varies depending on the audience, on whether he is speaking in India or to a western audience; when speaking to an Indian audience, he is much more critical of the ills in the then Hindu society and practices; while in the west he is deliberately silent about those. He mentions it being unwise and pointless to wash one's dirty linen among strangers.

Vivekananda is chiefly concerned with the aim of religion as leading to realization of *Brahman*, with the failings of practiced religion, more so of his own religion, Hinduism, and yet someone who has immense faith in the regenerative power latent in Hinduism (sometimes he also refers to it problematically as Hindu race (*Hindu jāti*) or Hindu Civilization (*Hindu Sabhyatā*)). In other contexts, he does talk equally strongly about accepting other religions as other paths to truth and countering sectarianism. He sees the Indian civilization as essentially religious and is hesitant to go for radical reforms; he, in fact, takes on as his project one of revitalizing the religious through appeal to a discourse of reason and trying to connect religion with social service in a bid to make material change in the lives of people. Due to the presence of such *contraries* which Vivekananda nevertheless manages to blend in his thinking, he remains relevant in Indian psyche and politics open to being co-opted by a Gandhi as well as a Subhash Bose, or in the contemporary by the secular as well as the Hindu right wing. There are bits in him that each conveniently find and use.

NOTES

1. References in this article are to *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vols. 1-9, Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1989-1997.
2. 'I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live' (vol. 2: 374).