

## BOOK REVIEW

KIERKEGAARD: A TURNING POINT by Indu Sarin. Delhi: Renaissance, 1996, Rs. 300.

When human existence is the focus of philosophical reflection or the search for what is ultimately real, dispassionate objective reason may be considered to be the wrong investigative avenue to follow in that search. And yet, the entire classical philosophy from Plato to Hegel is dominantly a history of a rationalist objectivist quest for eternal truths. What is common to this philosophical tradition is that the reality of the human individual is overshadowed by a picture of reality that gives precedence to the universal over the particular, the necessary over the contingent, the eternal over the temporal, and essence over existence. Various systematic approaches to high metaphysical abstraction result in theories about static universals, and the dynamic particularities of individual human existence are unscrupulously subsumed under general truths; such as, 'the real is the rational, and the rational is the real'. And what makes up the systems are not individuals as such, but logical principles like universality, reason, objectivity, necessity, the fulcrum of the systems turns out to be some eternal, total cosmic principles—the Absolute Reason, World-soul, or Logos.

Kierkegaard's philosophical voice is one of protest directed against this abstract rationalism, speculative way of dealing with the reality of human existence. His is a voice for taking up the question of the existing individual in its concrete historical particularities and contingencies—the existential dynamics of the living individual as constituted by its subjectivity. It is this *subjective turn*, a turn towards *inwardness*, set against the tendency to characterize the individual in objectivist terms of rational universalization, that is highlighted in Indu Sarin's book under review. This thrust of the book is the search for truth—*existential* truth rather than truth defined in terms of some general essence—that the individual is to actualize it in the existential process of deep subjective quest. It is the truth of existential inwardness, and that inwardness is a kind of inner subjective space where the individual's existential decisions are made with utmost freedom. That inward space, constituted by inner freedom, is the space of existential *authenticity*, and existential truth is none other than existential authenticity born out of a persistent engagement in subjective contemplation.

Sarin's attempt to present the salient ideas of Kierkegaard in the manner of a 'turning-point' is worthy of appreciation. But I very much doubt that the significance of the turning-point is convincingly brought out in the book. The high expectations generated by the subtitle of the book are to be fortified by the actual contents of it.

Kierkegaard is constructed to be *subjectivist-individualist* turning-point with regard to the *objectivist-universalist* persuasions of traditional philosophy. In trying to articulate this turn of thought, Sarin goes through a reasonably well-chosen assortment of topics to substantiate her position. These topics are: 'conception of Christianity', 'subjectivity', 'freedom and responsibility', 'the idea of God', and 'reason, faith and passion'.

Sarin's special outlook on the subjectivist turn exemplified by Kierkegaard is expressed in the form of a belief in the possibility of the redemption of humanity which is seen as imperilled by dehumanization. This is how she puts the point: 'The focus on subjectivity seems to be of even considerable significance to a critical understanding of man's condition which is faced with the perils of dehumanization and alienation in the industrial ecology of the contemporary age' (p. 108). While this observation is perceptive and a clear attempt to project Kierkegaardian Christian existentialism as an antidote to modern civilizational crisis, the book does not seem to contain a clear-cut argument about *how* it can indeed act as an effective antidote. Facile generalia seem to masquerade as arguments advocating for the redeeming virtues of a subjectivist existentialist alternative to a vicious objectivist mode of thinking.

A crusade against dehumanization and alienation is also pronounced in non-subjectivist theories of the nineteenth century, particularly in the dialectical materialist philosophy of Karl Marx. In what interesting ways does the Kierkegaardian theory fare better than the Marxian one in their common crusade? Is any objectivist theorizing *per se* a wrong strategy when it comes to reflecting upon the human mode of life in the world? What about a form of existentialism, like Jean-Paul Sartre's, which tries to establish a meaningful rapport with an objectivist theoretical outlook like Marxism? Such questions, which surely should have figured in the book, do not find a place in Sarin's discussions. And the glaring absence of such a multi-perspectival investigation leaves the book wanting in appropriate critical input. After all, there is nothing in a non-objectivist theory of Kierkegaard's kind that lends *a priori* justification to the argument that it alone has

the liberating spirit needed to overcome alienation and dehumanization.

I think Sarin's book would have been a real 'turning-point' had she tried to identify which form of objectivist universalism, rationalist or idealist, indeed is responsible for the kind of 'objectification' of human beings that actually results in dehumanization and alienation. For it is only when such a form of objectivism is identified that the counter-positioning of the Kierkegaardian subjectivist theory gains the kind of explanatory advantage and prominence that Sarin attributes to it.

There are certain points of observations on Sarin's part that show her ability to recognize Kierkegaard of real illumination. What I regarded to be one of the finest points in Kierkegaard's thought is his contention that (in Sarin's words) 'the truth of Christianity is paradoxical in character' (p. 31). Disclaiming this alleged paradox to be logical one, Sarin asserts that it is an 'existential' paradox that cannot be comprehended in rationalist terms. The paradox is: 'How can the eternal (God) come into being in the historical person of Christ?' From the rationalist viewpoint, it strikes to Kierkegaard as absurd 'that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth . . .' *ibid*?

The profound significance of this paradox is to be appreciated as the kernel truth of Christianity. In Kierkegaard's existentialist representation of Christianity, this truth is interpreted in terms of the human individual's deep inward relationship with God—a most contemplative subjective relationship which effects the 'synthesis of temporality and infinitude' (p. 32). Sarin maintains that this paradox, which cannot be resolved by reason, can be grasped through faith. Unfortunately, there is hardly any illumination in her book on how faith enables us to comprehend the possibility of this rationally unintelligible synthesis. It is precisely where the attentive reader is all agog to find illumination that the reader is frustrated not to find any.

It seems to me that a good Kierkegaard scholarship, which claims to project this great Danish philosopher of the nineteenth century as a 'turning-point' in the history of ideas, must grapple with this paradox. For it is in the imaginative articulation of the deep and dense meaning of the paradox that Kierkegaard's central idea of existential authenticity can be elucidated. The 'new birth' of the 'extraordinary individual' that Kierkegaard envisages in the accomplished synthesis of the temporal and eternal is none other than the authentic individual

emerging from the existential abyss of subjective contemplation.

Despite my critical comments given above, I recommend this book to both students and scholars of continental philosophy and the history of ideas as a book worth reading. It is a good research work on Kierkegaardian inward peep into man's existential concrete being. It has promises that can still be fulfilled by taking up the central problems and insights right where the author leaves for further quest. She has laboured hard to pinpoint central issues in the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard.

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