

TRADITIONAL VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE The Concept of Self and No-Self

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Man is a complex of body and soul and the possessor of a self. Does this self; the ego or "I" exist in a physical body or does it exist independently? Is this self conscious and rational? The traditional theory of human nature views the human primarily as a thinker. Plato considers reason the highest part of human nature. He uses the term psyche, which is commonly translated as 'soul'. Before proceeding to traditional theory of human nature expounded by Plato, let us see Socrates views in a dialogue: "To prefer evil to good is not in human nature." Socrates thinks tha man can know the best by reason; every human is rational so he cannot do evil by knowing it as evil. This is called moral intellectualism. Plato extends Socrates' moral intellectualism and places it in the context of a developed view of reality and of man's psychic functions. He presents his theory as "parts of man's soul". These parts are neither faculties nor they are mere functions. They are divisions of psychic reality and activity. They are not physical in nature. He compares the human emotions to two winged horses that can either drag a reason down into confusions and illusions of the world which is changing or help to carry our reason upward to the world of perfection which is unchanging. In Plato's words:

"In the case of the human soul, first of all, it is a pair of horses that the charioteer dominates; one of them is

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noble and handsome and of good breeding, while the other is the very opposite, so that our charioteer necessarily has a difficult and troublesome task ... the horse of evil nature weighs down their chariots, pulling heavily toward the earth any charioteer who has not trained him well. And here the extremity of toil and struggle awaits the soul ... It is there that Reality lives, without shape or colour, intangible, visible only to reason, the soul's pilot; and all true knowledge is knowledge of her. Now a god's faculty of understanding is sustained by experiencing direct and pure knowledge, as is that part of every soul that is concerned to receive what is akin to this experience. Consequently when the soul has at long last beheld Reality, it rejoices, finding sustenance in its direct contemplation of the truth and in the immediate experience of it until, in the revolution of its orbit, it is brought round again to the point of departure. And in the course of the revolution it beholds absolute justice and temperance and knowledge, not such knowledge as is subject to process, and varies with its various objects to which we ascribe Reality; no, it is Real Knowledge whose object is the truly existent ... but of the other souls, that which best follows [and most closely resembles] a god and has raised its charioteer's head up into the outer region is carried around with the gods in their revolution — yet it is troubled by the horses and only beholds Reality with much difficulty. Another sometimes rises, sometimes sinks; because the horses are unruly it beholds some part of Reality, but fails to see others.”¹

The driver of these two horses must know where he is going. Reason is the driver and the highest part of man's soul. According to Plato, body and soul are two distinct entities. The soul, or mind is something distinct from a gross corporeal body. Plato defines death through Socrates' mouth in his dialogue and gives a clear-cut idea of two separate entities.

“Do we believe death to be anything? Death means that the body come to exist by itself, separated from the soul, and soul exists by herself, separated from the body.”²

Socrates continued and thus summed up his argument:

“The soul is most like the divine, and the intelligible and the uniform, and the indissoluble, and the unchangeable, while the body is most like the humans, and the mortal, and the unintelligible, and the multiform, and the dissoluble, and the changeable? Have we any other argument to show that this is not same.”³

In 17th century Rene Descartes who is called the father of modern philosophy presented a sharp contrast between two entities — mind and body. One of which has physical characteristics and the other has mental characteristics. One’s attribute is extension and other’s thought. These two separate entities bound up together to make up a human being. It was the beginning of a big problem of dualism in philosophy and psychology.

The question is, is there any standard, any ideal on which one can pattern his judgment and his conduct? Is there any principle common to all human beings? There are many views of philosophers, psychologists and religious thinkers about this. In Plato’s philosophy the theory of intelligible “forms” is such a criterion. For, Plato the forms are eternal and perfect in nature and exist in an unchanging perfect heaven. Things on earth are but imperfect reflections of these forms. The purpose of the soul is to get freedom of its body and ascend to heaven. The soul can achieve its purpose or destiny only if it controls its bodily desires and trains its aggressive impulses so that both obey the reason. Reason, spirit and appetite are the three defining parts of human nature. Humans can control their appetites and aggression by the use of their reason.

Plato’s discovery of the three parts is the key to happiness and virtue. This happiness and virtue can be achieved through

the harmony of these three parts. Happiness is only possible when the reason ruled over emotions and desires. Unhappiness naturally comes when these three parts fight against one another. Socrates says:

“When reason and emotion have been trained and each has learned its proper function, they should stand guard over the appetites...lest the appetite grows so strong that they try to enslave and overthrow them.”⁴

It is very interesting to note here the Quranic approach. From its standpoint, the concept of human soul has to deal with the philosophical and metaphysical problem of human nature. According to the Quran, there are three stages of *nafs* or self:

Nafse Ammara (impulsive self)

Nafse Lawama (reproaching self)

Nafse Mutmainna (contented self)⁵

First self is ‘impulsive self’ (*Nafse Ammara*) because it is desire; this provides an impulse to action. This aspect instigates man to evil. This is the stage of appetite. In Plato’s theory this is the third part of the soul. This is for worldly desires and idolizes transitory external good and believes that would bring happiness for individual. It is natural stage but one should surpass through the consented efforts of his will.

Second self is ‘reproaching self’ (*Nafse Lawama*). This is the middle stage. It blames or criticizes itself. A conflict ensues between the two selves: the one, *Nafse Ammara*, incites to evil while the other, *Nafse Lawama*, restrains from evil. It could be called locus of moral consciousness. This conflict should be balanced by reason.

The third is ‘contented self’ (*Nafse Mutmainna*), where reason works and self ceases to be the seat of conflicts, worries and turmoil. Passions and desires are overcome, complete peace is established and a complete balanced personality emerges. This view is very close to Sufism. Sufi recognizes this as ‘*qalab*’. This imports the seat of intellectual understanding as well as emotions.

Aristotle held that human reason could discover the truth about nature. While Plato held that the truth about human nature requires knowledge of another world of reality. He held that truth about human nature requires only knowledge of our own world. However, he places reason on a higher level and agrees that our ability to reason is the characteristic that sets the human self. Aristotle says, however, the human soul is higher; it has the power of thinking and is able to think about the inner nature of things, so human soul has reason. He divides reason into two kinds, Passive reason and Creative reason. Creative reason is just form whereas passive reason is matter. Creative reason has a spark of divinity.

Plato has set a purpose in the form of "Forms". Aristotle also emphasized the idea that humans have some purpose. He argues as a biologist that all living things are tending towards a goal or purpose.

For example, it is clear that the purpose of an eye is to see and a purpose of an ear is to hear.

"as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought."⁶

Both the teacher Plato and his student Aristotle emphasize reason as more important than our desires and aggressiveness. Reason is a unique principle in human nature. Thus the reason sets the purpose of human nature on its own. We see the purpose of human beings is to be morally rational, as we see in platonic theory; reason must control worldly desires and aggression.

Another aspect of this problem is that human nature has a spiritual side, soul is immaterial and it is enslaved in body. The purpose of soul is to get free from the chains of body, which is a prison for soul. We as human beings are distinct from the material world. This is our mind which enables us to make a clear cut difference between material and immaterial. Through reasons we give meanings and sense to the facts around us.

In this rationalist view of human nature, human beings are as reasoning beings, imbued with soul, with the purpose of life. Our reason can control our appetites and aggressive impulses. In fact it is reason itself which gives us power to rise above desires and self interest and enables us to define our purpose.

If our reason knows the Form (ideals), humans can be completely virtuous. To be virtuous one has to gain knowledge of the Idea or Form of good, which exists in the unchanging world of ideas. The soul recalls the pure ideas, which existed in its pre-existent situation. Knowledge is not something new for the soul, that is the thing that has been forgotten due to the debasement of body. Plato's view is that we can achieve complete happiness only by coming to know the perfect forms, which exist in another unchanging world. Aristotle rejected this view and held that happiness could be found in this world not in the world of ideas. According to Aristotle,

“Even if there is some one good which is universally predicable of goods or is capable of separate and independent existence, clearly it could not be achieved or attained by man; but we are now seeking something attainable.”⁷

The question arises, what must we do to attain happiness? Plato's answer to this question is very simple, only by having knowledge of the perfect good, but Aristotle rejects this idea. Humans should have happiness in this world. Then what is the path towards happiness? In this connection Aristotle first deals with the human nature.

“Perhaps the best approach is to ask what the specific purpose or function of man is. For the good and

excellence of all beings that have purpose such as musicians, sculptors, or craftsmen — depend on their purpose. So if a man has a purpose his goodwill is related to this purpose. And how could man not have a natural purpose when even cobblers and carpenters have a purpose? Surely, just as each part of man — the eye, the hand, the foot — has a purpose, so also man as a whole must have a purpose ...”⁸

In Platonic theory man’s purpose is to be rationally good. It is man’s nature to achieve that good which lies there in the world of ideas. Aristotle believes that reason is good but man must achieve happiness in this world. The achievement of this purpose is in human nature. Afterwards Plato influenced Christian thought in many ways. Particularly Thomas Aquinas took Plato’s doctrine that human self is a rational self. It can control desires and has the power to rule over them.

Thomas Aquinas takes the idea of happiness and says that all humans and every thing in nature have a purpose. He sets the purpose of human self to achieve happiness by using their reason to know God. This is an ultimate purpose to be achieved by humans. According to Thomas Aquinas, there are two ways to consider the ultimate purpose (end). First is to consider ultimate end objectively and second is to consider ultimate end subjectively. In the objective sense the end or purpose must be a thing to get. Subjectively, this end is the use, having possession or attainment of those things. These are not two metaphysically different purposes but in roots there is but one ultimate purpose. St. Thomas explains:

“The end is spoken of in two ways. In one way, it is the thing itself (*ipsares*); in another way, it is the attainment of the thing (*adeptiorei*). Now these are not two ends, but one end, considered in itself, or as applied to another being.”⁹

St. Thomas classifies many natural goods in three categories

1. Goods of fortune

2. Goods of the body
3. Goods of the soul¹⁰

Goods of fortune include wealth, fame and power. Goods of the body include long life of body, strength, health and physical beauty. Goods of the soul are the soul itself. The good of the soul is not anything. All the created goods are discarded. Our desire for the perfection is the human nature. This desire could not be fully satisfied with anything imperfect. Natural things are but with limited perfection. God must be that object where man's natural desire for happiness will be fulfilled.

In the traditional view of human nature all the thinkers unanimously agreed that there is a self and it is rational. There is another side of the picture where some philosophers deny the existence of any kind of self *ab initio*. F. B. Skinner says that self cannot be explained except by positing a kind of "ghost in the machine". Skinner's view is that this belief was developed when a proper science of behavior was not developed. Afterwards he reduced man's behavior down like birds, animals who were conditioned to be what they were by their environments. What we call 'self' is a "united set of responses to stimuli". This is true that we respond to external stimuli but this is not all what we do. The complicated nervous system and the complex activity which human beings perform is not so simple as could be reduced only to a set of behavioral responses. An empiricist philosopher David Hume rejected the traditional view of human nature and held that we get all knowledge through sense perception. We cannot perceive the "self". So it is concluded that there is no self. He says:

"For my part, when I enter most intimately what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at anytime without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception ... but setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of man kind, that they are nothing but a bundle

or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and one in a perpetual flux and movement the mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance: pass, surpass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite verity of postures and situations.”¹¹

According to Hume there is no fixed nature of man. Everything is changing. If everything is in a constant flux it is impossible that human nature could be one out of it. Our mental states, our perceptions, sensations, all are changing moment to moment, then the question arises, does the self remain the same? If the answer is in affirmative it would be a negation of the first premise and if the answer is in negative then many other questions will arise. As Hume states that thoughts, feelings and desires are found in bundle or collection, the question is, is there any feeling or thought without the owner of that. My headache is my headache, other persons do not understand the severity of my pain. What makes my pain mine and your pain yours? Second point is when Hume says “I never catch myself ...” what is this ‘I’ he is talking about?

Existentialism holds that humans are whatever they make themselves. According to existentialists there is no any essential human nature. Individuals but create their own essence through their own free choices and actions. They do not agree with the traditional view of human nature and hold that there is no fixed rational nature or purpose of humans. There are many existentialists thinker including some religious thinkers. I will only discuss the chief exponent of existentialism: Jean Paul Sartre.

His one general statement is the gist of his whole thought about human beings: “we are free.” We humans can neither rely upon God nor upon society. We are condemned to be free and must suffer agony of our own decisions and afterwards anguish of consequences of our own decisions. We are fully aware of them. When we are aware, it means we are responsible for what we are doing. We must take full responsibility of our choices, decisions, ambitions, beliefs and attitudes.

Being conscious of the freedom and responsibility accompanying it, it causes anguish. When we escape from responsibility, we only act in "bad faith". We blame outer circumstances, our society and other forces, which are not under our control. This is self-deception. We know ourselves that what we are doing we are doing it consciously.

Existentialism emphasizes on a free and conscious human. In this view self is neither rational nor mechanical. This is but not a creature of God as such. On the other hand, it is rather a project that possesses a subjective life: human nature is, what humans themselves make it. To be human is to create ones own self. Sartre's famous words are "existence precedes essence". He believes that the existence of human is prior to his essence. First one exists then he makes himself whatever he wants to be made. Sartre in a very clear manner expresses his views in his book *Existentialism and Humanism*.

"Atheist existentialism, of which I am a representative declares ... that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man ... what do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence we mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself surges himself in the world ... and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until latter, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is he wills."¹²

Sartre's opinion is that all teleological explanations are injurious to the dignity of man. Man is not an end product.

For Sartre there is no metaphysical source of human nature or world plan. To search for a human nature common to every man, a principle shared by everyone needs to posit a deity, an

absolute being that is over and above the individual. Sartre avoids this kind of "Speculative Dogma". In its ontological sense, man is only pure existence.

In traditional view of human nature, human beings have a self and the function of the self is thinking and the purpose of human nature is to get happiness. All the human beings try to get this purpose through rational activities. While Hume rejected the concept of self and said that there is no self at all, existentialist thinker Sartre also denied any kind of self or any kind of planned nature because there is no planner. He affirms only the existence of man. The asserting of this "personhood" is the self-assertion. This self is conceiving its existence and asserting its free personality. It has a unique kind of unity that is common to all human beings. This view is further supported by the Cognitive-Behavioral Theorists who maintain their view that ability to think is most important aspect of both normal and abnormal human functioning. They hold that people's overall behavior follows from the interpretations of their thoughts, so it is the thought rather than actions that must be examined most closely.

"Albert Ellis (1987, 1984, 1962) proposes that each of us holds a unique set of assumptions about ourselves and our world that serve to guide us through life and determine our reactions to the various situations we encounter."¹³

This personhood of ourselves is the most real thing we can know. We know and affirm the reality of self or ego on the basis of direct intuition of it. Thus, the knowledge of the self is a direct perception of itself.

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