



Human Nature: An Indo-Eastern Perspective

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Abstract: *Over the years, as we grow up, we often wonder about the purpose or reason of our existence. Is life simply a matter of obtaining food and shelter? In fact, animals are mostly occupied in activities related to survival. But surely human existence must have a greater purpose. This has been the basic concern in the Indo-Eastern perspective on human nature. The Indian approaches tell us that many of the problems that we face in life are due to faulty ways of thinking and understanding the world. Therefore, the concern in the Indian perspective is on removal of faulty knowledge which keeps us in a state of ignorance (avidya). Once we have realized this, it is possible to live life with a new kind of freedom. In this state we come to experience a deep and complete joy. This happiness or state of bliss is present in each of us. We only have to unfold and experience it. Such a state enlarges the human consciousness in such a manner that a person's goal becomes recovering the experience of beingness or existence that is common to everybody.*

Keywords: *Human Nature, Indo-Eastern, Purpose, Existence*

I. INTRODUCTION

In western culture the concept of nature describes several things. Ellen (1996) argues that nature first means a “thing,” that is, the non-human aspects of the world. Second, it means an “other,” or in other words, all that exists “out there.” Third, nature refers to an “essence” that can be either human (e.g., the nature of humans is very complex) or situational (e.g., the nature of those acts is based on altruism). In other cultures these definitions may vary (MacCormack and Strathern 1980) [2].

John R Seeley (1950) argues in his research on the shaping of human nature that the Man is not born human, he becomes human in society. All his distinctively human characteristics: the “gift” of speech, the “ability” to reason, self respect, self control, his ability to put himself in the place of others, to sympathize, to love or hate in any human sense – all these and more, are mediated to him by the society into which he is born, and they cannot be had without it. The supporting evidence for such a point of view comes from the instances of feral children-not raised in human society-and from the instances of children highly isolated in their upbringing, but, more weightily from careful observation of the processes of growing up in a number of societies. In short, in the view of psychologist, the little biological organism, the little mass of reactive protoplasm, the little animal that is only potentially human gets his human nature in and from the society into which he is born. [3]

The debate as to what man is "really like" and what his potentiality is, is highly intricate. It has occupied intellectuals and citizens at large at least since Socrates walked the olive groves of Athens' academia. Scores of lines of argumentation have been advanced, challenged, qualified, and extended. There are three basic views of human nature: negative, positive, and indifferent. As the list is logically exhaustive, leaving no other possibility, the ultimate answer must be a variant of one of these. The pessimists hold that human beings, in their natural, ungraced state, are beastly. What has commonly been referred to as the Hobbesian view of human nature, is that humans are inherently self-centered and aggressive: "man is wolf to man." Society, it follows, must set up and enforce constraints that keep human beings civil.

The optimists see human beings in the state of nature as graceful, cooperative, and loving. Competitiveness, aggression, and destructiveness are introduced by the society which imposes itself on them.

The individual has a nature of his own, which affects and is affected by the societal needs, cultural heritage, economic opportunities, and the historical conditions he encounters. It is quite appropriately referred to as "human nature" because it is shared by all human beings, whatever culture, society, or historical age in which they live.[4]

Dennis O'Connor and Leodones Yballe in their research of Maslow's revisited have argued that over the next several decades, Maslow became increasingly intrigued by what he eventually labeled the “farther reaches of human nature” (Maslow, 1971). He sought to build an appreciative understanding of human beings at their best. In contrast with the preoccupation of Freudian psychopathology, this “psychology of the higher life” was to attend to the question “of what the human being should grow toward” (Maslow, 1964, p. 7). He interviewed folks who had been identified as great people and found that they had somehow become themselves more fully. He began to spell out in more detail the processes and character of self-actualization.



In Maslow's view, self-actualization is not an endpoint, but rather an ongoing process that involves dozens of little growth choices that entail risk and require courage. He noted that it was a difficult path to take and often puts us at odds with surrounding people and norms. He also found that self actualizing people were deeply committed in action to core values that look very similar to those put forward in all major religious traditions. These "being-values" are simple yet difficult to fully embody in the everyday challenges of life—for example, truth, justice, goodness, beauty, order, simplicity, and meaning or purposefulness. He observed that self-actualizers were attuned to their own unique biological nature (talents, likes, tastes, etc.) and had a unique, intangible spiritual nature, an interconnected combination of being-values and purpose. He saw these values as "meta-motivators." For example, individuals might be moved to seek justice in the world, as well as do justice to their own inner voice or truth. In general, they seek to put things right and to do it the right way. To a person, the self-actualizers were deeply engaged with their immediate worlds. They also were much more likely to report peak, transcendent experiences that helped them see beyond the immediate and develop a spiritual focus. They were "called" to act, and they responded. [5]

II. HUMAN NATURE: AN EASTERN PERSPECTIVE

A. GUNA THEORY:

Indian thinkers have widely accepted the samkhya view that prakriti manifests itself in three gunas – Sattwa, raja and tamo. When applied to human beings, it holds that, while the three are present in every individual, one predominates. Thus, an individual's personality – his outlook, temperament, attitudes, likes, dislikes, activities – are all a result of the prominent guna.

The Bhagavad Gita extends the samkhya thesis, going so far as to claim the kind of food one likes, how one sacrifices, what one worships, how one gives gifts and what is conducive to one's happiness are determined by it.

The Sattwa guna is associated with light, truth, calmness, serenity, egolessness, purity, harmony, balance, control, unity, thoughtfulness, gentleness, the inner sympathy and compassion. The raja guna is associated with passions, drives, action, physical strength, ruling, attachment, pleasure, restlessness, arrogance, heedlessness, disunity, divisions, power and wealth. The tamo guna is associated with inertia, darkness, sloth, confusion, obstinacy, unpleasantness, demonic, limitation, distortion, and coarseness.

The gunas successively dominate, support, activate and interact with each other. Sattwa is buoyant and shining. Raja is stimulating and moving. Tamo is heavy and enveloping.

The triadic nature of guna theory is important because it is simply truer to human nature than the bipolar western psychology. A simple example will suffice: If we cannot feel dull, heavy and fatigued (tamas) how can we rest or enter into deep sleep – thus allowing us to process our experience in our dreams and to wake up feeling once again clear and bright (sattwa) and refreshed with renewed vitality and power of action (rajas)? In waking life too, if we cannot tolerate 'tamasic' states in which our consciousness feels dull, murky, or clouded – or if physical inertia, lethargy or fatigue did not restrain from getting lost in the whirl of everyday desires, drives and activities (rajas) then we would not feel the need or take the opportunity to rest or mediate our lives.

The Indian approaches to human nature focus on the larger reality of which each person is a part. These approaches emphasize that the problems which we face are because we do not realize our true self. According to these approaches our awareness of who we are often remains faulty and very narrow. Because of this we live in a state of ignorance. It is possible to get out of this state of ignorance by following certain practices, including meditation. There are many approaches to human nature but in this lesson we will focus on the four approaches- Vedantic, Buddhist, Jain and Sufi.

The main concern in the Indian perspectives is on understanding the nature of self – who we are, and the nature of reality as a whole. These two topics constitute the main focus in the Upanishads, the last part of the Vedas. [6]

B. THE VEDANTIC VIEW:

It is derived from the Upanishads. The learned saints and seers who contributed to the Upanishads considered reality in terms of one ultimate principle which they called Brahman. It is held that the Brahman is present in the entire world and is the reason for the existence of all things. You will notice that all the suffering we experience in life is because we develop attachments, likings, disliking and preferences for external objects around us like fancy clothes, and other objects of material comfort. Since all these factors provide temporary satisfaction only, we end up only desiring more and more with lesser and lesser satisfaction. We are not in touch with the real center of our life's true self so we cannot experience true happiness.

The Vedantic view on human nature, or who we really are, emphasizes that the core of each person is one with Brahman or the consciousness. It can be understood with the help of the three terms sat, chit, and anand. Sat means existence, chit refers to awareness or consciousness and anand as you must know means happiness or joy which is the state of bliss or delight. Thus the



experience of Brahman comes from the realization that behind all existence including human beings lies Brahman which is pure consciousness and which is inherently blissful.

C. THE JAIN PERSPECTIVE:

It considers that the world is made up of two kinds of reality, living and non-living. Every living being has a spirit or a soul (jiva). For this reason the Jains avoid causing injury to life in any form. They practice non violence (ahimsa). Another important belief in Jainism is the respect for the opinion of others because they hold that reality is many faceted (anekantavada). In the Jain view of existence, consciousness is the basic or essential nature of every soul. An ordinary human being faces all kinds of suffering in day-to-day life. S/he is a jiva, or a living conscious substance called the soul. This soul is inherently perfect. It has infinite potentiality within. Infinite knowledge, infinite faith, infinite power and infinite bliss, all can be obtained by the soul. But there are certain obstacles which prevent the soul from attaining that state. Therefore, they have first to be removed. Just like the shining sun lights up the whole world as soon as the atmosphere is free from clouds and fog, the soul too can attain omniscience and other perfections, once the obstacles are removed.

D. BUDDHIST VIEW:

Based on his experience, Gautam Buddha offered the middle path to life: finding meaning in life by neither denying oneself from sense gratification, nor over indulgence in one's desires and cravings. Buddha focused on the important questions of sorrow, its cause, the stopping of suffering and the path through which sorrow can be stopped. The answers to these questions form the basis of Buddha's enlightenment and are known as the four noble truths (catvari arya satyani). These are as follows:

1. Life is full of suffering (duhkha): The first truth is the existence of suffering. Normally, the inner state or people are such that dissatisfaction becomes unavoidable.
2. There is a cause for all suffering (duhkha-samudaya): The second truth is that suffering is the result of desire. Most people have an attachment to positive and pleasurable objects and repulsion toward negative and painful objects. If our desires are unsatisfied, we have a need to change our present situation. On the other hand, if we are satisfied, we are afraid of change and this causes frustration and suffering. Since all things have a temporary existence, our enjoyment of the present is reduced because of the realization that it will soon pass. For this reason, we always want the situation to be other than what it is.
3. It is possible to put an end to suffering (duhkha nirodha): The third truth is that it is possible to stop suffering by removing craving. According to Buddhism, it is possible to learn to accept the world as it is without experiencing dissatisfaction. If our happiness depends on the satisfaction of certain needs, or if we are controlled by our desires, then they have become unhealthy cravings which should be removed. Some desire like those for food and sleep - are necessary for survival. Acceptance of the world as it is, means we should develop an even-minded attitude of enjoying desires which are fulfilled, without fear of those periods when our dreams don't become a reality. In this way we slowly learn to accept things as they are, but at the same time, by acting in the right way, we can make things better for the future.
4. There is a path which leads to the end of suffering (duhkha - nirodha - marga): The fourth truth is that there is a way to remove suffering, i.e., craving and dissatisfaction. This way is called the Eight-fold Path, (astang marg) which consists of right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right thought, and right understanding. The basic idea here is that certain ways of thinking and acting can harm others as well as injure oneself. In Buddhist training, three aspects are essential: moral conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. The Eightfold path falls under these three categories. Moral or ethical conduct is based on the fundamental Buddhist teachings of universal love and compassion for all living beings. Ethical conduct includes right speech, right action and right livelihood.

E. THE SUFISM VIEW:

It is the spiritual, mystical core or inner aspect of Islam. For centuries Sufism has offered a path which if followed can lead to progress toward self realization - the emergence of the true purpose of our existence. The goal of Sufism is to help a person in having a direct experience of God or ultimate truth by going beyond ordinary personal experiences. This goal is attained with the help of teachings in different forms which have to be practiced in one's life. Sufism has been described as a way of knowledge, a way of devotion and a way of love. It is an approach which helps us go beyond mental and emotional obstacles which come in the way of spiritual growth. In the Sufi view, certain teachers know what is really important in life, how to help individuals to become real and complete human beings and realize one's true nature. These teachers help in transmitting useful knowledge -



knowledge that helps in the understanding of one's own self and which allows us to experience the Divine spark which exists within each one of us. A person who follows the path of Sufism is called by different names. Apart from that of a Sufi they are referred to as a faqir, and also a dervish.

The following four points are considered as important tenets of Sufism.

1. There are as many ways to reach truth (or God) as there are individuals. All ways involve transformation of the ego and service to creation.
2. We can live in harmony with others only if we develop an inner sense of justice. This occurs only when we have reduced our selfishness and arrogance.
3. Love is one of the underlying principles of morality. Love springs from self-work and expresses itself in their service to others.
4. The cardinal truth is self-knowledge. Knowledge of self ripens into knowledge of God.

III. CONCLUSION

We have discussed different Indo-eastern perspectives on the nature of human being. One thing which is noticeable here is that all four views - Vedantic, Jain, Buddhist and Sufi - tell us that normally we live in a state of ignorance. We do not have knowledge of who we really are and therefore, we are dissatisfied and we suffer. In order to realize our true nature, different methods are given in these systems of thought but the goal is similar. The goal is to directly experience a higher truth behind our existence. Once we have an experience of this, our true nature, our approach towards life changes. We see ourselves, the whole world as a big family. The day-to-day suffering and problems come to an end. and we are then able to live meaningful and fulfilled lives.

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