

Relevance of Arthur Schopenhauer's Pessimism in Modern Times

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Abstract

Pessimism as a living philosophy of life at any rate cannot be considered as a proposal with a candid appeal. Majority times it is by default that a philosophy is forced upon by life-experiences. Ultimately choice of a specific philosophical outlook as a guidance or route to happiness is mostly an outcome of one's own compromises in life. It goes without dispute that only a select few philosophers could master courage to handle Pessimism as a philosophy. Needless to say Schopenhauer's approach is indeed a unique one. Embracing reality needs an upright nature and further transcending over it to guide humanity requires the strength of purpose. It is an uphill task. The paper attempts to show how Arthur Schopenhauer dealt with pessimism at the initial stages and later drew philosophical tenets out of this behavioral science. In addition Schopenhauer's treatment of this subject just does not include only exposing the negativities of life but providing solution through 'Nirvana' philosophy.

Introduction

Despite the intermittent wars in the 18th Century, Europeans in particular did not spare any effort in continuing their interest in the theoretical aspects of knowledge. No shade of philosophy was either deliberately ignored or left unnoticed because of any pre-conceived notions. Religion, of course as the main center of attraction was sincerely looked upon as an eclectic guidance and ultimate source to provide the requisite solace. But at the same time the mercantile tendency, rather inherent did not take any back-seat. By means of some tactical propositions countries were conquered for establishing their own colonies. The weak-willed and unorganized or one can say even disorganized nations got easily snared and fell prey to the opponent's astute calculations. Fortunately, philosophers somehow managed to remain uninfluenced. Rather they hardly bothered about these turmoils. In fact, they preferred to maintain a respectable distance, rejoicing in their own created world. They were indeed quite pre-occupied. They were consistently obsessed with the then extant problems in philosophy. Early Greek philosophers worked exclusively for the welfare of the society. Later somehow with centuries rolling on, the spirit got either weakened or wavered. It is a fact none can deny, that all human beings are by nature inquisitive but only a chosen few can make a profession out of this natural faculty. Philosophy is an essential element needed for making a concrete sense out of this propensity. Philosophers are obsessed with the idea of discovering the fundamental cause or causes for the phenomenon 'Life and its events'!

Present Scenario

There had been so many conflicting currents in philosophy that it is humanly improbable to create a grading system to evaluate them completely and impartially. One has to honestly accept the fact that not all philosophies can be considered as truly useful to the society as a whole or a personal life's progress. Many of them are rather stuck up in a purely academic domain. Such philosophies, naturally can hardly enthuse common man. This is because the common man has a tendency to look to philosophy as of great utility for day to day life to dispel own ignorance and meet life-challenges. Such philosophies with

a high overtone and academics should be reserved only for the scholarly discussions or acrobatics. This is in no way a criticism leveled against the recognized scholars but it is in view of the utility of a philosophy that is ever needed for common man.

Every decade and obviously century, poses different problems or same problems with altered shades. There is no escape from this. Humanity as such has limited resources mainly because of its rigidity in approaches. Common man wants solution to his problems rather than the description of the problem or analysis. Just by changing words or tone or using subject jargons nothing can be transformed or changed. Some of the great philosophical traditions particularly with regard to ethics have undergone radical changes and now they are referred only for their historical importance. Generally common man neither wants to be a philosopher nor scientist. All that he is eager to achieve is knowledge to defend the existing reality, than finding a resort in escapism. It would therefore be wise not to hold on to only one exclusive current in philosophy but to use it sparingly in an appropriate manner on time for the demand of this situation.

"Philosophy then, would claim, speaking broadly and in the round, is mood music, and we become accustomed to using the philosophy that fits the mood, whatever it is. There are times of adversity, for examples, when a man is called upon to show stoic strength, other times when Epicurean serenity would be more fitting and still other times of wild speculation and mystical belief when a skeptical attitude would be more fitting." [1].

The Conflicting Isms

Optimism

This behavioral science untiringly takes pride in pinning its hope in the predominance of good or rather positivity in the world. It also expects the existence of a naturally occurring balance of pleasure and pain. At times, it may even prefer to overlook the very existence of the latter. Philosophical optimism has been worked out in a systematic way in Leibniz's outlook. According to him, this is probably the best

possible way to design the world. It should be credited to the genius and handiwork of God only. In a way we find Immanuel Kant also extended support to Leibniz's idea by having an emphasis on the 'Radical Evil' in the world, which in turn rather prevents men from practicing or exercising good-will at every front. Optimism effortlessly nurtures the belief in a better future or in the ultimate triumph of good over evil, virtue over vice, and all morally recognized qualities to dominate over the existing immoral habits. Even Aristotle and Epicurus not only advocated this viewpoint but placed support system for this philosophy. Epicurus, in particular, vehemently supported optimism in the interest of humanity mainly to strengthen the mind, then allowing it to get weakened in the mart of mundane activities. For him 'Pleasure as the living principle of life' was of utmost importance.

Pessimism

Usually pessimistic outlook is tainted with the charge that it not only promotes a depressive viewpoint but also engages in strengthening this claim. According to this 'ism' the world had been essentially filled with evil, and there can be no respite. Rolling of the events is automatic and beyond our control. Steadily or abruptly everything slips away. It would start from bad and go to worse. It would be really difficult to bring it to our mind, by honest analysis, that good can ever excel and bad would be eliminated forever. All the negative qualities are so strong that there seems to be no genuine hope to survive. Somehow from the historical standpoint it is clear that there had been hardly a few notable philosophers who could embrace Pessimism as Philosophy. Religious Philosophies held optimism as the requisite quality to progress in the path of spirituality. On the other hand those who outlived their time had a tendency to find shelter under Pessimism only. Arthur Schopenhauer and Hartmann can be considered as the main pro-pounders of this philosophy. However, some of the philosophers of existential doctrines like Heidegger, Sartre and Nietzsche can also be added to the list. These thinkers found a convenient platform in Pessimism to put forth their doctrines related to Death, Nothingness and Angst.

Meliorism

All is well with this world or nothing sounds good in any walk of life had been the extreme moods. Naturally every person is bound to experience both the moods. However to hold on to only a particular theme and then transform it into a distilled philosophy is not easy. Meliorism, rather adopts the 'golden mean path', according to which it is wise to accept both isms with their convictions but partly. It's a fact that both have slightly exaggerated claims. Nonetheless, none of them can be dismissed. Meliorism thinks that the description of the world around us has been given by both with a single shade only whereas numerous shades are available. In brief the existing world has definitely depressing facts over which we may not have any control. However this could be made better for living. Owing to this a ray of hope is encouraged and acceptance of the reality is also indicated.

Schopenhauer's philosophy

Schopenhauer stands as one of the eponymous individuals who could describe the existing world only on the axis of reality. Generally there is an attempt to present the world other than the way it exists or functions, providing a false hope. In fact it all began with Immanuel Kant who strived to morally adjust this world. In course of time it became almost mandatory for him to look practically into the 'Will' one of the fundamental questions in ethics had been how to conduct

and as an extension to see that it leads to happiness. Life never can be a scientific riddle. One has to exercise his 'Will' with necessary modifications willingly or unwillingly. Kant claims, 'Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world or even out of it which can be called good without qualification, except a Good Will' [2]. For Kant the dynamic form of moral ideals is the key to unveil many truths. Moral ideals too in their own rights may be subjected to changes and therefore should not be treated as rigid entities. Therefore Kantian philosophical outlook can be used as a way of life so as to be worthy of happiness.

To begin with, Schopenhauer's Will should be understood little beyond its usual meaning. For him, Will is not to be taken as the deliberate or purposeful activity on the part of some individual or social group [3]. Schopenhauer expresses a separate existence both to an individual and the surroundings. Therefore there are instincts, temptations, inclinations etc. related to human existence, animal world and plant kingdom. That means Will is an incessant activity in all the Organic parts of Universe. Will is to be recognized as an active agent working in every sphere of Nature. Further it is the Will which is completely responsible for the desire to live and continue to live. It is in this context that Will is taken for a force which includes our instinctual tendency and impulsiveness. His 'Will' firstly adheres to pantheism and then finds refuge in Buddhism. In fact much of it is derived from Vedanta. On the whole, Schopenhauer began with a scientific zeal to understand cause of all Nature phenomena and concluded that for everything, Will is the root cause. Therefore every action has Will as the primary and efficient cause. While defending the position of Will at a personal level, there cannot be any dispute over the existence of misery, injustice, hatredness, insufficiency and so on. All these negative qualities find birth in the deficiency in self. On all planes it is the personal Will which is dominating. Since Will is the master, it is ever at work.

"All willing arises from want, therefore from deficiency....." [4]. Schopenhauer shows that, Pessimism follows from the very nature of will. On the other hand willing itself sprouts from deficiency. Owing to this fact it is accompanied by misery or suffering. Satisfaction to its fullest measure may not be possible yet when there is sizeable percentage of gain; it seems many more are clearly denied. The species 'desire' as such is limitless. True justification may be sparsely furnished. Therefore lasting happiness or peace seems to be a farfetched idea or almost improbable. Therefore Schopenhauer feels, "So long as we are the subject of willing we can never have lasting happiness nor peace." [5].

Absence of unhappiness does not guarantee happiness; Schopenhauer insists upon this fact and extends the same in other areas too. The consideration of life fixed by him as 'pain', whenever we announce the pairs of opposites we do miss the line of demarcation. Therefore absence of one doesn't transform the other into its opposite.

The path of salvation

Schopenhauer refers to thing-in-itself as distinct from the world as idea, whereas, Kant had "the world split into Noumena and Phenomena. Schopenhauer rejects Kant's interpretation of thing-in-itself but does not dismiss its necessity in total. Schopenhauer never insisted on the world as merely a dream or my "my idea". To him it is Will which is the base of all phenomena.

Schopenhauer doesn't just present a scary picture but also suggests a deliverance from it. The primary path according to him is through Art.

Art is connected to ideas and so it can help create eternal ideas through contemplation. The source of Art is surely through knowledge of ideas. One can forget his individuality, Will and manage to remain as the pure subject. A Genius can do so by renouncing everything. But then this also may not give complete deliverance. One can't stop willing. Therefore true release is only by giving up willing, not by shunning sorrows (reality) but rejecting joys. Next step therefore, has to be morality, which is perception and the perfect root of all morality is sympathy. However true salvation comes only when the striving disappears completely. Lastly the Ascetic starvation can only lead us to the attainment of Nirvana, total extinction of consciousness, so that nothing can trouble a man. He can smile away at the delusions of this World!

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