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Vivekananda's Philosophy of Life

Abstract

Swami Vivekananda was a great philosopher who would successfully dilute the abstruse philosophical concepts for the common man. His concept of religion has broad and universal. He lent to Hinduism the glory due to it. A man of lofty vision, he was never removed from the social and cultural realities of India. His writings and speeches help man in achieving earthly perfection as well.

Keyword: Vedanta, Maya, Ideal-ism, Abstract Monism, Sat-Chit-Ananda

Introduction

Vivekananda's philosophy of life arises from the awareness of the social, religious and economic conditions of the Indian masses, he had also a realization that at least some of the social evils were due to the orthodox and superstitions prevalent in the society of the time. He had a deep conviction that this was due to a loss of faith in spiritual values. Consequently, he aimed at emphasizing the ultimacy of spiritual values. Amiya P. Sen remarks:

"..... the idea of India as a distinct civilization and cultural habitat found its most creative expression in Swami Vivekananda. It was his persistent belief that India was capable of giving back to the world as much as it took from the world and thereby re-establish its rightful claim in the assembly of nations."¹

The Impact of Vedanta

The deepest influence upon his thought is obviously of ancient Hindu philosophy- especially of the Vedanta. It can safely be said that to a very great extent, Vivekananda is a Vedantist. The main body of his thought is derived from the Hindu scriptures from the Upanishads and the Vedas. His basic belief in the essential unity of everything, that is, in the completely monistic nature of reality, owes its origin to the Vedanta. His doctrine of Maya, again, is derived from the same source. The distinction between 'an empirical point of view' and a transcendental point of view' that he so often makes and to which he refers time and again in order to solve certain apparent contradictions of his thought, is also borrowed from the Vedanta. It is true that Vivekananda always emphasizes the need of re-interpreting Vedanta in accordance with the demands and needs of the time; In fact, his philosophy itself is an attempt in that direction, but this remains a fact that some of the basic ideas of the philosophy of Vivekananda are derived from ancient Hindu philosophy-specially the Vedanta. Pranab Mukherjee observes"

"Swami Vivekananda was a great patriot, thinker, spiritual leader, lover of humanity and awakener of souls. He played a significant role in the cultural renaissance in Bengal and other parts of India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth countries."²

Buddhist Influence

In a certain sense, Vivekananda is influenced by Buddhist philosophy also. Buddha himself, even after attaining Nirvana, kept on roaming about and helping others in their struggles against suffering. Vivekananda fully recognizes the worth of such humanitarian and altruistic work. His own missionary zeal for service is influenced by this. Some of the Buddhistic ideals, like *Samyak karmanta* and *Ajiva* have also inspired Vivekananda a great deal.

Impact of Christianity

Alongwith these Indian influences, he also carried, on his thought, the influence of Christianity. He was impressed by the strength of character, the soul-force that the man of the Cross possessed. He could see that it required a supreme spiritual strength to gorgive the oppressor. From Christianity, therefore, Vivekananda takes up the idea of service and love. His conviction that man contains within him the spark of Divinity and his optimistic belief in the possibility of man's redemption contain elements that greatly resemble the Christian notion of the kingdom of God.

Sanjay Sharma
Asstt. Professor,
Deptt. of English
P.S.M.P.G. College,
Kannauj

Other Influences

There were certain other influences too. For some time he was under the influence of Brahma Samaj, and it can be said that his strong feelings against the prevalent orthodox and superstitious rites were generated under that influence. Dayananda's emphasis on the indeterminate nature of reality and his practical insistence on the quality of fearlessness had left a deep mark on Vivekananda. Then, there was the *Gita*, which with its emphasis on 'selfless work', was a source of constant inspiration to Vivekananda.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa

But the profoundest influence, in the light of which every other influence was remodelled and shaped, was that of his master- Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa. In fact, the story of the life of Vivekananda would have been entirely different, had he not come under the influence of Ramakrishna. It is said that Ramakrishna brought about a spiritual transformation in the personality and the mental make-up of Vivekananda. Swami Nikhilananda, speaking about this, says:

It was his Master who had taught him the divinity of the soul, the non-duality of God, the unity of existence and one more great thing, that is, the universality or harmony of all different religions.

It is true that Ramakrishna initiated him into spiritual discipline and meditation.

Idealism

The philosophy of Vivekananda is idealist in more senses than one. Idealism may mean either Ideal-ism, or Idea-ism or Idealism as such. There is a difference between the second and the third senses of the term although both can be example of Metaphysical Idealism. Metaphysical Idealism believes that the reality is ultimately spiritual or mental or ideal in character. Some Metaphysical idealists go on to hold that the ideal reality is of the nature of 'Ideas' finite or Infinite or Ideas objective and universal. Vivekananda is an idealist because he believes that the ultimate reality is essentially spiritual in character. He is also an idealist in the sense that he believes in the ultimacy of certain ideal values and recommends that a continuous and persistent effort should be made for the attainment of those values. His 'ideal-ism' is therefore not unrealistic; Ideal-ism becomes unrealistic only when the ideal is nothing but a creation of one's imagination. Vivekananda asserts that the ideal that he talks about is a living ideal capable of inspiring and attracting man towards itself.

Vivekananda's idealism is monistic. An idealistic philosophy that is strictly monistic is indeterminate. The One, it feels, cannot accept any distinction or qualification of any kind within it. Vivekananda very often describes reality in this fashion-in the fashion of the abstract monist. But, at many other places, reality is given a monotheistic description and assertions about God's characters are emphatically made. Now, one is at a loss to decide whether Vivekananda's philosophy is strictly and abstractly monistic or monotheistic.

Vivekananda's Monism

In fact, Vivekananda combines, in his thought, Abstract Monism and theism. He is a Pantheist, and yet God, according to him, is personal. Consequently, we find two currents flowing almost side by side in the philosophy of Vivekananda one that resembles Advaita Vedanta, and the other that reminds one of the theism of the Bhakti-cult. Vivekananda is almost convinced that these two currents are not really two currents, that they are just two ways of looking at the Reality. But then an attempt can be made to determine the features of both these aspects of his thought. Almost like an Advaitin, Vivekananda says that reality is one absolute Brahman. He emphasizes the monistic character of reality to such a great extent that he says that reality is one but not a 'whole'. According to Vivekananda, Absolute is perfect unity, and therefore the distinction between whole and parts completely vanishes. The concept of Absolute is arrived at by carrying the process of abstraction to its maximum possible limit, and that explains its strictly monistic character:

... God is neither outside nature nor inside nature, but God and nature and soul and universe are all convertible terms. You never see two things: it is your metaphorical words that have deluded you.

That is why the absolute has been described as indeterminate. You cannot properly attribute qualities to the Absolute. To attribute characters to the Absolute would amount to knowing the absolute and 'knowing the Absolute' is nothing but a contradiction-in-terms. Absolute is the unknowable, it does not admit ever internal divisions.

Like Sankara, Vivekananda also says that the Absolute can be described as Sat-Chit-Ananda. The concepts of Sat (existence) and Chit (consciousness) are similar to the Sat and Chit of Advaita Vedanta, but the concept of Ananda (bliss) has been greatly enriched by Vivekananda. Partly under the influence of Buddhism and partly under that of Christianity, Vivekananda makes 'love' the essential core of 'bliss'. He asserts that ananda is in love.

In fact, Vivekananda believes that the religious urges and aspirations of man demand satisfaction, and that demand can be met only by a personal god. Vivekananda believes that Absolute and God are not two- that God is not a creation of Maya. These distinctions surely arise on account of ignorance or our limited ways of apprehension, but knowledge means the realization of the irrelevance of such a distinction.

Views on God

Vivekananda has a very deep faith in God. This faith expresses itself in the conviction that it is, in fact, impossible to live without faith in God. In fact, at times Vivekananda does not feel inclined to make any effort for the demonstration of God's existence. He feels that it is possible to have a direct realization of God. He is convinced that Swami Ramakrishna had a direct realization of God. So he thinks that arguments, proofs, demonstrations etc. are not actually needed for establishing God's existence; His existence can be

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felt and realized. At some places Vivekananda has referred to certain demonstrations that appear to be similar to the traditional teleological proof for God's existence. He says:

The whole of nature at best could teach them only of a personal being who is the ruler of the Universe; it could teach nothing further. In short out of the external world we can only get the idea of an architect, that which is called Design Theory.⁵

Vivekananda seeks to prove God on the strength of the necessity of God's notion. Its rejection, according to Vivekananda, is impossible. God's idea is shown to be necessary on various grounds. It is necessary because it is the Truth and Truth is necessary. It is necessary also because it is freedom. The fact of human freedom presupposes the ideal of absolute freedom which is nothing but Divine freedom. It is necessary also because it is inherently present in man. Vivekananda asserts:

It is the God within your own self that is propelling you to seek for Him, to realize Him. After long researches here and there, in temples and in churches, earths and in heavens, at last you come back, completing the circle from where you started, to your own soul.⁶

God has also been conceived as supreme Goodness. Goodness to Vivekananda, does not mean mere moral perfection because from the point of view of God the question of morality is also irrelevant in God there is no distinction between good and evil. According to Vivekananda, Divine Goodness has two implications. First, it means that God is bliss and happiness. Secondly, it implies that it is possible for every individual to be good if he fixes up the Supreme Goodness as his ideal.

This takes us to assert yet another character of God to which Vivekananda has given a unique importance. God, according to him, is a human God. This assertion, far from being anthropomorphic represents a very great truth. It does not suggest that God has been cast in man's image, on the other hand, it suggests that man bears the spark of Divinity within himself. Vivekananda is conscious that one of the greatest justifications of God is the fact that God is able to satisfy our urges and needs, and is able to provide to our life greater vitality and strength. Therefore, God has to be given some human attributes just in order to make communication possible. Therefore, Vivekananda says:

He has human attributes, He is merciful, He is just, He is powerful, He is almighty He can be approached, He can be prayed to, He can be loved in return, and so forth. In one word, He is a human god, only infinitely greater than man.⁷

Conclusion:

But, this does not take away from Vivekananda his basic Vedantic conviction. He is convinced that properly speaking God cannot be described. Our language is inadequate to represent Him accurately. These attempts to represent the characters of God are nothing but our limited ways of trying to know the unknown. Vivekananda says:

You cannot describe Him by any language. All attempts of language, calling Him father, or brother, or our dearest friend, are attempts to objectify God, which cannot be done. He is the eternal subject of everything.⁸

References

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