BARUCH SPINOZA: THE LONELY PHILOSOPHER

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Abstract: A widely used method with an intention to apply axiomatic principles in philosophical theories is referred to the Geometrical Method in philosophy. Spinoza’s name is always reckoned as the foremost one, in the list of the prominent exponents of this method. It is something quite close to Euclid’s geometry involving introduction of the terms with proper definitions and axioms before extending it to logical conclusions. This might seem to be an unusual outlook in philosophy, but for Spinoza it was the major aim to understand sectionally the Universe and then connecting the sections internally. All knowledge which is necessary and presentable, needs the assistance of the Geometrical Method because it is scientific and demonstratable. The main features have been clarity and obviousness, which can be seen when the postulates of a theory are announced. There have been varied opinions and that too totally with a contrast, regarding Spinoza’s position and viewpoints in philosophy. As it goes on record, some considered him to be an atheist in temperament while others thought all his efforts were deliberately directed towards Pantheism. Due to the latter opinion he was even labelled as “God-intoxicated”. It was so because on one hand on the strict parameter of Orthodoxy or adhering to Theological principles, he could not qualify to be conventionally religious. On the other hand, his deviating from the Christian outlook of personal God also created doubts regarding his intentions. But then he also vehemently holds on to the concept of God right from the beginning to the end and also insists on only the exclusively worthy ideas of religion.

Therefore, in this paper there would be an attempt to place the facts and Spinoza’s clear viewpoints referring to some of his major works. In other words, it could be observed as a simplified version of Spinoza’s philosophy in general, to bring forth what he really struggled to accomplish as a renowned philosopher.

Keywords: Geometrical Method, Atheistic Outlook, Theistic Approach.

I INTRODUCTION

It is always mandatory for us to take into account the childhood events and further the struggles of youthful years to understand any great personality’s life. The mental frame is erected strongly owing to the clash of the psychological unrest and blend of feelings that are forceful suppressed much owing to the circumstances. Our lonely philosopher was punished for being a rationalist and was almost boycotted by all for being a Jew by birth. Loneliness somehow for Spinoza proved to be strength which he realized soon he needed to understand the realities of life. Spinoza barely in his early twenties had no other option than to evade the orthodoxy because he was intoxicated. It was so because on one hand on the strict parameter of Orthodoxy or adhering to Theological principles, he could not qualify to be conventionally religious. On the other hand, his deviating from the Christian outlook of personal God also created doubts regarding his intentions. But then he also vehemently holds on to the concept of God right from the beginning to the end and also insists on only the exclusively worthy ideas of religion.

Therefore, in this paper there would be an attempt to place the facts and Spinoza’s clear viewpoints referring to some of his major works. In other words, it could be observed as a simplified version of Spinoza’s philosophy in general, to bring forth what he really struggled to accomplish as a renowned philosopher.
determined to continue his pursuit of excellence, which was nothing else than hunting for Truth. Obviously having taken such a harsh decision he had no other place to rejoice than his own built castle which provided philosophical security. He decided to work only for philosophy, hoping someday he would strike the truth and would be in a position to place before the world. There was for sure a little uneasiness as he was detached from the society, yet he discovered a sort of solace therein. The unfortunate part was, due to this even his own people also turned against him. His father was utterly disappointed while his own sister stood against him for the sake of inherited property, after the demise of his father. The greatness of Spinoza can be seen from his liberal attitude when he voluntarily parted from the fortune that had come legally to his share. Though he had won the case in the court of law, he happily passed on the whole sum to his sister.

II PHILOSOPHICAL EXCURSIONS: SPINOZA’S GOD

Most of the times in Indian Philosophy, which is profusely aligned with Religiosity, the ancient philosophers in particular, were obsessed by the questions related to God, Life and its purpose. We find the philosophers either straightaway submitting to a particular school of thought to get satisfactory answers to the level of their comprehension or enduring to research out in own way. The main trouble was owing to the contradictions which arose over the nature of God as described with so much hype that even philosophers could not accept or appreciate it easily. Similarly the very purpose of life also could not be presented convincingly such that it could suit all the factions of the society. In fact, growth of philosophy was much owing to such complicated questions. In Indian philosophy, spiritual outlook got steadily magnified and the platform remained fixed for future philosophical ventures. Spinoza was also thinking on the same lines and had determined to reach the realm of Truth at any cost.

It is difficult to come to a final say, with regard to Spinoza’s concept of God because unlike most of the philosophers he preferred a route that was less travelled or explored. For a certain time he was stamped as a diehard atheist and also disconnected from the society because of his outright denial of the personal god, which was in vogue and held in high esteem in Christianity. At the same time it is equally difficult to bind Spinoza’s God through naturalism wherein God can be identified with the laws of Physical world or Phenomena. He also clearly signals his vast interest in establishing God’s position through the genuine ideas of Religion. May be due to this he was also given a sort of nick name—the God intoxicated. Therefore the common or rather ordinary concepts do not find any worthy position with regard to God in his philosophy. He goes to the extent of referring to the earlier theories as irreligious and misleading. For Spinoza his philosophy commences with and ends with God. He considers this viewpoint as an exclusively practical one because it is so akin to life. Therefore he begins correlating all the things by insisting upon a sort of unity between them. To him this is absolutely a basic requirement. At this stage generally everyone refers to Descartes’ philosophy. For Descartes a division in the world into two different entities is a must and God to be perceived separately. This meant rather a disconnection between God and the worldly activities. God could be a mere spectator. At this stage, Spinoza’s concept of God goes in a diagonally opposite manner. For him God is an embodiment of perfection and having relation with the world. Therefore all the realities could be explained or conceived through this connection only. “After men have persuaded themselves that everything that happens, happens for their sake, they had to regard that quality in each thing which was most useful to them as the most important...Hence to explain the nature of things they had to frame the notions good, evil, order, confusion, beauty and deformity and from their belief that they are free have arisen the notions of praise and blame and sin and merit...They have called good everything which conduces to health and to the worship of God, and bad that is unfavourable to these.”

Right in the beginning Spinoza insists upon understanding the unreality of the finite things. He strongly denies the general or common viewpoint held by many that this world has people filled with objects that are independent and real. In fact, most of us initially subscribe to the view that everything is independent ad true. But with experience, one clearly comes to know that it was a folly on our own part. No object can be given the sanction of independence. There is definitely a connection between the objects. Due to this our attempts to find permanency in the finite things meet failure. It is our outlook which makes us happy or unhappy. Then comes the question as to where are we supposed to seek the solution? For Spinoza all our efforts to gain happiness by depending on the imaginative efficacy of the objects is always futile. Other way around it would be wise to divert our mind to that source of Joy which is not bound by the finite things and this whatever we may call would be an unfailing reservoir of all the virtues we crave for. We can definitely experience blessedness when we connect our feelings with that eternal source, which may be referred to by any term, though commonly it is called God.

It seems Spinoza deliberately took a long route to understand or describe God as the ultimate and a dependable Reality. Human beings, psychologically, need such a trustable entity and therefore using reductionism as a method, Spinoza tries to prove the link with God. But then the major problem which a common man or the modern mind faces is regarding the nature or functioning of God. Not all the description presented before the world in various forms of writings match with the existing reality which we all experience. Spinoza does not want to surrender to the popular belief in an imaginative personality like a humans with immaculate perfection in every fibre of their being. Usually every pattern of the act, its sanction and further the result, in a fatalistic manner, are credited to the acts of God. It should be borne in the mind that the concept of God is erected in the society for own advantage. Therefore, according to Spinoza our life as such is a divine scheme. Individually we may not be able to prove the worth but that together a melody can be developed. None of us should ever be dismissed as useless. Everything contributes in its own way and that is brought forward by God. With this, God is to be recognized as Universe. The rest obviously are mere parts but necessary parts. The
world is a sort of symphony created by God and so our mind, body are parts of the God who is Ultimate. This is where we find Spinoza outrightly indicating Pantheism as the main germ of his philosophy. With Pantheistic view, he insists upon human society as a whole in which all of us are lodging unitedly but the controller is God. Philosophers right from ancient times have been considering ‘happiness’ as the chief aim of life. Spinoza extends the same by urging all to be happy unitedly because individual happiness and welfare, also depend on the surroundings. Our living in this world has a purpose and that is only to pursue happiness. Most of the times, avoiding unhappiness may not promise happiness but surely, we could be at least on the righteous path to become happy. We have limitations and once we accept this fact, nothing would disturb us. Although everyone is important in the Universe, it should be kept in the mind that individually we cannot achieve all our goals. The physical laws rarely fail. They have no preferences. They are ever steadfast. It is the controller or God whose Will governs the functioning of the world we live in. In a nutshell, we all are having equal importance in the world because we are nothing other than parts of God only.

III SPINOZA’S ETHICS

We know Spinoza considered everything God and God everywhere or in everything. Therefore he opted to identify Nature with God. Everything finally remains in God only. This undiluted pantheistic view does not allow God to be separately portrayed and that too away from the world. God himself is the World or World is the reflection of God and therefore, logically there is no chance for God to be outside the world. Then comes the question, what is so special about Spinoza’s pantheism? Ethics as we generally cognize is the study of morals so as to adopt those workable principles which can guide our conduct for a life of contentment. Spinoza prefers to apply the geometric method to Ethics which in turn can help us follow the very art of living and furthermore the moral conduct for a sane disposition. This could be on line with what Descartes did through the mathematical viewpoint. Therefore, logical conclusions are necessary. Spinoza exerted to achieve a slight deviation from Descartes’ rational method. Our life according to Spinoza, is always subjected to the laws of Nature which remain uniform throughout. Having accepted this fact at the inception itself, we realize that there is hardly any scope to our voluntary passions and feelings. With this approach, we can find satisfaction and lead a life of contentment and happiness. Therefore Descartes’ dualistic concept of Reality is not agreeable to Spinoza. “Love declares Spinoza, is that which transforms our temporal life into an eternal ecstasy. It is the supreme emotion which gives real meaning to our existence...Death is but an incident, a transitional moment, a passage from mortal life to immortality. The body dies, but the soul lives on...The human soul is not destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal.”

Spinoza hits straight on the human limitations and the faulty trend carried forward relentlessly without inspecting it properly or improvising on it. Our emotional dependence on the objects which are imperfect in themselves and transitory, is the root cause of all the unpleasantness that we experience in our life. There is so much of changeability in the nature of objects and their existence, that expecting happiness on an eternal basis is clearly an absurdity. It is our love and emotions which are so strongly connected to the objects that at any stage we promote a wrong hope expecting convenient results. Ultimately we are dragged into the domain of despondency and forced to feel everything is meaningless. The grip of emotions is so strong that getting released would be highly improbable. It is our own wishful thinking that creates all unhappiness. In other words we are responsible for all the vices and their perpetual continuity in life. Therefore all our knowledge based on sense perception is clearly inadequate and would surely lead to confusion. Spinoza also tries to clarify the basic cause of all this turmoil taking place in life by distinguishing between actions and passions. He thinks it is the mind which has certain ideas that are clear and distinct but at the same time there is intrusion of confused or unclear ideas. With this background he often refers to emotions and passions. The latter is an attempt to reach a higher level or degree to gain the results and therefore we realize pleasure. From this triad, we can easily discern or describe any emotion. So, taking into consideration the viability of these characteristics and their positive implications, we need to know the source. Spinoza thinks it is the sublime knowledge. Real blessedness comes from proper knowledge only. Any source other than the impeccable and true knowledge guiding our emotions would be clearly a disaster. Ultimately it seems Spinoza’s main aim is to get humanity relieved from the shackles of negative or destructive emotions or the periodically recurring state of depression. Spinoza wants everyone to aim and pursue happiness, considering it as the exclusive and ultimate goal of life with proper knowledge.

IV SPINOZA’S SALVATION

Having described the world we live in and God the controller of all phenomena that we witness, just as in Buddhism or eastern philosophies in general, Spinoza too speaks of salvation. With pantheistic viewpoint it is difficult to speak of human freedom. Taking it for granted that everything happens according to the master mind- God’s decision, nothing seems to come to human personal Will or freedom. Things which go, according to Spinoza, are owing to our own faulty knowledge which is based on wrong calculation. Imperfections are bound to create negative aspects of any phenomenon. The actions that we perform, Spinoza thinks, are wrongly construed ideas at the dictates of our own free Will. However the repercussions of an act can make us repent and realize that it was the failure of our mind to keep the emotions under control. The forceful speech and action are many times the result of our own impulsive nature. Nature has its own defined course and when we make modifications for a personal advantage or benefits, we face the adverse tune. We must understand that we have severe limitations and therefore any alteration in the fixed scheme of Nature would prove detrimental. Freedom of salvation would be possible only when we clearly follow Nature’s discipline and subject ourselves to its uniform functioning. We, majority times, act emotionally with confused ideas. It would therefore be unwise to change the laws of Nature for gaining personal interest. To cease the struggle against Nature would surely be an intelligent approach towards life than fighting a lost battle. “For salvation according to Spinoza, an altruistic viewpoint is the dire need. He thinks, ‘In order to love yourself you must love others. Love, Pleasure and Happiness- these treasures of the soul are best enjoyed when most generally shared. We have already met this doctrine of enlightened selfishness in the philosophy of Aristotle. Spinoza amplifies the idea and applies it to modern life. The wise man, declares Spinoza, knows that he can help himself only by helping
others... Individual happiness is mutual happiness... Our greatest victories, writes Spinoza, are not by arms but by greatness of Soul.”

Spinoza comes out with a solution than merely pointing out the limitations of human capacity and power. The basic postulate suggested by him is controlling our emotions which generally go wayward and that is the root cause of all the human misery. Accepting the things as they are is one of the easiest and wisest ways to deal with emotions. Investing the emotions with a wishful thinking for the consequences is a blunder for which one has to pay very heavily in return. Therefore it is our attitude which can create peace or perturb the mind. Ultimately the discontentment arises out of our own unchecked and crude imagination. Gaining true knowledge is always essential because it has uniformity, steadiness and permanency. True knowledge is the reflection of the very idea of God. Our low aims and selfish views or ideas will melt away when we stick to true knowledge. Expecting salvation when we are attached to anything with an expectation of only personal progress is totally misleading self. Therefore, even common sense would recommend a path which can lead to the immutable and eternal, which is only God. Now for any reader and a student of philosophy this may sound same as a staunch religious outlook. However, God is much of imagination and therefore, we are subject to both virtues and vices, due to the domination of our Will. With this our expectations also rise limitlessly and that would cause a transformation of a virtue into vice at any moment. In Spinoza’s philosophy salvation comes through virtues only and for the vices, there is no scope at all. It is the pure love towards God that will destroy all negative attitudes or emotions. In other words this may be considered as the intellectual love of God. Therefore, the good that happens to us is due to the practice of virtuous life. It should not be considered as the aftereffect of following virtue but virtue itself is good. Finally it is an indication that only a wise man can be happy while unhappiness always springs out of our own nurtured ignorance.

V CONCLUSION

Theistic attitude remains even today as a common and an easy one to face the vagaries of life. Each phase of life has its own set of demands and challenges and they are not uniform in intensity for all. Every philosopher takes on the routine questions by following religious texts as a base or some dare to use own analytical method to describe the world we live in. Turn of every decade brings on new paradigms in the same enquiry regarding the world. It is a dynamic and therefore an ongoing process. With this reality nothing sounds to be ultimate as well as consistent. May be a given philosophy suits a particular generation for a while. Therefore most of the philosophers concentrate on the living issues which could be tackled by temporary solutions. Few of the philosophers have strived hard to get to know the Reality, so as to provide a way out to the oft repeated problems. But then they risked their lives on many counts. Some of them were totally ostracized. In this regard we can say their suffering was voluntary or self-inflicted due to the upright behavior. There were short cuts available, which could have saved them from all the pain and misery they had to face. ‘When Spinoza’s doctrine of the emotions is referred to, we find we get the clarity of the relation between emotion and passion. For typically an emotion is just a confused idea or a passion. The body can be affected in many ways by which its power of acting is increased or diminished; modifications of the body and their corresponding ideas through which either of these results is brought about are what we call emotion. A passion in which the mind passes to a greater degree of perfection is pleasure; one in which it passes to a lesser degree of perfection is pain. By reference to the three elements – desire, pain, and pleasure – all the varied emotions are to be defined.’

Spinoza understood the limitations and manipulations of the textual hopes that were highlighted in the books of authority on religion. He felt most of them are not solving the problems because there is no acknowledgement of the existing problems. On the other hand the society which was already confused was made to tread on further more in dark. It is necessary to look at the problems from philosophical as well as scientific viewpoints. That is why Spinoza insisted on the Geometrical method as well as theistic approach, so as to gain correct and complete knowledge of the world we live in. He brought forth the objects and their impermanence so that our efforts with complete trust in their qualities would not suffer. The major fault with humanity had been the habit of ignoring the discipline of the physical laws and the dictates of the controller of the world who is referred to as God. Once we accept these facts then all our emotions would be streamlined and life will have true meaning. In Spinoza’s words, Our chief interest in life is to love ourselves; each man must love himself and seek what is useful to him!

References

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