

An Epistemology of Swami Vivekananda: A Comparative Approach

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Abstract

Indian philosophy being profoundly rich from socio-political, economical, and spiritual perspective has a lot to offer. A lot many philosophies of different Indian thinkers have been probed into for the purpose of character and national building such as that of Kautilya, Gandhi, Nehru, M.N. Roy and likewise. However, there exists a plethora of thinkers whose philosophies have been not studied systematically or have been overlooked. It is owing to this research gap, that the paper is prepared with special attention to the teachings and philosophy of Swami Vivekananda who altogether gives a different perspective about life and its intricacies. This paper tends to explore the various socio-political concepts expounded by Swami Vivekananda which are relevant event today and if taken and deliberated upon seriously have the potential to resolve a lot many crises that are being faced by the Indian society. This is a qualitative study, examining the political philosophy of Swami Vivekananda through his works. The paper analyses the relevance of the philosophy in the then era as well as in the contemporary era with reference to western ideas and philosophy. A comparative approach is adopted in the paper to comprehend the differences as well as the similarities between the philosophy of western thinkers with that of Swami Vivekananda.

Keywords: Epistemology; Swami Vivekananda; Comparative Study; Character Building

Introduction

"The miseries of the world cannot be cured by physical help only. The only solution of the problem is to make mankind pure"

Swami Vivekananda

The oldest theory of state was given by Robert Filmer in his book *Patriarcha* wherein Filmer expounded divine theory of state. Filmer had basically emphasized upon the idea of divine supremacy thereby glorifying the state. This was challenged by the social contract thinkers and they stated that individuals not only possess the right to resist

but it is also their duty to resist if the state fails to protect their individual rights [1]. The thinkers of enlightenment era promoted science and individual rights in their theory and asserted that the state was created for serving the primary needs of the individuals as well as to provide them with better opportunities for personal development. Since then, western political thinkers have propounded their philosophy with respect to power, freedom, rights, liberties, duties, and justice in context of the state and the common populace. The utilitarian philosophy in their perspective about the state propounded the idea of maximising the happiness of the maximum number of people. They had taken a more scientific

approach wherein they introduced parameters by which happiness was to be measured. The classical utilitarians did not make any distinction between lower form of pleasure and higher form of pleasure. This was a loophole which J.S. Mill dealt with in his works and proclaimed:

"It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question [2].

Mill had talked about higher and lower form of pleasure but had not discussed as to how a fool may become a wise person or is there any probability about it. The simple assertion in the statement above is that there are some intelligent people and some fools, and that we do not need to cater to the needs of the fools. A philosophical question that rises here is that should we alienate the fool and leave them to their destiny or help them build their character and personality? A similar classification of the society was done by Plato wherein he divides the society into 3 categories of souls: gold, silver, and bronze. Only those people with the gold soul were recognized to be rulers and it was not necessary for this trait to be passed on hereditarily and again he never discussed any scope of soul development or transformation [3]. The social contract theorist discussed about human nature and their perspective about human nature varied significantly. Transformation they believed was possible but the systematic procedure seems to be missing. The Idealist philosophy of Plato gives out "what ought to be done" but the process for it is still a subject of investigation. In this context, there exists significant contribution by Indian philosophers which needs to be given more focussed attention to. From the abundant Indian philosophy in this context the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda has been chosen owing to its simplicity of language and richness of thought process.

In his book, *Karma Yoga* Vivekananda delves into understanding of self, the mind, and the methods needed to train it which would ultimately lead to character development. In this work we would compare these core ideas with other western philosophical works [4].

Understanding of Self

While probing into the human nature Hobbes ascertained human as pessimistic beings who would always be quarrelling due to the presence of competition, diffidence, and glory. For Locke not all human beings were bad but few that made life difficult while as Rousseau described humans as noble savages. To sum up they did not have a fixed view about human nature and neither can they have for human nature varies not just according to person to person but also according to time and circumstances. To put it simply

some people are extremely materialistic in nature and to satisfy their materialistic needs they do not shy away from committing fraud or even murder. But this is not true for every person, a lot of us have different desires which are not fulfilled but rather than turning into a criminal many of us learn to live without it. Then again there are some individuals who are otherwise peaceful but rage, jealousy and other such emotions make them commit acts for which they repent later. This variation in human nature has been described in the Sankhya philosophy which has been studied and simplified by Vivekananda wherein 3 basic elements found in human nature are described: Sattva, Rajas, and, Tamas. The Sanskrit terms have been translated into English as- equilibrium, activity, and inertness. These are not qualities, but elements, the materials out of which the whole universe is evolved. In the beginning of a cycle these remain in equilibrium; and when creation comes, they begin to combine and recombine and manifest as the universe. In every creation that includes humans these three elements are present. When the element of Tamas prevails, we become lazy; when it is Rajas, we are hyperactive; and when Sattva prevails, we may find ourself in the state of calmness. One person may thus, act differently in different times and again in different persons one of these forces would be predominant, thereby making them act differently to similar situations. For instance, for a new job opportunity one person would not be very excited for it would require him to move out of his comfort zone; while the second person would be very chirpy about it; and the third person may not be exhibiting any kind of emotion but only displaying a cool and calm face. In another case, in the face of injustice being exercised by an oppressor, the first person may not want to do anything about it but just surrender to the oppressor; the second person may be very keen to take the revenge and hence may indulge in fighting; while the third person may not react in the heat of the moment instead would come take action against his oppressor after careful thinking and planning. The first state is that of extreme dullness here, the other of hyper-activity, while the third is that of careful activity. The third state is a very difficult state and very rare humans can make use of it. Most of the humanity exists in the first two states i.e., either we surrender ourselves to the situation before us or we try to destroy everything around us which leads to further complications for the society.

The idea propounded here is to evolve our actions in such a way so as to reach equilibrium. We need to raise our level of consciousness and understand that duties are graded and according to the gradation duties are to be followed:

- First is our first duty towards our state of life.
- Second is the duty in certain set of circumstances
- Third, a duty which is solely to be performed by us.

The first duty is explained with the example of the famous motto i.e., "Resist not the Evil". This implied not to fight your

enemy the way they do [5]. The Christian commandment spoke about the utility of non-resistance and remaining a non-violent person. Non-resistance is the highest moral ideal and has been propounded by various philosophies such as Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism and likewise. However, if practiced absolutely without any reservations would become problematic for all of us as then the wicked forces would take over understanding absolutely well that no one would resist them. While those who can fight and subdue them would be made to feel guilty if they are able to overpower them. Vivekananda cites the example of Mahabharata where Arjuna was unwilling to pick up arms against his own family which had committed all sorts of sins. Lord Krishna calls Arjuna a hypocrite and a coward because of his refusal to fight, or offer resistance, on account of his adversaries being his friends and relatives, making the plea that non-resistance was the highest ideal of love. Krishna says that in all matters the two extremes are alike. The extreme positive and the extreme negative are always similar. Extreme practice of positive and negative will have the same result. Resistance will not be helpful when a person is weak, lazy or incapable to fight but when the other person knows that he can strike an irresistible blow if he likes; yet he not only does not strike, but blesses his enemies. Non-violence is the highest virtue but before reaching that stage our duty is to resist the evil, to work and to fight and only when we have gained sufficient power will nonviolence become a virtue. Buddha gave up his throne and renounced his position, that was true renunciation; but there cannot be any question of renunciation in the case of a beggar who has nothing to renounce. So, we must always be careful about what we really mean when we speak of this non-resistance and ideal love. We must first take care to understand whether we have the power of resistance or not. Then, having the power, if we renounce it and do not resist, we are doing a grand act of love; but if we cannot resist, and yet, at the same time, try to deceive ourselves into the belief that we are actuated by motives of the highest love, we are doing the exact opposite [6].

The secondary duties are those that are prescribed by our religion, nation i.e., our circumstances. Therefore, a duty of a Hindu would be different from the duty of a Muslim or a Christian. For a Christian giving beef to someone starving would be a duty but for a Hindu it would be a sin. Similarly, for any ordinary citizen kills someone under some adverse conditions they are bound to feel bad but if that very person, joins the army as a soldier and then kills twenty people, would feel proud.

The third category of duty is related to our status or profession in society. In Hindu scriptures, different rules are laid down for different men. It is the duty of a householder to take care of his family; it is the duty of the student to learn; it is the duty of the celibate to devote himself to work.

Vivekananda says that rather than understanding the status of a person in the society, one should study their worldly activities, for that is what determines the character of a person. Each person is great in their own place and cannot be discriminated for their status or occupation in society. There is however, only one idea of duty which has been universally accepted by all mankind, of all ages and sects and countries, and that has been summed up in a Sanskrit aphorism thus: "Do not injure any being; not injuring any being is virtue, injuring any being is sin."

Working of the Mind

All knowledge that the world has ever received comes from the mind. It is the infinite library of the universe and if you do not know the directions you are bound to get lost in it. The phenomenon of apple falling down may have been witnessed by millions before Newton but it was him who discovered the law of gravity. An action when performed with some knowledge and cleverness would produce fruitful results. In this case, Newton was performing the action of observation with knowledge of physics and hence, he was able to come out with this theory. This is the very essence of work; to bring out the power of mind. A lot of us today are merely performing our routine jobs without thinking which has reduced us to robots. Human emancipation or peace of mind would not be attained through jobs or duties.

The mind would wake only when there is some motive attached to the action. Motives can that be of: name, fame, power, love and all such materialistic things. There is nothing wrong with having these desires; that what is wrong is getting obsessed with these desires. By doing this the problem of inactivity or laziness can be resolved. However, once the mind becomes active it is prone to venture into dangerous areas; mind getting attached to different objects, people, or some times even ideas are a likely thing. The training of mind herein would be the method by which we may be able to regulate the mind and hence, the action that is committed as a consequence to the thoughts developing in the mind. Using the simile of a lake for the mind, just as every ripple as it subsides does not entirely die out but has the possibility of resurfacing similarly every thought that we think, leaves an impression on the mind and even when such impressions are not obvious on the surface, they are sufficiently strong to work beneath the surface, subconsciously. What we are every moment is determined by the sum total of these impressions on the mind. If good impressions prevail, the character becomes good; if bad, it becomes bad. It is the will power here that we need to make strong and when there is continuous reflex of good thoughts, good impressions moving over the surface of the mind, that the tendency for doing good would become strong and we shall have control over our sense organs. There are two ways by which the will

power would be developed:

- Iti: This method is employed by vast mankind wherein people develop some bonding and attachment but slowly and gradually they give it up, after enjoying things and thus obtaining experience. For they have now known the nature of things but now wish to give up these worldly desires.
- 2. Neti Neti: This is a negative method wherein what all pleasures and materials are denied by the person, are also denied by the senses of the person. In simpler terms if a person says he does not wishes to eat and if you produce sumptuous meal in front of them their senses may betray them but in certain cases no amount of attraction towards the food would be felt by the person. This however, would be found in rare cases.

Generally speaking, will power be practiced by the first method too is difficult. For one has tasted the fruits of different materials and after that they are supposed to give up. In the second case, the person in the first place does not know the feeling produced by that respective material but herein they have experienced it and have decided to withdraw from that experience. But this is the best method of character development for there is a voluntary consent from the individuals with respect to his actions. They are not under some forced military training wherein there is limitation put on the meal and the person does not eat not because he doesn't want to but only because he knows the next day his bosses would find it and then he would have to pay heavily for it. And if there is the slightest possibility that this knowledge from the superiors can be concealed the person would gladly eat as per his wish. The consent of the mind is equally important to bring humans to their duty but forceful consent of the mind is neither a practical nor a good idea.

Similarities with Western Philosophy

Swami Vivekananda's philosophy is an integration of Vedantic philosophy, yoga, and Bhagwad Gita and the school of western philosophy such as idealism, naturalism, pragmatism, and western humanism. He tries to make a harmonious blend of ancient Indian philosophy with that of the modern western philosophy. The Behaviouralist school very much resonates with the philosophy of Vivekananda. As for them, politics is about human behaviour in relation to the state. Vivekananda was inspired by the ideal of social harmony and synthesis embodied in the *Varna* theory of ancient India and wanted to ennoble the caste system.

Vivekananda like Aristotle, was a believer in moderation with regard to social change. A social arrangement if is sustained for a long period is bound to decay the society but the way to change this social arrangement is not to destroy

them violently rather gradually. He was a bitter critic of social Europeanization. He writes:

"We must grow according to our nature...We, with our traditions, with thousands of years of Karma behind us, naturally can only follow our own bent, run in our own grooves, and that we shall have to do [7]. On "What is life?" Swami Vivekananda replied, "Life is the unfolding and development of a being under circumstances tending to press it down." This is attributed to Swami Vivekananda's days of wandering when he was once asked by Ajit Singh, the Raja of Khetri (later became Swamiji's disciple).

Like Hegel, Vivekananda believed that there is one all-dominating principle manifesting itself in the life of each nation. For India, the guiding principle was religion, and it was identified with realization of eternal principles such as reincarnation, *Karma*, and not as some social dogmas, ecclesiastical formulations and obsolete customs [8].

While discussing about power struggle Vivekananda finds that in ancient India there was power struggle between royal power and priestly power. Here his theory is also said to have similarities with Pareto's theory of circulation of elites because the conflict was no doubt amongst different classes but these two classes of ancient India have always been the ruling class [9].

Karl Marx was trying to fight the prevailing social conservatism as it was based on injustice and even Vivekananda was fighting the set social order of his society. Exploitation of the weak and the poor was common in their findings.

In order to defy the evil, Vivekananda had suggested for changing and moulding the environment, the same has been recommended by an American political scientist, Glenn D. Paige. For Paige, evil is anything that deprives a human life and to protect that he constructs a 'nonkilling funnel' which would be helpful in overcoming the evils, at least those that exist on the external plane [10].

Dissimilarities between Western Philosophies with that of Vivekananda's

In his philosophy, Vivekananda does not outrightly rejects utilitarian concepts nor does he ask to embrace spirituality alone. But his philosophy does differ in defining the ultimate goal of human life. As for Utilitarian school, the ultimate goal of human life is happiness [11], for Marxists it is to establish equality by destroying the prevailing social order through class [12] for which he asks to abolish the state, for the Realists and the Fascists it is acquiring power but for him [13], it is character development by acquiring knowledge.

Another famous philosophy of the West, is that of the Existential school. It gave absolute freedom to humans to define themselves. The philosophy of 'eternal recurrence' is the mainstay of the famous book Thus Spoke Zarathustra by Friedrich Nietzsche. It means all the events in one's life will happen again and again infinitely till the humans through their 'will to power' take a different recourse in their actions [14]. The goal of this philosophy is to become 'superman' through the will to power but this philosophy does not make any differentiation between good and evil. According to Nietzsche 'There is no such thing as moral phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena' [15]. Similarly, while grading duties, Vivekananda had also ascertained that there is no concept of universal morality. An action is moral or immoral in accordance with the situation it was committed in. One cannot preach the virtue of non-violence to the victim while they fight a murderer or a rapist for that would only lead to further injustice.

The concept of evil has been dwelt upon by many political thinkers and they have categorized two concepts of evils- a broad and a narrow concept [16]. The concept which Vivekananda focusses upon is the broader concept as it is concerned with the bad state of affairs, wrongful action, or character flaw. According to him, evil is that what brings bondage, so anything that binds you physically, mentally, or spiritually is an evil [17]. It has also been described as something that puts a hurdle in your path of reaching a higher goal [18]. Hence, it is ever moving and cannot survive alone. It would always require a host upon which it makes it survival possible. Once the host is destroyed it would move to a next host. The evil may exist inside of us, or outside of us, or maybe in both the realms. Our habits or our nature that prohibits us from doing something good may be called as the evil inside. On the external realm it would be those entities that try to put some kind of bondage or restriction over us by which we are unable to realize our full potential. So, by this measure we can say that psychopaths, tyrannical governments, arbitrary society, & terrorist organizations are what falls under the definition of evil.

While the utilitarian philosophy differs from that of Vivekananda with respect to the ultimate goal of human life, Marxists differ in the methods to bring about change or reform in the society. He advocates for peaceful methods to bring change unlike the Marxists who believe that only a proletariat revolution can lead to the establishment of an egalitarian society.

In the contemporary times, there are writers like Steven Pinker who are of the view that humanity has already achieved enlightenment. His reflections show stunning developments resulting from science in the last one hundred years. With regard to problems such as that of terrorism, he is of the view

that mostly the terror acts are "low tech attacks on target rich gatherings and kill very few people. Indeed, I venture that the proportion of brilliant terrorists in a population is even smaller than the proportion of terrorists multiplied by the proportion of brilliant people." (Pinker, 2019). The question here that arises is that what made those people resort to such extreme measures? If in true sense material development had solved all the problems of the worldly life why did these minority section of people not take advantage of it. Pinker refuses to even acknowledge this fact that revolutions such as industrial revolution were also recognized as the age of social upheavals in the society wherein the crime rate, poverty, unemployment, sexual exploitations had increased. His approach to progress of mankind is very narrow even neglecting the environmental concerns.

Further, he viewed Karma as unscientific for it actually does not have any evidence but when we look at the third law of Newton, which says "every force has an equal and opposite force", the affirmations given by the psychologist to treat the trauma of their patients, the scientific element in the theory of Karma can be better understood. Critics may say that Newton's law was applicable to objects and not human, but if we study about all the objects of the universe we can find that all objects of the universe are inter-related with each other. Their form changes but the inner properties remain the same. This is to imply wherever there would an application of energy in the environment there also would occur a reverse application of that same energy whether that is of love or hatred. Psychologists have also studied the corelation between positive psychology and karma theory [19]. Some of them have even come up with providing evidences to reincarnation [20]. Brian Weiss, et al. a psychiatrist from USA provides an astounding insight about his patients by revealing how in his therapy sessions he would take his patients to their previous birth. He explained that in those previous births the patients had suffered some trauma or some incident which had its impact on their current life in form of some or the other psychological illness. Through these sessions the patients would learn about their actions in past and accordingly would rectify their actions in the present. In all these cases he said the patients would be recovering faster than otherwise. The concept of Karma therefore cannot be ruled out absolutely.

Vivekananda had shared a lot of ideas with his contemporaries but the waning away of his philosophy along with other spiritual thinkers like him has led to rise of writers, who are unable to differentiate between religion and spirituality due to which the problems of the world are only escalating. Pinker has only focussed on providing material help and to some extent intellectual help but he has totally dismissed the idea of spiritual help which for Vivekananda is equally important. On the other hand Vivekananda never

dismissed the idea of materialism [21]. In his view:

"Material civilization, nay, even luxury, is necessary to create work for the poor.Bread! Bread! I do not believe in a God, who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven [22]."

Political Theory Contribution

It was V.P. Varma who filtered out the political thoughts in the philosophy of Vivekananda and then systematized it in his book. He recognizes three major contributions of Vivekananda. To substantiate this, we may refer to causes of clashes in contemporary times. Most of these violent conflicts occur due to religious reasons. Samuel Huntington has in fact identified this, in his famous book *Clashes of Civilization*. The most manipulated concept in the contemporary world is that of religion. In the name of religion various wars have been fought [23], horrendous acts of terrorism have been committed and communal violence have occurred as calculated by Huntington [24].

The second contribution of Vivekananda to political theory is his concept of freedom. He regarded the light of liberty as the only condition of growth. He defined freedom from various perspectives: physical, mental, and spiritual. He says:

"Those social rules which stand in the way of unfoldment of this freedom are injurious, and steps should be taken to destroy them speedily. Those institutions should be encouraged by which men advance in the path of freedom" [25]. Vivekananda was also a believer of natural rights theory and along with spiritual freedom he was advocating for material freedom of all humans. Thus, he denounced the practices of untouchability and other such social evils. His idea of liberty was that of the positive liberals i.e., freedom with certain rational restrictions. He states, "It is our natural right to be allowed to use our own body, intelligence or wealth according to our own will, without doing any harm to others; and all the members of a society, ought to have the same opportunity for obtaining wealth, education, or knowledge [26].

His third contribution in the field of political philosophy is his concept of strength and fearlessness which has been described as the theory of resistance [27]. Vivekananda was considered to be an ardent patriot and is said to have established a sense of identity-consciousness with the country, its people and its historic ideals. Though Varma feels that Vivekananda never spoke directly about the emancipation of India as he was a *Sanyasin* but it must be remembered that while describing the duties of individuals in his book *Karma Yoga*, he specifically spoke of resisting the evil doer, when one is powerless. India too was powerless when the Britishers were ruling over it. If fact his idea of

non-violence would be a virtue only had the Britishers exercised it while dealing with the protest from the Indians. Vivekananda was addressing the souls in his philosophy which encompasses everything in itself. It is the limitation of our mind that makes us segregate materialism with spiritualism and because of which we tend to lose much of the literary and philosophical work.

To add, some more contributions it may be highlighted he tried to segregate the fundamental duties. In his gradation of duties Vivekananda has highlighted a hierarchy by which we are supposed to follow our duties. Through this demarcation, the clashes that often occur between duties and rights can be resolved. Further, he emphasized both on the means and the ends that we pursue and try to attain in our life. For him, both were equally important and if one got corrupted the other was bound to get affected in an adverse manner. Finally, most importantly while as the western philosophers were looking at the external world for the solution to the various types of problems whether it was political or social; Vivekananda emphasized and tried to explain the internal world which is common to each and every human and tried to provide a solution by explaining the internal concepts of life

Conclusion

Philosophies provide a way to live our life. In the emerging and diverse problems being faced by the world today we observe rampant corruption leading inefficiency of society or to murder or mass killings as a form of retaliation. On one hand we find that owing to the development of science and technology there is tremendous progress of human civilization but simultaneously we also find cases of homicide, rape, suicides, theft, fraud likewise being committed by these very innovations. This is because whether it was Mill, Marx, or Pinker, each of these scholars emphasized on the ends and did not focus on the means. As a result, a highly disturbed society was created. History has been a witness to the fact that those civilizations which did not take care of their values and philosophy ultimately collapsed even though scientifically they were much advanced. The primary contribution of Vivekananda is that he tried to fill in the gap between materialism and spiritualism by which the civilizations could flourish and humans could live a dignified

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