

I N T R O D U C T I O N

It will be rather incorrect or inappropriate , if we say that almost all philosophical enterprises so far have culminated in finding out the nature or essence of man. The philosopher's interest has often been directed to metaphysical, epistemological and ethical issues. It is customary to read in the history of western philosophy such ontological or epistemological considerations. But these issues could not be considered except as issues which have man in the centre. This is particularly true so far as epistemology and ethics are concerned in which man is established as a subject of knowledge or as the subject of moral judgement. Thus, in the history of western philosophy, we find different pictures of man as the epistemic subject or as the ethical subject. We do not, however, mean to suggest that man has been left out in the philosopher's metaphysical discussion. A question of human nature has often appeared, though secondarily, as a very important ontological subject.

If we consider western philosophy in the modern age we find Descartes separating man from nature or the objective world. This is a separation which has been made on the ground that man has a certain characteristic which is not available in non-human world. It goes to the credit of Descartes to have announced that man has mind besides his body. Mind manifests itself in all sorts of consciousness. Man has consciousness which is manifested primarily in his thinking capacity. This capacity is not simply a distinguishing character of man. For Descartes it is a feature which is a proof for man's existence to himself. Man is a thinking being and secondly, man is in a position to prove his existence which he does with the help of his thinking capacity.

The above is an example in which modern philosophy starts with the distinctness of human reality and the proof for its existence. This is an example in which the topic of man figures as the primary issue of philosophy. Besides the existentialist philosophers,

one may find it difficult to name any other philosopher for whom the human reality is the primary subject of his philosophical investigation.

Kant, for example, has distinguished man as the cognising subject very much like Descartes. But he finds it as a requirement of his critical philosophy. The point is that, man is not the primary issue of his philosophical enquiry.

In the above, we have tried to show that the question of human reality and of its nature came up in different philosophies for different reasons. Let us ignore the reasons and see that it did come up in their philosophies. The question is : can we really construct a philosophy about the nature of man ?

This question has been particularly taken up by the philosophers of existence and consequently we may restrict our discussion to the thoughts of some of the existentialists.

It seems that the term ' existentialism ' has to be explored. Descartes, in spite of his enquiry into the nature of man is an existentialist by concession because his thought is typically Platonic or essentialistic.

The suggestion is that the existentialistic investigation into the nature of man is anti-essentialistic. Let us take up this clue and look at this aspect of existentialism. It will help us to see how the concept of man is meditated by the existentialist.

The term 'Platonism' or 'Essentialism' indicates a belief in the reality of essence over existence. It is customary to describe existentialism, in the form of the slogan : " Existence precedes essence". This characterization of existentialism is to be understood by contrasting it with the slogan of the essentialist namely, " essence precedes existence ". So far as Platonism is concerned, the concept of precedence here stands for ontological priority. It has been held by Plato that the essence or the Form is the primary member

of his ontology so much so that whatever has existence is what it is by virtue of its participation with essence.

In Platonic philosophy, therefore, a table is a table and not something else because it participates in the Form of the table. The Form, therefore, dictates or determines what a thing is. In Platonic ontology we have at least two important levels of reality - one is the level of Forms or Ideas and the other is the level of copies or imitations. The particulars which we come to know as objects of the world are supposed to be copies of their respective Forms.

Plato's ontology, when seen from the point of view of the existence of human reality seems to suggest that individual human existences owe their nature to the Form of man. This kind of looking at things indicates that the Form is what makes a thing what it is and thereby play the role of a leveller in the sense that all human existences are taken to be similar or identical. From Plato's point of view all human natures are alike essentially, which simply means that so far as the

essence of man is concerned plato finds no difference between one man and another man. The individual characteristics which distinguishes one man from another are only contingent differences and not essential difference, for essentially all men are alike. This means that the points of difference between one man and another are non-essential points of difference and are of little philosophical significance.

Existentialism is a revolt against this kind of essentialism which ignores individual differences or the uniqueness of different personalities while it ascertains the essentiality of non-difference. The existentialists believe that nothing can be more damaging to the human personality than what is said by the essentialist. As a matter of fact one can look at essentialism as a philosophy which humiliates human personality by ignoring his uniqueness. It is humiliating to merge every individual into a crowd in which one cannot be distinguished from another. The concept of 'crowd' reflects a central contention of Platonism and it is this very concept which has been the target of the criticism of the existentialists.

It is necessary at this point to give an idea of the central thesis of the philosophy of existence. It is a philosophy which, as it is obvious, emphasizes individual differences as more important than similarity. Every individual human personality has a unique life history of his own so much so that one man cannot be identical with another man. The universal or the Form which every man shares is of course a phenomenon which must be accepted philosophically. But when we consider the nature of a man it is not speculation that is important. It is a question of value. There is no doubt that all of us share in the same universal or participate in the same Form. This thesis may be philosophically defensible. But the existentialist wants to enter into the question of value and to judge whether essence or the element of sameness or existence, i.e. the element of difference and uniqueness is more important or more valuable. The concept of man which we find in the thoughts of the existentialists is fundamentally based on a question of value while for the Platonist essence is more valuable and rationally satisfying. For the existentialists existence is more valuable from a point of view which is not of course rational in the sense in which the term is used in

philosophy, but is more satisfying to man himself. The rejection of platonism by the existentialists does not follow the line initiated by Aristotle. There are no logical or philosophical arguments to disprove the thesis that the universal is more real than the particular. The non-essentialistic thesis has been upheld simply in the criterion of value. The existentialists therefore do not enter into a philosophical debate with the essentialists; but from their sense of respect for individuality and uniqueness it is clear that they would reject and stand against essentialism of Platonists.

The concept of man expressed in the philosophy of existence is the concept of the human reality as characterized by contingencies, irrational propensities, unpredictable possibilities all of which are accomodated in the concept of uniqueness. This is why these philosophers are so allergic to the concept of 'crowd '. They would say that essentialism reduces men into members of a crowd in

which people are hardly distinguishable from one another. Essentialism, as a writer said, provides readymade garments which may fit every body. The maker of the garment considers prospective users as absolutely identical like the products of a machine. Existentialism cannot stand this attitude in which a man's particularity is completely ignored as not worthy of consideration.

We can therefore, describe the concept of man in existentialism as the concept of a unique individuality for whom whatever is particular and contingent is more important than whatever it shares in common with other individuals.

The expression 'the concept of man' is highly misleading. It appears to suggest that existentialism believes in conceptualizing manhood. This would mean abstracting what is common to many and thus would mean a lapse into essentialism which it rejects. The phrase 'the concept of man' will be used here not in the Hegelian or in the Platonic sense. Existentialists do not intend to abstract what is common among many and do not

hypostatise it, We use this expression here just to indicate the picture of man as an individual in existentialism.

We shall concentrate our attention to the philosophical writings of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre. Our intention is to uncover existentialistic tendencies in the social and political thoughts of John Stuart Mill expressed particularly in his celebrated essay 'On Liberty'. We hope to show that Mill is an existentialist in a very technical sense. The branded existentialists did not show the social, political implication of their idea of man, which they could have show. Mill in his philosophy has worked out a social and political ideas on the concept of man which is thoroughly and perfectly existentialistic.