

DEATH AND THE MEANING OF HUMAN EXISTENCE:

A Phenomenological-existentialist Inquiry

When we enquire into the meaning of human existence we do not examine an idea or a concept but rather we interpret the various dimensions of human existence such as consciousness, temporality, Being-in-the-world, transcendence and the like which constitute human existence in its totality. Interpretation by its very nature has an orientation, a goal; interpretation participates in the goal of that which is to be interpreted. The question here, therefore, is what is the goal of human existence. It is always *that for the sake of which one lives*, it is that which deserves one's utmost concern, it is the project of one's constant attention. It is one's goal, that makes one's life meaningful. As long as there is a goal, a future, there is meaning in life. This is what Sartre has in mind when he states that life can be made meaningful by means of that which is not (*Being and Nothingness*, p. 687).

The meaning of human existence consists in one's commitment to one's projects, dedication to that for the sake of which one lives. The question is not *what* is it for the sake of which one lives. That could be anything. The point is *how* one lives in relation to that which is one's concern. Even if the duration of the life of how one lives the project is short, by its depth and intensity, it transforms the whole of one's life. One's life that has been spent aimlessly turns out to be a life spent searching for that which concerns oneself. The past then is seen with a new

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insight and the present is seen as directed to the future. This is what happens to Mathieu, Sartre's principal character in his trilogy *Roads to Freedom* who leads an aimless and meaningless life in the *Age of Reason* about which he himself confesses saying; "I am free for nothing", "freedom is a curse upon me". Roquentin in *Nausea* has similar experiences. But towards the end of the trilogy in *Iron in the Soul* Mathieu's life is transformed, he finds his path, he strives hard with all his might and strength towards his project, viz., the struggle for liberation. In other words, it could be said that by applying Sartre's ideas of freedom to concrete situations, as elucidated in his literary works and political actions, he advocates the need for commitment to one's project. Sartre proposes the possibility of discovering the meaning of life within the domain of action. The point which Sartre makes is this: as long as there is a future, a future which manifests itself in radiacally intense commitments and (revolutionary) actions, there is meaning in human existence.

Despite Sartre's assertion that the for-itself can be made meaningful, he makes his claim for which he is popularly known that our life has no meaning. He writes: "if we must die then our life has no meaning because its problems receive no solution and because the meaning of the problems remain undermined" (*Being and Nothingness*, p. 690). This is a remark which is phenomenologically not justifiable. Sartre makes an important distinction between ontology and metaphysics and points out that phenomenology deals only with the ontological, i.e. how-problems, and not with the why-problems. Why-problems are metaphysical in character and they have no definite answers. But phenomenology which deals with how-problems examines the mode of existing of something. This distinction which Sartre made in the context of his enquiries into the origin of Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself enables us to understand

that in so far as the problem of origin is metaphysical and, therefore, having no locus standi in phenomenology, the problem of the end, viz., death, is also a metaphysical problem and hence does not have a place in phenomenological enquiries. Consequently, phenomenology need not discuss death.

It is on the basis of this distinction that Sartre has been able to delete a large number of insoluble metaphysical questions from the domain of phenomenology. But while asserting the meaninglessness of life, Sartre does not adhere rigorously to this phenomenological insight. The first half of Sartre's above statement can be paraphrased saying that our life has no meaning because we must die. That is, the reason why there is meaninglessness is said to be death. The second half of Sartre's above statement says "because its (life's) problems receive no solution and because the very meaning of the problem remains undermined" are, in fact, the consequences of death. This statement can be reformulated as the problems of life receive no solutions because we must die and the very meaning of the problems remains undermined because we must die. In other words, whatever be the kind of analysis of Sartre's above statement regarding the meaninglessness of life one thing is certain that it appears as an answer to one or the other why-questions. In no way do they describe the manner or the mode of meaninglessness of life. They are in no way answers to any how-problems. Consequently, Sartre's elucidation of the meaninglessness of life appears to be non-phenomenological.

Does Sartre's commitment to phenomenological methodology permit him to indulge in such why problem? Can he propose the solution of a why-problem as an answer to the phenomenological, how-problem? The answer is a definite no. Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* avoided a large number of problems under the pretext of phenomenological ontology stating that his

methodology permits only how-problems and not why-problems. But here is an example where Sartre discards his phenomenological ontology to declare something which is totally inconsistent with his sort of philosophizing. The tending of consciousness to its object (i.e., intentionality) is, in fact, the very tending of life towards its concerns, towards its projects. Life, after all, cannot be separated from living expressed in intending.

Does Sartre have any justification for stating that human existence has no meaning? The angle from which the for-itself is examined in *Being and Nothingness* is that of bad faith. It is this point of a view which forms the basis of Sartre's declaration of the meaninglessness of life. Within the frame-work of *Being and Nothingness* one does not have any liberation from bad faith for it is ingrained in the very structure of consciousness and, consequently, it would not be possible for Sartre to speak of a meaningful life. Sartre's original rejection of Husserl's transcendental ego is intended to restore the pristine spontaneity of consciousness. But by not accepting that toward which one's life and, therefore, one's consciousness tend, which makes life meaningful, Sartre betrays the original spontaneity of consciousness. By accepting the noematic correlate attached to every act of consciousness, Sartre is committed to accept the meaningfulness of life in the sense of having meanings in that life is (minimally) a stream of conscious tendings towards that for the sake of which one lives. But as human freedom is freedom experienced in various activities, one could surely say that the meaning of human existence is the meaning of one's activities. In so far as one's actions have meaning (because they have goals) one's existence also has meaning for one's actions are the modes of one's existence. That towards which tending takes place is the meaning of intentionality. It can also be pointed out that phenomenological method primarily is a search for meaning.

This being so, can it be used at all to elucidate a phenomenon which Sartre considers to be inherently and constitutionally meaningless?

Is meaning phenomenologically given? Sartre in his *The Transcendence of the Ego*, (p. 35) holds that "phenomenology is the science of fact and its problems are problems of fact". The fact which Sartre examines is human existence and the meaning of this fact is that about which the fact is, viz., that for the sake of which human reality exists. If this is so, then one must hold that meaning is phenomenologically given. The heart of Husserl's notion of the universal is that the meaning of a fact is given along with the fact itself. That the meaning of a fact is inseparable from the very fact itself is the core of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology as well. These lead us to suggest that in so far as the meaning of a fact is that about which the fact is, one can very well say that the meaning of one's life is that about which one's life is, and that about which one's life is that towards which life tends and this is one's concern, one's project.

From Sartre's point of view while human reality can be made meaningful in terms of its future, it turns out to be meaningless on account of its death. What it means is that due to death, human reality has "no exit" towards a future, its life concentrated in the present is haunted by its past. It is precisely here that Heidegger's treatment of death (Being-towards-death) becomes very significant since he has been able to envisage a future for human existence (i.e., Dasein), but a future which is the possibility of the impossibility of being any more human.

Purely from a phenomenological point of view Heidegger need not discuss death at all in his phenomenology for the streams of experiences, as Husserl points out, with which phenomenology deals, does not have a beginning or an end. What is

meant is that we are aware of ourselves as already having experiences and we cannot be aware of ourselves except in virtue of experience. Consequently, Husserl states that : "the ultimate problems of phenomenology is the explication of the structure of the living present ". He goes on to add that birth and death we know only on the basis of inter-subjectivity. Death appears as a pure pause in the other's life.

Keeping in mind the objections raised both by Husserl and Sartre against a meaningful treatment of the question of death, it could be pointed out that Heidegger is not a phenomenologist simpliciter nor does he limit his philosophical concerns merely to that of Husserl and Sartre. It is his hermeneutic phenomenological elucidation of the ontology of Dasein that makes him look at the problem of death. Heidegger's use of phenomenological concepts like anticipation, projection and horizon in the context of elucidating Being-towards-death shows that Heidegger makes use of phenomenological notions merely as a point of departure for the study of Being-towards-death in his hermeneutic phenomenology. Moreover, it is very interesting to note that the key to Heidegger's elucidation of death is Husserl's assertion that phenomenology considers that which is already in process and its implication. In other words, Heidegger does not consider Being-towards-death as an event occurring at the end of one's life as Husserl and Sartre assume but as a process inbuilt in Dasein ever since its birth. Had Heidegger been considering Being-towards-death as an event occurring chronologically at the end of Dasein's life, it would not have been possible for him to use the phenomenological concept of horizon because there would be no horizon of Dasein once the event of death occurred. For Heidegger Being-towards-death is always in Dasein's horizon, Dasein projects itself into its death by way of anticipation which reveals clearly what Heidegger means by Being-towards-death.

By anticipating what happens is this : one need not be at the end to realize the end, i.e., the right perspective of the end is achieved not through being at an end but by being towards the end. I need not be at the very end to realize the end but rather my awareness that I am going to die is enough to give me an authentic (owned) approach to my existence as a whole, i.e., the existential awareness of the possibility of ceasing to be is the owned, authentic awareness of death.

A close reading of *Being and Time* reveals that an enquiry into death, in fact, does not seem to be the main concern of Heidegger. The only reason why Heidegger examines death is because it is capable of infusing authenticity into Dasein's existence. Dasein's authenticity consists in anticipation; the culmination of anticipation is death. Why should Heidegger consider death as that which institutes authenticity into Dasein's existence? Both from his Christian background and from the study of Kierkegaard's writings Heidegger realized that nothing ordinary can redeem human existence (from its fallenness) : there needs to be something *momentous* to make life authentic. In contrast to Kierkegaard's religious concern and the elucidation of the momentous within the domain of Christianity, Heidegger's purely philosophical considerations combined with his uncompromising secularism compelled him to search for the momentous within the realms of human reality which is Heidegger's primary concern. If human existence is ordinary and mediocre, i.e., inauthentic or unowned, the momentous must be its opposite, i.e., the very termination of it and this happens in death. Death, therefore, is the scandal par excellence to the ordinary everyday human existence because when it occurs mediocre human existence totally ceases to be. By eliminating mediocrity from human existence, death infuses authenticity into human existence. In so far as death is the phenomenon that is capable of instilling

authenticity by eliminating mediocrity from human existence, death infuses authenticity (the state of being owned) into human existence. In so far as death is the phenomenon that induces authenticity by expelling mediocrity, human existence in its orientation to it must be authentic or owned; hence the close relationship between authenticity and anticipation of death.

One fundamental reason why Heidegger differs from Sartre in elucidating the meaningfulness of human existence by way of Being-towards-death is Dasein's ability to constitute and to discover meaning. From Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological point of view, man (Dasein) is the meaning-giver, he is the very source of meanings. It being so, man (Dasein) cannot have a meaningless experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology which attempts to discover the meaningfulness of every experience enables Dasein to experience something in so far as it has meaning. The endeavour of Dasein is to discover 'how it is meaningful to me'.

In addition to hermeneutic phenomenology, Kierkegaard's study of acceptance of the inevitable in relation to free choice throws light upon Heidegger's notion of death, for the authentic approach to death according to Heidegger is the free choice and the whole-hearted acceptance of death in spite of the fact that it is inevitable. Kierkegaard points out that by assuming responsibility for what one already is, by choosing freely what one has already become, one becomes one's own creator¹. What this means for Heidegger is that human reality being finite has to end, has to die. Death being inevitable, ordinarily, it does not make much of a sense to speak of Being free-for-death. One is totally helpless in the face of it. It is for this reason that Sartre's for-itself tries to run away from it. But Dasein does not do this. Stimulated by Kierkegaard's contention, Heidegger points out that Dasein chooses its death, Dasein makes itself free-for-death,

Dasein finds meaning in death (by assigning meaning to it) all of which appear to show that Dasein effects its finitude. This active role of Dasein with regards to its own death opens a new perspective in our understanding of Heidegger's assertion that Dasein chooses itself to be finite, Dasein chooses its own death.

One essential feature of death is its ability to reflect authenticity to the whole of Dasein's existence. What is meant by this is that anticipation of death is what makes Dasein's future authentic. This authenticity, resulting from anticipation, makes not only Dasein's future authentic but rather anticipation of death reflects authenticity back into the past as well as to the present of Dasein, i.e., to the whole (existence) of Dasein.

It is possible to compare Heidegger's and Sartre's understanding of meaningfulness and meaninglessness of human existence. From Heidegger's point of view if the ordinary every day human existence is lived in orientation towards death, the momentous, it can become meaningful. But Sartre's point is that it is life's inherent direction towards death that makes it meaningless. The for-itself is constantly engaged in the process of discovering the meaning of its existence (in terms of its actions) in its future. While searching for meaning, reality inevitably encounters death which puts an end to the for-itself. Because the for-itself comes to an end at its death, death terminates its attempts to discover the meaningfulness of existence. Then one can say that death is the most meaningless phenomenon which human reality experiences such that it reflects meaninglessness back into the whole of existence of the for-itself making it totally absurd. In other words, it could be said that because a future which culminates in death is ever ingrained in the for-itself, the for-itself is ever meaningless.

While Sartre's contention regarding the meaninglessness of human existence may not be justifiable phenomenologically, Heidegger's attempt to depict Being-towards-death as the sole source of meaningfulness of human existence may not be very acceptable from an existentialist point of view. Phenomenological study of human existence advocates primarily the meaningfulness of human existence. From a phenomenological and existentialist point of view, human reality is constantly engaged in the process of discovering most personal and subjective meanings. This is because man constitutes meaning and he does so because he is the source of his own meaningfulness. This being so, the meaningfulness of human existence cannot be found exclusively in its orientation towards death, as Heidegger holds. As pointed out in the beginning, human existence is meaningful in terms of its future, on account of its goals, on account of its commitment to that for the sake of which it lives. Human existence turns out to be meaningless not because of death but because it has no goals to achieve, no future to realize.

Death cannot be the phenomenon which encapsulates all possible meaning of human existence (although the meaningfulness of dying for a cause cannot be denied). Death is only a mode of human existence and human existence is more than any one of its modes. Human existence discovers meaning in that for the sake of which it exists. The meaning of human existence cannot be decided on the balance of death; meaning consists in having a future, a goal, a commitment.

Indian Council of Philosophical Research
USO House, 6, Special Institutional Area
New Meherauli Road
NEW DELHI-110 067.

V. C. THOMAS

NOTE

1. ".....the individual becomes conscious of himself as this finite individual, with these talents, these dispositions, these instincts, these passions, influenced by these definite surroundings, as this 'definite product of a definite environment. But being conscious of himself in this way, he assumes responsibility for all these.... Thus at the instant of choice he is in the most complete isolation, for he withdraws from the surroundings; and at the same moment he is in absolute continuity, for he chooses himself as a product and this choice is the choice of freedom, so that when he chooses himself as a product, he can just be as well said to produce himself".

Either / Or, Vol. II, (p. 225)

PROF. S. N. MAHAJAN

We profoundly mourn the sad demise of Dr. S. N. Mahajan, Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Humanities and Social Science at I. I. T., Kanpur, who passed away on 29-12-1988 after a long illness. He was 47.

Born in 1941, Dr. Mahajan had his early education in Punjab. He took Master's degree in Philosophy from University of Punjab in 1962. After teaching at the Baring Christian College, Batala for a few years, Dr. Mahajan went to the University of Hawaii in 1964 as an East West Center scholar and earned his Ph. D. in 1968. He taught Indian Philosophy for sometime at Santa Clara, California and Slippery Rock State College, Pennsylvania. He joined IIT Kanpur in 1970 as a Lecturer in Philosophy. An active researcher and a popular teacher, he earned promotion to Assistant Professor in 1973 and to Professor in 1978.

Dr. Mahajan worked in the areas of Indian, Religious, Social and Political philosophies. In these areas his contribution, both in terms of the courses he designed and taught, and the research he carried out, is a very significant one. He published widely, and the courses he taught were very popular among students.

Dr. Mahajan also contributed actively to the curricular and co-curricular life of the institute. He was mainly responsible for starting Yoga classes in the Institute and had worked for Meditation Centre and Vivekananda Samiti whose aim was to foster inter-religious understanding among the members of the I. I. T. Community.

EDITORS
