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PROFESSOR PRASAD ON WORKING OUT A LEAD
FROM SWAMI VIVEKANANDA : SOME REFLECTIONS

It seems to me that there are two distinct parts to Professor Prasad's paper, "Morality to Override Religion" (IPQ, Vol. XXII, No. 4, Oct., 1995) : (a) the part in which he claims to take out a "lead" from Swami Vivekananda's thoughts, and (b) the part which contains his *own* views as to why Swami Vivekananda should not be regarded a philosopher as also why and how one should distinguish between philosophers and thinkers. Under (b), he makes two further points : (i) that Swami Vivekananda was a thinker, creative and, therefore, critical, and not a philosopher, and (ii) that those who have regarded him as a philosopher have failed to derive "any philosophical lead from his works" thereby doing him "dishonour" and at the same time exposing their own "childish" approach. Now, to my mind, a critical consideration of all these points will bring out some contradictions and inconsistencies in Prof. Prasad's own standpoint. I want to argue that the two parts, i.e., (a) and (b) are not related by mutual dependence and so Prof. Prasad could well have dwelt at length on (a) without the necessity of dovetailing it with (b). Further, I feel that the inclusion of (b) in some ways goes only to vitiate his own treatment of (a), particularly in view of what he says at (ii). And finally, his use of the term "philosopher" with a certain illocutionary force introduces an unnecessary polemical strain that remains unresolved in his essay. Let me briefly outline some of the points in support of my contention.

(1) In the first place, Prof. Prasad claims to take out a "lead" from Swami Vivekananda's thoughts that have to do with the very "Character of the religious attitude itself". The important point here is that by working out the implications of the Vedānta in a creative way Swami Vivekananda reaches out to the conclusion as to what *attitude* one should adopt towards life so that the Vedānta religion could be applied to the furtherance of social change and vitality and not as a mere means to one's own salvation (*mokṣa*). In other words, an important strain in such thinking is to bring about a radical attitudinal change in the minds of the masses toward their role and task *in life* which would be in harmony with the message of the Vedānta as *creatively interpreted* by Swami Vivekananda. The Vedānta religion, according to the Swami, when correctly

understood does not take us *away* from life but makes us work towards a better *quality* of social life in which the poorest of poor also can live with a sense of human dignity and well-being. Now, within the context of our own philosophical *tradition* one can surely see a paradigm shift when one goes through the works of Swami Vivekananda. Also contrast such a view of religion with the way it has been construed by another great thinker, Marx. Thus, Prof. Prasad rightly points out that : “By emphasizing the practical nature of the Vedānta he (Swami Vivekananda) intends to assert that the Vedāntin must not remain an ascetic, cut off from social involvement, but should contribute to the good of the society, i.e., to the alievation of human suffering, as far as practicable”. (p. 330) Prof. Prasad goes on to elaborate on this ‘lead’ by pointing to the implicit principle which Swami Vivekananda upholds and which is that a religious principle should not contradict reason. This may also be understood as meaning that in the event of a conflict between religion and morality the latter should be our guiding principle. Now, having analyzed this point at some length Prof. Prasad suddenly turns around and issues a caveat that this is not to be taken as a “philosophical lead” and towards the end of his essay he cautions his readers in the following lines :

“I have not so far referred to any philosophical lead obtainable from the Swami’s works because, as I have said in the beginning of the essay, he is basically or mainly a religious and moral renovator”. (p. 335).

This at once raises in one’s mind the following questions : (Q1) What is a *Philosophical* lead? Or, what does Prof. Prasad mean by such a lead? (Q2) What kind of lead does Prof. Prasad think he has taken from the Swami’s works if, as he clarifies, the “lead” taken by him is not a philosophical one? I fail to find any satisfactory explanation for such questions in this essay, and in particular, for (Q1).

(2) Secondly, considering that the lead taken out by Prof. Prasad from the works of Swami Vivekananda is not philosophical it would make sense to ask : (p) Is it because of his own limitation? Or, (q) is it the case that it is logically not possible for the works of a critical thinker (but not a philosopher) to provide any philosophical lead? Now, Prof. Prasad’s reply to (p) would be in the negative *because* an affirmative reply to (q) is implicitly contained in his remarks cited above. In other words, he seems to hold the view that philosophical leads are not extractable from the works of critical thinkers. It follows that

philosophical “leads” can be provided only by the utterances and remarks made by philosophers. One wonders if this way of contrasting the two *kinds* of leads does not give way to an implicit value judgement, whatever the tilt might be in favour of. If the philosophical lead is taken to be superior to any other kind it calls in question the very assumption on which such a conclusion is based. On the other hand, it appears somewhat distressing to common sense that critical and creative thinkers, howsoever profound they be, could provide “leads” that would be at best only secondary to the philosophical leads as a class. Again, in such a debate, should the casting vote rest with the “philosopher” only?

(3) Thirdly, on his own admission if the “lead” referred to by Prof. Prasad is *not* philosophical (and according to him, this is “the most important lead” that Swami Vivekananda provides) should *his* own essay on this topic count for a philosophical essay? Not only does it *find* a place in a reputed *philosophical* journal, but an earlier version of its was presented at a seminar on Swami Vivekananda which was organized by the ICPR, an apex national body for the promotion and coordination of philosophical research. In other words, can the “leads” *other* than the philosophical ones be the fit subject matter for philosophical seminars, essays and discussions in the pages of philosophical journals? But on further reflection, can we say that even if a “lead” is not philosophical a discussion and analysis of it by an accredited academic philosopher would make such an exercise philosophical? This may well be so as perhaps there is no contradiction that seems involved in holding such a position. What, however, is puzzling is that Prof. Prasad in the course of his own discussion administers a stiff admonition of all “academic” philosophers who undertake such exercise either for their own take or for the sake of their research scholars. If philosophers as a class show their “childish” approach by discussing “leads” taken from the works of *non*-philosophical thinkers why should there be any single exception such that the charge (of being childish) can be escaped by him? It may be true, as Prof. Prasad argues, that doctoral students and many reputed philosophers who have written “some comparative or non-comparative account of what the Swami has said” have not come upto the mark as “none of these attempts has succeeded in deriving any philosophical lead from his works”. (p. 336) But, to predict that all” (S)uch works are bound to be, as philosophical pieces, insipid” smacks of undue prejudice and dogmatism. Moreover, such emphatic pronouncement against undertaking research-level writing on the thoughts of Swami Vivekananda would clearly seem

to contradict, at least in spirit, what Prof. Prasad has himself said about the range, richness and fecundity of his (Swami's) thoughts in the earlier part of his essay :

“But till date we have not exhausted all, or even the most relevant leads his thoughts can give. This is not surprising because the thoughts of a great thinker are capable of throwing up different types of leads which perceptive minds may pick out according to their existential needs”. (p. 328).

I feel tempted to ask, who could aspire to be such “perceptive minds?” Surely, not philosophers (or doctoral students in Philosophy departments) if Prof. Prasad is to be taken for his words.

(4) Fourthly, consider for a moment the possibility that Prof. Prasad had *excluded* from his essay all his remarks on the purported nature of the “lead” under reference, the distinction to be made between philosophers and thinkers, and the desirability (or otherwise) for writing dissertations on the thought of Swami Vivekananda. Would that have detracted from the merit of the “lead” he discusses and analyses in this essay? On the other hand, does it add to the quality and level of his discussion given his pleadings that the Swami be not regarded a philosopher as well? I think it quite besides the point whether one is a philosopher or not so long as it is possible to reflect fruitfully on one or the other aspect of a thinking person's works or outpouring. For that matter, a person may combine the role of a philosopher and a moral renovator without involving any contradiction. (Of course, whether one *is* actually able to do so is quite another question.) Moreover, whether one is a philosopher or not (if the question is important at all) can be judged only *after* one has studied and reflected on the works of such a person. In our own times, Russell and Sartre (and more recently, Chomsky) have combined different roles on different occasions during their life time besides getting claimed as philosophers. Just because one is a political activist or moral renovator can be no ground for rejecting the claim of such a person to be a philosopher.

(5) And finally, one might be in sympathy with Prof. Prasad's view that a thinker need not necessarily be a philosopher if the term “philosopher” is taken in a very rigid and narrow sense for an academician who teaches or conducts research in certain specified areas of philosophy. But I fail to see the provocation for Prof. Prasad to go all hammer and tongs hairsplitting the

meanings of and distinctions between philosophers and thinkers. Surely, he knows better than I do that these connotations change with time. And, in everyday language if the two terms (i.e., "philosopher" and "thinker") are used almost interchangeably - even if that be the case only in the "Indian English" language - one may want to side with the philosopher who says that there is nothing wrong with the *ordinary language*.

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