

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN ACTION

1. Self-knowledge

'Who am I?'. One way of answering the question would be : I am a student, studying philosophy. One day I look into the mirror and ask, 'Who are you?' particularly, for example, when I find surreptitious changes having taken place in me without my having been able to give them attention. I may look at myself in the mirror and ask myself that question. Even the question 'Who am I?' would form a part of a conversational discourse : A asks me in a certain context: 'Who are you?' and I say : 'Who am I?' 'Well, I'm a student studying philosophy'. But I can plunge in a philosophic exercise of trying to find answers to questions like 'What am I?', 'What is Self?', 'What is Soul?'. To these questions, taken to have the same meaning, I shall try to show that any conclusive answer, except one, would be self-stultifying.

When I conclusively try to answer the question 'What am I?', the self-stultification that I commit consists in my not taking into account the disposition to make the knowledgeable utterance that I do make about myself. Thus when I say that 'I' consists of X, Y, Z (and their interrelationships) then I do not take into account that disposition, namely that which enables me to knowledgeably utter : 'I' consists of X, Y, Z. When I do take this disposition into account then I leave out this disposition, namely the disposition to knowledgeably utter: 'I' consists of X, Y, Z and the disposition to knowledgeably utter that 'I' consists of X, Y, Z. It seems to me that any such account would lead to infinite regress. Consider, for example, Descartes' account : 'But what then am I? A thing which thinks. It is a thing which doubts' understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses and which also imagines and feels'. But the disposition to knowledgeably utter this statement does not form a part of Descartes' analysis of the 'I'. Hume would fall into a similar dilemma : 'When I enter most intimately into what I call **myself**, I never can catch myself at any time without a perception and never can observe anything but the perception'. This insight is a part of Hume's 'I', yet it is not explicit in the analysis of 'myself' that Hume offers. It is implicit in it, and this is what makes any explicitly conclusive talk about 'myself' or 'I' impossible.

Any analysis that I may make about 'I' presupposes a disposition to make that analysis but explicitly precludes it in that analysis, rendering it always incomplete or inconclusive. A claim that one has fully analysed the nature of 'I' would, thus, at any time, be a self-stultification. Is the query then meaningless? It does not seem so as I can offer an answer which does not involve me in an infinite regress. The answer is : I am infinite (where 'infinity' means 'impossibility of conclusive description'). To this statement infinite regress does not apply because the dispositions which lead to infinite regress are all covered by infinity. 'I am infinite' is, in fact, the only conclusive statement that I can make about myself (and anyone else can make about oneself) if one has to escape from infinite regress and self-stultification.

The problem here is not to try to know something about oneself. I, for example, know a large number of facts about myself; that I was born at a certain place on a certain day, that I have graduated from College, that I am under six feet tall, that I feel hungry at certain times during the day, that though I liked B until about a month back I now avoid him. Even in self-deception, for example in persistently believing that I play good cricket when I do not, I still know that I believe that I play good cricket. But in saying all this I am not offering any answer to 'What am I?'.

It is obvious that each day I make a large number of statements concerning myself. I may say that I am (feeling) tired, bored, light-headed, hungry and so on. Such talk is not meaningless but perfectly in order because I am not here trying to offer any conclusive account of myself but am merely expressing the state of myself at a particular moment. There are obviously sometimes special difficulties in trying to know my own mind : the answer to, 'Should I go to play tennis today?' may not be immediately accessible to me because I do not know whether I should, or should not, play tennis today; whether, for example, obliging a friend today is more important for me than the movie that I wanted to see. When we say that 'Rama is an unhappy man', we do take into account certain incidents in Rama's life and his reaction to them, his attitude to other things, and so on. I may

be wrong in saying 'Rama is an unhappy man' because, for example, I may have wrongly evaluated Rama's reactions to certain incidents in his life. In all these cases, however, I am not trying to give any conclusive account of myself or of Rama.

How is the statement, 'I am infinite' to be really (and not just verbally) understood? One way, the Vedantic 'neti, neti' is the negative way in which one refuses to accept any conclusive or finite conception of the nature of oneself through repeated denial of attributes as conclusively exhausting one. The other is one's sheer awareness of oneself in a state of meditation.

2. Human Action

Before considering human action, it would be necessary to consider a human being. A human being is one who knows or claims to know a large number of facts about himself and about others. Additionally, he is also capable of asking himself the question, 'What am I?'. Any answer to this question except 'I am infinite' is self-stultifying. If infinitude is an important aspect of a human being, then must not this aspect be considered in considering human action? If I may call this infinitude Soul, then does it not follow that as a human being I must treat you as Soul and that I must treat myself also as Soul? In the aspect of Soul, I am not different from any other human being and it is this which makes me see that when I perform an action unto another human being, I do not just perform an action unto human being A or human being B but unto a human being essentially the same as I. Thus, I think it can be said: 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end' (Kant). 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Christ). These directives seem to me incomprehensible except on the notion of human being as Soul. Also, the possibility of my treating you as a means only (namely as just so-and-so) glaringly remains. The history of human beings amply testifies to this fact and to all the human misery that goes with it. Hence also the necessity to treat every human being not only as a means (i.e. as so-and-so) but also as an end (or as Soul).

Human actions must therefore take into account this infinitude of a human being called Soul. What I say to or do for my sweeper may differ from what I may say to or do for my teacher. But that should not prevent me from seeing both as Soul. If I see that the sweeper ought to be taught the fundamentals of arithmetic I may go about teaching them to him. I may go to my teacher to become philosophically richer. But in these diverse activities I ought not to lose sight of the fact that I, the teacher, and the sweeper are all Soul. It is an attitude that I have, but an attitude that makes me see that I have absolutely no reason to suppose that I am doing a favour to the sweeper or that my teacher is doing a favour to me; or that my teacher is a superior being to me or that I am a superior being to my sweeper. Nevertheless, a sweeper is a sweeper (he sweeps), a teacher is a teacher (he teaches) and a student is a student (he studies), it would be foolish to equate all three as teachers, sweepers students. But all three are human beings and therefore Soul and I cannot neglect this aspect as I cannot neglect that one human being is a teacher, another is a sweeper and a third a student, in performing human action. If as human beings we are Soul (as we are sweepers, students and teachers) then I see that as Soul the sweeper and the teacher are not different from me; how can they be when Soul is infinite? It is this attitude that makes it possible for any action that I may perform towards a human being (including myself) to be called human action. If I regard the sweeper merely as a sweeper (i.e. as a means) then in acting unto him I do not perform human action. If I regard him (solely as Soul i.e. as an end) human action becomes impossible. I cannot treat him as less than Soul and still call him a human being. The only way in which I can regard him as a human being and perform human action is to see that he is Soul (i.e. as not different from me) and to see that he does not know arithmetic, that he ought to know arithmetic and that I can teach him arithmetic. Usually we see only one or the other aspect but we have to be able to see both to be able to perform human action.

BLACKIE & SON PRIVATE LTD.

BLACKIE HOUSE

103/5, Walchand Hirachand Marg,

Post Box 21, Bombay 400 001.

**Some of the Forthcoming Books on Philosophy and Religion
from the Open University Educational Enterprises Ltd., U. K. to be
Published in 1979.**

<i>Author</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Course No.</i>	<i>Price</i>
CLARK F. & OTHERS	Seekers And Scholars	AD208 1—3	£.2.95
WEIGHTMAN S.	Hinduism in the Village Setting	AD208 4—5	£.1.95
McDERMOTT R.A. & SMART N.	Hindu Patterns of Liberation	AD208 6—8	£.2.95
HALL M. & MASSON J.	The Nobel Path of Buddhism	AD208 9—11	£.2.95
THOMAS T.	Sikhism : The voice of the Guru	AD208 12—13	£.2.10
FERGUSON J.	Greek and Roman Religion	AD208 14—15	£.1.95
GOLDSTEIN D.	The Religion of the Jews	AD208 16—17	£.1.95
CLARK F.	The Christian Way	AD208 18—19	£.1.95
CRAGG K.	Islam and the Muslim	AD208 20—21	£.2.10
BROWN S.	Secular Alternatives to Religion	AD208 22—23	£.1.95
FINNEGAN R. & FERGUSON J.	Aspects of African Religion	AD208 24—25	£.2.25
HINNELLS J. R.	Spanning East and West	AD208 26—28	£.3.25
THOMAS T.	Inter-Religious Encounter	AD208 29—30	£.1.75
THOMPSON K. & CLARK F.	Quest and Questioning	AD208 31—32	£.2.10