

THE PURUSHARTHAS IN THE LIGHT OF CRITICAL THEORY

Introduction

The present essay is an attempt at formulating a possible understanding of the doctrine of the four purusharthas in the light of the basic principles of Critical Theory as found in the work of Jurgen Habermas, particularly in his "Knowledge and Human Interests". Since what it hopes for is the suggestion of a new perspective on an old philosophical conception, I would like to make it very clear at the outset, that, as the discussion stands at present I would not like to claim **interpretative validity** for what I do. I believe that a re-study of the texts may, perhaps, even substantiate the views I would like to be considered; but I do not want to make that claim here and now. If the conception is found philosophically acceptable perhaps, one could undertake such a textual re-study, afterwards; I would, hence, like to examine the philosophical credibility of the proposed conception. A similar prefatory remark concerning critical theory is in order. Here again I am not expounding or interpreting the texts of Habermas as they exist; I do not want to make that sort of claim with regard to critical theory either; I just want to make use of the formulation of the philosophical problem suggested by Habermas and I also believe that if the doctrine of the purusharthas is formulated under the auspices of the Critical Theory, so to say then it seems to me we can more easily come to see the **relevance** of the doctrine. Of course, I am not suggesting that this is the only way, or even the best way, of bringing the relevance of the conception into focus. Also I do not want to suggest that this attempt would in any way assimilate the Indian doctrine to Critical Theory; Critical Theory is not the active catalyst which brings the classical Indian conception to life and relevance; rather, I believe that in the process the contours of Critical Theory also might change it also may acquire a new relevance in the process of reciprocal illumination, such that, afterwards when one begins to carry on the discussion of Critical Theory, one may perhaps increase the depth of its insights. But one thing I firmly believe namely that at this level, it is

possible to hope for a reciprocal illumination and re-vitalization of some classical Indian and some contemporary western image of man.

According to Habermas, one of the fundamental tasks facing us at the level of theory of knowledge is to work out a new conception of the proper relationship between knowledge and human interests; negatively, this task takes the form of a critique of instrumental rationality, but positively, one can hope to have such a new theory of reason and cognition only on the basis of a philosophically articulated conception of man, of human nature, which would provide a foundation to the sought-for essential relationship between knowledge and human interests. In this, the epistemological task the working out of an adequate theory of rationality presupposes a foundation in philosophical anthropological conception of man. But, he holds, we also have to face a third task, or a third aspect of our fundamental task, namely, an ontological one. As he shows in "Theory and Practice" there is, at one level, a secret or hidden affinity between the classical Greek conception of Theory and the positivistic conception of value neutral rationality; both of them presuppose an ontological objectivism - the view that there is an independent order of nature, of facts, which is objectively there independent of human interests and that the task of theory is to achieve as adequate a comprehension of this objective, independent world order as possible. He argues that this classical objectivism is the source of the demand for the separation of knowledge from life interests, for given that there is such an objective order independent and self sufficient, it would follow that the introduction of interests would only allow an element of subjectivity, or anthropomorphism into the life of reason. Reason, if it is to be adequate to the comprehension of such an independent order of things, must undergo a catharsis or purification from all impulse desire or interests. Habermas now argues that we must, at the ultimate level of images of the world, displace the objectivism and in its place, work out an ontology of constitution of the objective world by way of the interests of reason; we must, in other words take a turn towards a transcendental philosophy of the type of Kant.

I now wish to use this three fold formulation of the philosophical task as the basis for developing a perspective on the doctrine of purusharthas. If the above analysis is accepted as a point of departure then we have to formulate our problems at three levels : at level of philosophical anthropology, we must sketch out a view or conception of man, which at the level of theory of knowledge would provide us with a theory of rationality which would formulate in a proper and adequate manner the relationship of knowledge and human interests. On the basis of such an epistemological analysis of the constitutive role of interests, we can, at the ontological level, take up the project of Critique, i. e. work out a theory of the transcendental constitution of the world of experience by way of these knowledge-constitutive interests. If this is the formulation of the structure of our philosophical tasks, I suggest that we may begin to work out the theory of purusharthas in such a way that it provides us a basis for the solution of these tasks. If and when this is done, the doctrine of purusharthas would not be, any longer, a mere incidental or secondary insight, but would become the ground of the possibility of any adequate philosophy, Eastern or Western.

Men, it is said, are distinguished from other natural beings in as much as men are species-beings. In this idea of a species-being, two things are involved. Firstly individual men are members of the class or species men, but secondly, not only do they have a class membership, but they also have an awareness of their membership, of their species character. Individual men know themselves as human. This awareness of their humanity is not, however, an awareness which they have apart from or in addition to their awareness of themselves. On the contrary, their sense of identity is made possible only because they have this sense of species-being. The self consciousness awareness of being a person, the idea of personal identity is possible only in terms of an acceptance, recognition and life with others.

This identity, therefore, is an achievement and not an innate or instinctive possession. Also, this achievement while it is experienced in cognitive terms as the self - awareness of an individual, is yet something which is materially grounded in their actions and interactions with nature, with others and with themselves. The sense of identity, the awareness of self reflective

personhood is something which is shaped and formed by the structures of life. Men have to shape themselves as human in their interaction with the external world, in their social and communicational interrelations with others and in the experience of power, domination and subjugation. Work, Interaction and Power are the contexts which shape and structure the identity and self awareness of human beings; but these contexts are not to be taken as separate and forming the identity of human subjects serially rather, they are to be taken as a total and simultaneous gestalt of formative forces. Indeed, it is this compresence which defines a form of life as human. Animals too are under the nature imposed necessity of having to come to terms with the exigencies of their environment; similarly, they also have a sort of togetherness or herd life and they too are subject to the ravages of predation. But what constitutes the human form of life as **human** is the interpenetration, the simultaneity of these formative influences. Men's dealings with nature are not merely a biological or natural metabolism with objects, but as **work** precisely in so far as this exchange with nature is mediated by way of social relationships and social understandings. The order of communication, the moral order, enters into the order of material exchange and transforms it into work as labour. Similarly, the moral or cultural order too is not experienced as an "angelic" or free and unfettered process of mutual recognition and respect. It also is mediated by the inequalities and divisiveness imposed by the production relations thereby shaping the peculiarly human experience of exploitation deprivation and social injustice. Each context as it were forms and is formed by the others and thus by their simultaneous co-presence gives a distinctive categorial specificity to human experience. Similarly the sheer clan of being alive is also transformed into a specifically human mode of experience, when mere life gets conceptualized and acknowledged in moral cultural terms as a **value**, when men seek not merely life, but **good life**. The distinctiveness, the peculiar **humanity** of our experience is therefore the result of the formative influence of the contexts.

These are purusarthas in the sense of being transcendental a priori constitutive grounds of a form of life that can be regarded as human. They are not merely empirical motivations of men

but, rather they constitute our distinctive humanity. We are men only in so far as our experience and life are grounded in these formative contexts. Hence to recognise any being as human is to consider him under the form of these orientations, as a being who sees himself in terms of a striving after these, as one who recognises in himself the authority of these. They are the grounds of the possibility of our humanity and it is they, in their simultaneity, which distinguishes us as men, as human. I said, "in their simultaneity" because in every one of our actions and experiences, they are all constitutively involved.¹ To sunder one from the other is precisely to negate it as a purusartha, as a human constitutive orientation. Kama without artha, dharma and moksa, for instance, would not be human happiness or pleasure but would define merely the life of animal impulse. What makes Kama a human aspiration is precisely the mediation by the rest. The forms of mediation may differ from one purusartha to the next for instance, the way in which Kama enters into moksa would be different from the ways in which it enters into dharma or artha; similarly there would be different forms of mediation and one can indeed begin to sketch out a fascinating phenomenology of these mediations. Such a phenomenology may provide the ground work for a new philosophical anthropology but for the present I merely wish to emphasise the necessity of mediation with respect to each one of the purusarthas.

The doctrine of the purusarthas, in this understanding, is to be taken as the conclusion of a transcendental mode of argument; given the distinctively human form of life, we ask regressively, as to the grounds of its possibility. An experience and form of life could be recognisably human only in so far as it is understood as determined by the structure of these four-fold aspirations. Only in so far as we recognise the authority and pull of these aspirations, can any effort or desire or want or wish could be regarded as human. In this sense, the purusarthas are the grounds of the possibility of human life. This means to say that they are constitutive of us, they are the arthas which are recognisable as peculiarly human.

But understood in this sense what they define is the transcendental a priori **framework** of human life and to this extent, considered purely in their purely a priori or 'formal' aspect, they

have a universality and necessity about them. All forms of experience and effort in so far as they claim to be human, must be formed by them: it would be a transcendental impossibility (not of course, a logical impossibility or a contradiction) to conceive of human beings to whom they would have no application. In this sense, they have a strict universality and necessity about them like the kantian categories. But this does not mean that the particular content or significance which goes into them the specific 'material' interpretation of this framework also must be necessary and invariant. Indeed, the content is variable and relative contingent upon a host of other historically determined factors, social, cultural and temperamental. To be more specific, all men, merely by being human, experience terror, repression, violence and coercion and all men also have the dream and pursuit of emancipation. The experience of bondage and the idea and aspiration of emancipation are indeed one of the framework principles of our common humanity such that if we were to meet with a man who has never felt the burden of the one and the longing for the other, who has known no terror nor hope, I think it would be an extremely uncanny encounter. Such a one would fill us with an unnameable anxiety and unease. But this does not at all prevent different men and different groups of men having different ideas about bondage and emancipation. The context which goes into the form may have a wide range of variability. Some may see bondage as being in thrall under cosmic forces, others in terms of social oppression and tyranny and yet others may see it in terms of dark, inner compulsions within the self. Similarly, the content of the emancipatory passion also would show a very rich diversity and variability. But for all that, the forms are invariably constitutive of our humanity. Similarly with the other purusarthas; they are the framework principles which constitute or define the specifically human mode of being in the world.

If this is so, then they must also be the grounds of our cognitive powers and capacities. They must be the human structural contexts which give orientation to knowledge - they are the matrix for the knowledge - constitutive interests. Kama Artha, Dharma and Moksa ground the aesthetic, the technical, the moral communicational and the emancipatory interests of reason.

But here we must be careful to avoid a misleading linearity which may tempt us to think of the purusarthas as conditioning the forms of reason as a cause determines or conditions an effect. Reason is not a mere faculty or instrumental capacity of men; being their essence, there is nothing in human beings which is untouched by it. There is no mere brute impulse or animal drive or instinct in man. For Reason being the form or essence of a living, human individual, it is present even in the life of impulse and desire. Even human sensibility is a formed sensibility, which has been shaped by the pure forms and categories of the understanding. Sense experience is not a mere raw, non-rational encounter with objects, but is a product of the constitutive role of the subject. Hence impulse and desire also show the stamp of the constitutive productivity of reason. We can never understand man as an animal with rationality added; he is a different kind of totality in which the fact of reflective consciousness leaves nothing else unaltered: the feelings, desires and even the instinct for self-preservation of a reflective being must be different from those of other animals. This is what we must accept if we take seriously the view that reason is man's essence. But then, we cannot think of the purusarthas as somehow separate and apart from rationality. If it is true to say that the purusarthas ground the interests of reason, it is equally true to say that the purusarthas are forms of reason also. But this reason is of course not the instrumental rationality of means-end calculations, but it is reason as constitutive. The purusarthas are not apart from reason, but they exemplify the fourfold way in which reason constitutes our humanity. I suggest that the doctrine of the purusarthas may be looked upon as the phenomenology of constitutive reason.

The relationship between knowledge or reason and interests must be understood differently from the way of pragmatism. For pragmatism has a conception of reason and intellect as essentially a problem-solving power or capacity, and accordingly the intervention of reason is seen merely in its technical role. The conception of reason is still an instrumentalist one. In order to distinguish our present conception of knowledge and life interest, we may distinguish between the regulative and constitu-

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tive role of interests. The difference from pragmatism is not merely that it has a less comprehensive or one-sided conception of practice and action, but rather that in so far as knowledge is seen in instrumentalist terms, the conception of practice itself would be vitiated or distorted; a comparison with the Kantian critique of empiricism may be in order here. Kant did not merely hold that the empiricists have a partial or incomplete picture of human experience to which certain rational elements of the understanding must be added; rather his point was that in so far as experience itself presupposes certain nonempirical conditions of its possibility, the empiricists have a categorially inadequate conception of experience itself. Similarly here too, the point to note in connection with pragmatism is that its conception of practice and not merely its conception of theory is defective.

But to return to the major implications of our analysis; I have been suggesting that each one of these orientations is constitutively present in our experience such that we must see them as compresent formative influences. No experience or context of experience merely exemplifies one *purusartha* in isolation; for purposes of theoretical analysis, we may have to speak as if each one of them could act in isolation; we may be misled by this distinguishability into taking them to be separable presences or powers. But this is to confuse the order of analytical distinction with the order of real powers. In reality, in every one of our experiences, all the four orientations are active and it is this conjoint action that gives a specific 'humanity' to our experiences, they shape our experiences as constitutive *gestalts*.

I have already stressed this point, but now we can move onto another. Not being merely objective or causal powers, but orientations upon thought and action, being interests of reason, they become operative only in so far as there is a recognition, an awareness of their presence and authority over our lives. It is only in so far as the subjects recognise these orientations and accord them legitimacy can they function in their constitutive role. Like the power of language, their power and authority also depends upon a subjective recognition and appropriation;

they do not act behind the backs of human subjects, like blind causal necessities but they become effective only in terms of the subject's own formation of the will.

This subjective recognition and appropriation in turn is no simple act of theoretical insight; it depends upon a conjuncture of a variety of factors and circumstances, individual and socio-cultural. For one thing, there must be an **opportunity** for such a recognition, an objective possibility for seeing our lives and experiences in the round, as it were. In so far as our experiences are fragmented and we live in different wolds, with no sense of unity and totality of our form of life, in so far as we experience only the **serial order** of our lives, we would not be having even an opportunity or occasion for the comprehension of totality. But merely an objective possibility or situational opportunity must be matched with a certain **sensitivity** of reflection, a certain capacity for a totalistic comprehension, a kind of imaginative capacity to see every experience in terms of all the four contexts. This kind of sensitivity demands at once a certain purity and charity which would see the component of moksa in every one of our actions, a moral perception which would see its dharma element, a realistic and mundane intelligence to be sensitive to its artha dimension and lastly an aesthetic taste and sensibility for its kama element. Such a multiformed sensibility and plasticity of understanding is needed for the subjective recognition of the constitutive presence of the orientations. But this kind of sensitive and discriminating awareness has to be nurtured and developed in the individual subjects, for it depends upon equipment skills and learning and training, and lastly there is also the question of **motivation**, of the **formation of will** - this, fundamentally is a matter of **life acceptance**, a yea-saying to the form of our lives.

Given the objective and subjective conditions of the full appropriation of these orientations, it could be seen that no existing social system or arrangement of life allows us the full possibility of such a recognition; all systems of social life cripple and mutilate such recognition and thereby dehumanise the subjects, but there are **relative** possibilities of a particular social arrangement giving us more of an access to such a recognition than certain other social arrangements. To the extent it does so, it would be preferable as a more **humane order of life**.

I have been suggesting that we must look upon these interests, not merely as regulative for our life and thought, but as constitutive of our experiences. In conclusion, I would like to say something more about this constitutive function. Such interests are said to be knowledge – constitutive, firstly because they function as criteria of relevance or significance. Minimally, they act as the standards of what is proper and appropriate in a context. But they also function constitutively in so far as they determine the type of concepts and categories with which to articulate the problem. The orientations function with regard to inquiry as criteria of conceptual and categorial formulation. But the interests of reason also function, at the third level, as standards of warranted assertability, as criteria of justification; they determine the proof procedures as well as the type and meaning of tests. They thus determine the rational acceptability of the different claims. But merely to see the constitutive role of the interests upto this point and not take up the question of the constitution of the objects of experience would be to leave a residue of fundamental arbitrariness about it. For if the objects are beyond the pale of these interests, if they are untouched by them, then it would appear that these interests in so far as they influence reason only take it further and further away from truth. If the interests are merely so many influences upon our thinking and if the objects of knowledge are independent of them, then it would appear that we must overcome the distorting effects of these subjective prejudices. In such terms they would only be sources of error and bias, something like Bacon's idols. But these interests, I have been claiming are knowledge constitutive and it would appear that they can be so regarded only if they are constitutive of the objects also.

But it may be felt that if reason is to be seen as constituting the objects also, then it might be thought that we are back in a philosophy of Absolute Idealism. But not really so, if we keep the essential turn of the Kantian philosophy at this critical point. Kant's commitment to the things in themselves is, I had argued elsewhere, not an, irrational and irrelevant 'dogmatic' prejudice, but it precisely provides the ground for affirming the transcendental constitutive role of reason as he understands it. As I put it elsewhere, the doctrine of the things-in-themselves is a kind of meta-transcendental safeguard.

It is this which prevents the relapse into a dogmatic speculative idealism. For Kant, human reason was constitutive, no doubt, but he saw reason in its a priori purity, as unconnected with interest. Hence his final conception of man suffered a basic flaw or distortion; for Kant, man is a transcendental subject with natural functions. I suggest that if we take the purusharthas as knowledge-constituting interests, we can have a conception of man as **natural subject with transcendental functions**.

I would finally like to explain, at least schematically, how the doctrine of purusharthas may suggest this conception of man as a natural subject with transcendental constitutive functions. In so far as our specific human essence is shaped by kama and artha they necessarily naturalise the subject who is under their authority; the human mode of enjoyment is possible only for a being whose impulses and needs find their fulfilment by way of objects independent of subjective impulse and need. Man is a natural being in the double sense of a being whose nature itself takes the form of desire and need and also in the sense of a being who finds fulfilment in objects existing independently of him. The structures of this natural character of the human subject are prefigured in kama and artha.

The transcendental constitutive function of this natural subject is revealed in dharma, which I take to be the symbol of the moral communicational order, the order of meanings, values and norms. The order of communicational understandings is made possible by man's capacity for language. Language is certainly a capacity or power of natural subjects. Both in the sense of requiring a sensuous medium and in the sense of its discursive character, language is an attribute of natural subjects, but in its operation, language constitutes the world of human experience; it builds a distinctively human world over the basis of the order of things as they are in themselves²; it shapes the world of human meaning and experience by means of its symbolic powers, such that with the power of speech and communication man distances himself from the rest of creation; in a sense, the world of human experience, thought and action is a constituted world. It is this constitutive aspect of communicational reason that stands for the transcendental function; or to put it in terms of the doctrine of purusharthas, dharma is

pivotal and crucial for it modulates kama and artha on the one hand and moksa on the other. It is in this sense that dharma could be said to be a parama purusartha but we must also note that a being who experiences the demands of the moral order in the context of need and toil cannot find fulfilment only in the moral order; such a one must also have a dream of emancipation.

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NOTES

1. I owe the recognition of the importance of this point to personal discussions with Prof. K. J. Shah.
2. For the constitutive role of language please see Prof. S. S. Barlingay "One World" I. P. Q., Vol. V, No. 2, 1978, I am also thankful to him for further personal discussions concerning this point.