Self and Other
Some Western and Indian Perspectives

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A very basic question in philosophy concerns the nature of self and its relationship with other selves; whether the self or person is constituted by its community or society, or it is what is due to some universal element which is shared by all selves, call it reason (Kant) or *Atman* ((Indian thought). In ethics, the same question would become—whether the self owes duties to its immediate community alone, or whether it owes duties to itself on the one hand, and to entire humanity on the other.

I

1 . During the ancient and medieval periods, both in the East and the West, the individual subject and agent was mostly conceived as a unit of society with a definite institutional role. At first the Renaissance humanism, then the Enlightenment rationalism and nineteenth century liberalism gradually transformed the conception of the self in the West. Post-Enlightenment modern Western thought conceived the individual as a person, and emphasized the 'natural' affinity and equality of all human beings based on their shared rational nature.

In Kant, the ideas of the dignity and inviolability of a human person (expressed in the second formulation of the categorical imperative concerning the need to treat human persons as ends-in-themselves, and never as a means); and the absolute equality of all persons (expressed through the third formulation of the categorical imperative concerning the kingdom of ends) find their strongest expression.[1] Both ideas are, however, based in Kantian philosophy on the axiomatic belief regarding the moral agent being essentially a

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rational person and reason, in turn, being conceived as universal.[2] Thus, while the human person is an end-in-herself in Kant, she is also a member of the kingdom of ends, sharing a common rational nature with them.

Nineteenth century liberalism carried forward these ideas of equality, liberty and dignity of all persons *qua* their humanity. It also asserted the values of individualism, pluralism and tolerance.

2. There was a parallel movement in the Continent, whose pioneers were Hegel and Fischte, which conceived and emphasized the State as a living expression of universal Reason, Mind or Spirit. State was conceived as an organic unit whose citizens have no separate or independent identity of their own.

The existentialists acknowledge the social context of human life and personhood. The person or subject is not some one standing over against, or confronting an alien, unknowable world, rather the person is constituted by her relationships with others. According to Martin Heidegger, a person is a *Dasein* or being-in-the-world; that is, being related to others is an essential aspect, or even constitutive, of the being and existence of a person. The being of a person is 'being with 'or' being for' others.

However, the existentialists also emphasize the essential solitude of the human person as she faced anxiety, guilt, and above all death alone. J.P. Sartre has especially asserted the essential solitariness of human person in his concept of the authentic existence which consists in 'treating ourselves as isolated, unique, and free'. It also consists in a total rejection of 'bad faith' through a refusal to be what others want us to be. It is being and living on the basis of our free decisions. Sartre goes as far as to say that my self is the only sure thing; others' 'being' is either a matter of doubt or a threat.[3]

The emphasis on authenticity which can be achieved only by rejecting the place of others and their demands in our lives is at variance with their first assertion regarding the subject's existence as being with others. The concept of authenticity, however, has one great merit, that of acknowledging that the human person owes duties to herself as much as, or perhaps more than, she does towards others.

3. This brings us back to liberalism, because for liberals, as for existentialists, the individual person, her goals,, desires and rights are of prime importance. Above all, liberty of the individual is the pivotal idea of nineteenth century liberalism.[4] Its emphasis on individual's

liberty and right to the pursuit of happiness and perfection express an extreme individualism.

Though John Rawls is separated from earlier liberals by several decades, his views are generally regarded as the paradigm of liberal ideology. Rawls interprets liberty quite differently from the nineteenth century liberals, so that it remains commensurate with equality of all humans *qua* their humanity. Liberty and equality are not always compatible—and Rawls takes extra care to ensure minimum equality among different persons and groups. This is made possible by bringing in the principle of justice as fairness. The latter aims at equality and 'the greatest benefit of the least advantaged'.[5]

4. In the later half of twentieth century, a strong communitarian movement has emerged in the West. Communitarians interpret Rawl's philosophy as purely individualistic which fails to understand the intimate relationship between members of a society. According to them, people necessarily derive all their beliefs, values, norms and attitudes, as well as their self-understanding from their community. Further, the content of human welfare is inherently communal.[6]

Communitarians are critical of the liberal suggestion that there is some universal essence of human beings—for Rawls it is the rational nature—which is common to and overrides the particularities of various cultures. Liberals, they argue, detach people from their diverse cultures, 'in whose terms they conceive themselves and the meaning of their lives'.[7]

5. They are right to the extent that they acknowledge the role of community and its way of life in determining our norms, values and patterns of behaviour. But perhaps the community is not as determinative of our personhood as it is made out to be, since individual's norms and values are generally derived from more than one source.

Similarly, differences are there as an empirical fact. But let these differences not bind us to—first, the differences of capacities, inclinations and values among individuals belonging to the same society; second, differences and tensions between various groups and traditions within a society; and third, the affinity between, or some common nature and needs shared by all or most human beings. The emphasis on the rationality of, or affinity between, human beings need not negate the differences between various cultures. And the recognition of these differences need not imply the rejection of either their rationality, or the fact that they share common ways of thinking and

responding to life's situations. In other words, there is a common bond of humanity which does not contradict the various level differences between human beings.

Communitarians deliberately use the term 'community' in a very vague manner. It may mean anything from a small group organised around some one shared interest to the larger nation society. It would be naive to think that each of us belongs to one community alone. Rather, we belong to so many communities at once, and our various identities, regional, linguistic, religious, economic and so on necessarily overlap. If so, which of these innumerable communities can justifiably claim to be the determiner of the individual's identity, her values and norms?

Many Communitarians, such as Michael Sandel, Michael Waltzer and Alsdair MacIntyre, frankly regard the 'political community' as the proper referent of the term 'community'. But make the state or political community the source of all our norms, standards and even our very personhood is to pave the way for totalitarianism, as happened in the case of nineteenth century advocates of supremacy of the State (Hegel and Fischte). Moreover, the conception of the state as representing a homogeneous tradition and way of life denies the natural internal pluralism of every society, a pluralism which the Communitarians were supposed to defend.

6. Communitarians thus fail to do justice to either the immense plurality of beliefs, values and ways of people (by conceiving the political community as a homogeneous whole), or the basic affinity of humankind. We need not undermine either the determinative influence of the community over its members, or the immense diversity of ways of life of different communities. But can we say more than this, that when two persons, belonging to two different cultures, meet for the first time, they would fail to recognize in each other some primordial affinity which can pave the way for mutual communication and dialogue?

This affinity of humankind is best safeguard if the individual, and not the community, is made the basic unit of our socio-moral discourse. While communities are conservative, chauvinistic, and resistant to change, it is the individuals who are the vehicles of change and reform in any society, and it is they who form bridges between various societies and cultures.

For that matter, contemporary liberals are not as much individualistic as their nineteenth century counterparts. For example,

Rawls' rational persons are individuals—may be separate individuals—but they are interested in forming a social order based on justice as fairness, and conceptualizing ways and means of achieving it.[8]

Nevertheless, while liberals conceive individuals as almost independent, isolated units of society and communitarians make a rigidly defined community the source, authority and goal of individuals, both seem to neglect our common humanity.

II

1 . It is here that the ancient Indian thought offers an entirely new perspective to the problem of self and others, Let me clarify at the outset that it would be a mistake to understand Indian thought as a harmonious whole, rather it is extremely multifaceted. Various religio-moral traditions had their own metaphysical beliefs, morals norms and standards which were often mutually divergent. We can distinguish three traditional perspectives in ancient and medieval Indian thought and practice. First is the socio-centric approach of the Dharmasastric and to some extent Epics. It resembles in a marked manner postmodern communitarianism, even though it precedes the latter by almost two millenniums. Second is the self-centric hypothesis of the law of karma and transmigratory existence. It closely resembles and anticipates the existentialist point of view. And third is the Vedantic vision of the Self in all which is shared by Mahayana Buddhism in a somewhat different version. This view may be compared to Kantian and Rawlsian emphasis on the essential dignity and equality of all persons, but is much more profound and sublime than the latter.

2. According to the first, Dharmasastric view-point, all the socio-moral norms, standards and other beliefs, as well as the very identity of the individual are derived from his community. The individual is not expected to have any personal identity, but is considered as a unit of a particular *varna*, caste, professional group, and *kula* (larger family). The socio-moral standpoint of this tradition is communitarian and relativist on two counts. First, man's *dharma* or socio-moral duties are strictly relative to, and determined by, the community to which that person belongs. The structure and ethos of the community, in turn, are influenced by those of the place *(desa)* and time *(kala)*.[9]

All Dharmsastric writers, as Manu, Apastamba, and Gautama, accept the conduct *(acara)* of the righteous persons of three upper classes as an important source of *dharma* and as the standard or criterion

of human conduct.[10] Here *acara* means an ideal mode of conduct, but gradually any mode of conduct or custom that was in vogue in a given community (*acara*) came to be accepted as the standard for all the members of that community.

These customs (*acara*) are necessarily relative to the historico-social circumstances of the particular community belonging to a particular place (*desa*) and time (*yuga*). They would be invalid and even sinful if practised by the members of another community. The customs vary in the same community according to the changing times, and must be followed as such. Dharmsaststras are very particular about protecting the customs and practices of people belonging to different *varnas*, castes, or professional groups, and instruct the king to respect the same.

Above all, a person's identity was determined by his *varna* or caste. Not only did it determine his place in society, his duties and rights therein, it also determined his moral identity. Thus while the brahmins were expected to be the paradigms of virtue, the description of sudras singularly lacks any mention of moral duties or virtues.[12] It is a well known aspect of Dharmasastric socio-moral system, and need not be elaborated upon. It is important here as it represents the communitarian view-point to the core, according to which not only the socio-moral rights and duties of a person, and his entire set of norms and standards but also his very identity is relative to and determined by the community to which he belongs.

At the same time, this tradition emphasizes man's social responsibilities, his duties towards parents, dependents and other members of the society. The conception of debt *(ma)* which is pivotal to this tradition relates the person to the society and entire creation. This may be contrasted to the modern Western communitarians' exclusive emphasis on community as the sole object of loyalty.

3. As against this communitarian understanding of the person and his relationship to others is the self-centric understanding of the man in the hypothesis of the law of karma and transmigratory existence. According to it, a person is an individual soul who must suffer the good or bad fruits of his deeds alone. The soul is not related to, or influenced by, any other soul in its lonely journey through transmigratory existence. In this worldview every person is expected to be obsessed with his own salvation; the individual's duty seems to be only towards himself and his future destiny; and the responsibilities to others are undermined. Even Manu, the archetypal law-giver in socio-

centric morality, says, 'Living being is born alone, he suffers the good and bad fruits of his accumulated merits and demerits alone.'[14] The Epics and Puranas often give an extreme version of this self-centric world-view. The *Mahabharata* advises at one place that if a person desires liberation, he should renounce the world without bothering with the thoughts as to how his dependents would be sustained after he leaves them.[15]

This self-centricity is equality apparent in post-Samkara Advaita in which the universal Self *(Atman)* is often conceived and delineated in terms of the subject self. But since this would require elaboration, I am leaving it here.

4. I am particularly interested here in the third tradition of Indian philosophy which views the individual self and its relationship with other selves from an entirely new perspective. When I say that Indian thought offers a new perspective to the interrelationship between human selves, I mean Vedanta and Bhakti tradition on the one hand and Mahayana Buddhism on the other. Vedanta is a nebulous religo-philosophical system whose interpretations vary from the rigid monism of Samkara's Advaita to the simple faith of Bhakti saints in the immanence of the Divine Being in all hearts. Mahayana Buddhism is a heterodox sect which rejects not only the Divine Being but also the soul *(nairatmya)*. Yet there is a strong family resemblance between the three—Vedanta, Bhakti tradition and Mahayana. They all reject the relevance of contingent factors, and affirm the fundamental affinity and equality between all selves or living beings. (Significantly, for all three systems of thought and praxis, there is no relevant difference between human beings and other living beings.)

It is impossible to do even a semblance of justice to the profound vision shared by these apparently varied sects of Indian thought here. Very briefly and very generally speaking, Vedanta (which is shared by the Bhakti tradition) asserts that the one Self *(Atman)* is immanent in all living beings (and the entire creation) as its inner-controller. It is the source of our consciousness, and whatever we know and do.[16] Differences are not to be rejected; they are there as empirical truth *(vyavaharika satya)*, but in the final reckoning it is the one Truth or Being (Sat) that is the essence of all.[17]

Samkara argues in a convincing manner that since all selves are identical with the pure-consciousness or universal Self, other selves are illusory, or at best empirical.[18] The spiritual vision of one Self is best expressed in the *Bhagavadgita:*

> The Self abiding in all beings and all beings abiding in the self sees he whose self has been made steadfast by yoga and who everywhere sees the same.
>
> He, O Arjuna, who sees with equality everything in the image of his own self, whether in pleasure or pain, he is considered a perfect yogin.[19]

The phrase 'he sees all in the image of oneself' *(atmo pamyen sarvtra samam pasyati)* expresses this Vedantic perspective in a nut-shell. This view transcends and negates both the communitarian obsession with the community and the existentialist, as well as law of karma's, obsession with the individual self and its separate identity. The individual identity is neither determined by his community, nor is he some solitary individual distinct and separated from all other selves. Rather, his identity as an individual subject and agent is both contingent and empirical, his real identity being the Universal Consciousness which inspires and energizes all his knowledge and actions and which is the same in all. Therefore individual's duties are not confined to some one community but are directed towards all other selves who are essentially one with himself. The *Mahabharata* derives a very high level of morality from this vision; a person should treat others as he would want to be treated himself; and should wish for others whatever he wants for himself.[20] In fact *Mahabharata* indiscriminately uses the terms self *(atman)*, ego *(jiva)*, life *(prana)* for the common element within all living beings, and declares that having life oneself, the subject must not hurt others.[21]

Not only the Vedanta seems to be too esoteric to the modern mind, it was often interpreted in the context of individual liberation, that is, in a self-centric way. On the other hand, the Bhakti tradition, though as multifaceted as Vedanta, simply asserts the immanence of one Divine Being in all living beings, and derives from this a very positive conclusion that all human distinctions of religion, caste, socio-economic status etc. have no metaphysical (ontological) basis. Let me clarify that most of the Bhakti saints did not deny contingent differences; what they meant was imply that in the final analysis all living beings are essentially the same.

The best expression of this vision is in Kabir. He is never tired of declaring that all empirical distinctions are irrelevant. All human beings, nay, all living beings are essentially the same on two counts—first, all *jivas* or individual souls have the one Divine Being as their innermost reality. One Rama lives in very heart and is the source and

ground of all living beings. The entire universe is born of the one Glory *(nur)* and all being the creatures of one God, even the distinction between good and bad is unjustified.[22] Secondly, there is no justification of harping on distinctions of caste and creed, because all Hindus and Turks, brahmins and sudras have the same kind of body and the same blood.[23] All distinctions vanish for the one whose gaze is directed to that 'Divine'. Nanak similarly rejects all caste and community differences and declares the unconditional equality of all human beings. Others as Tukarama and Tulsidasa also asserted the divine presence in all human beings, as well as in the entire creation. This presence sanctifies all lives and negates the relevance of all distinctions of caste and community. Popular Hindu mind is very much at home with the idea of the basic affinity of all living beings.

Mahayan Buddhism rejects both the Divine reality and a permanent individual self *(nairatmya),* and yet arrives at the same conclusion. Its argument is very simple. Since there is no individual soul, there is no ontological ground for distinction between one self and another; and therefore all beings should be treated as essentially the same. Implicit here is a rejection of communal identities based on caste and such contingent factors.

This is best expressed in the doctrine of Bodhisattva who sacrifies his own salvation for the sake of others, and his immense, all-encompassing *karuna* (compassion). *Karuna* or compassion consists in realizing the equality of one's self with others *(para-atma-samatra),* and also substituting others for oneself *(para-atmaparivartana).* Such a Bodhisattva transcends the idea of 'I' and 'mine' 'thou' and 'thine'. He learns to feel the joys and sorrows of others as his own, and does not prefer his own happiness or even salvation to that of others. Again the argument is very profound and yet simple. Since there is no substantive self which I may call myself, there is no reason to make a distinction between the sufferings and joys of others and those we call ours.[24]

Thus, we find in Indian thought the entire spectrum of perspectives from which the relationship between the self and others can be discussed. First there is the communitarian point of view which understands the individual subject as but a unit of various communities. Then there is the self-centric existentialist point of view which emphasizes the separate identity and the loneliness of the individual's soul. Lastly, there is the Vedantic-Buddhist-Bhakti traditions'

transcendence of all empirical distinctions in a profound vision of basic affinity of all selves.

NOTES

1. *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals,* tr. Thomas K. Abbott, Indianapolis, 1984, pp. 45ff.
2. 'Rational nature exists as an end-in-itself.' Ibid., p. 46. *'Reverence for the worth of man* is for Kant the material principle of moral science. Man should do his duty ... out of reverence for himself, and in his intercourse with his fellow man he should... honour in him the worth of personality.' See, W. Windelband, *History of Philosophy,* tr. James H. Tufts, New York, 1957, p. 553.
3. 'Man is condemned to be free.... Once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.' See, W.T. Jones, Frederick Sontag, Morton 0. Beckner, Robert J. Fogelin, eds., *Approaches to Ethics,* New York, 1962, pp. 521ff.
4. See J.S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings,* ed. Stefan Collins, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 20ff.
5. 'Each person is to have equal rights in the most extensive system of equal, basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all' in *A Theory of Justice,* Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 302, also pp. 14-15, 28, 250.
6. Alsdair-MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 1984, p. 220, also see Stephen Mullhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians,* Massachusetts, 1996, pp. 13ff; 16.
7. *Liberals and Communitarians,* p. 19; *After Virtue,* pp. 195ff.
8. *Political Liberalism,* 1993, pp. 16 footnote; 202-203.
9. See my, *Aspects of Hindu Morality,* Delhi, 1989 (1999), p. 74ff.; P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra,* 1973, vol. III, pp. 825ff.; 856ff.
10. *Manu Smriti* 85-861 V. 178; VI . 46-7 VII . 41; *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* 1.7. 20. 7-8.
11. *Gautama Dharma Sutra* XI. 20 *Yajnavalkya Smrti* 343; 11. 192.
12. *Manu Smrti* I.87ff. X. 74 ff.; 100, 121-123 *Bhagavadgita* XVIII. 41ff. In addition while brahmins were exalted as gods or mediators between gods and men, sudras were thought comparable to animals. Worst of all, justice was administered and punishments awarded in strict accordance with the respective *varnas* of the offender and the victim. Just as an example see *Manu Smrti* 93-96; II. 135; IV. 165-169, VII. 270-272; VIII. 413-414; IX, 248, 319; X. 50 ff. All Dharmasastras repeat the same idea.
13. See Jhingan, op. cit., pp. 83ff.
14. *Manu Smrti,* IV. 240.
15. *Santi Parva* 277. 15ff.
16. *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* III 7. 3-23, *Kena Upanisad* I. 1-2.
17. *Chandogya Upanisad* VI. 1. 4-7; VI. 8. 4-7.
18. Samkara's, *Bhasya on Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* II. 1. 20.
19. *Bhagavadgita* VI. 29-32.
20. *Santi Parva,* 251. 19-25.
21. Ibid., 308. 126.
22. *Kabir Granthavali,* ed. Shyamsundar Das, Varanasi, pp. 81-2; 113; 131; 203. Also see *Bijak of Kabir,* trs, Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh, Delhi, 1985, pp. 74- 9; 80.

23. *Bijak of Kabir*, pp. 65; 67; 79; 85.
24. See Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, Delhi, 1978, pp. 178ff. for a detailed discussion of the conception of *karuna* in Mahayana Buddhist texts.