

Musings by A Philosopher

Philosophical Reflections

by G.C. Nayak

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Stories about philosophy and philosophers, their moody and absent-minded nature are legion! Unfortunately, this perceived image is not countered by much of the philosophical discourse itself. Although the father of Western Philosophy, Plato himself wrote lyrically as a poet, others such as Immanuel Kant and countless others, employed a prose that is notoriously dense and inaccessible to the lay persons. Indeed, in some philosophical quarters, the attempt seems to have been to write deliberately in a style that is abstruse, obfuscating and convoluted. On the other hand, many distinguished philosophers like Bertrand Russell, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Sri Aurobindo are eminently readable, and students of English language and rhetoric, often turn to their writings as models for emulation.

It is therefore very heartening that an eminent Professor of Philosophy offers a very readable collection of essays for a wider audience. In *Philosophical Reflections*, G.C. Nayak, a distinguished member of the profession with an impressive track record in teaching, research, fellowship and administration, admirably demonstrates how such an enquiry could enhance our understandings of human life and values. Written over a fairly long span,

these essays were first brought together in 1987 by the ICPR, the apex body that carries out philosophical research in the country. The volume was well received, and now a second revised and enlarged edition is presented before the interested readers.

Professor Nayak's higher education, research and teaching career have taken him, over many decades, to some of the leading universities in the East and the West. He has been the General President of the *Indian Philosophical Congress* in 1992 and of the *Akhil Bharatiya Darshan Parishad* in 2001. He is the author of over ten important volumes on philosophy. Buddhism and analytical philosophy are some of the areas of special interest for him. However, he has not fought shy of taking up general topics like *Neburu and Indian Culture* (1990) either. He is well-versed in Sanskrit and it was therefore perhaps befitting that he has served in Departments of Religious Studies of various universities and been the *Vice Chancellor* of Sri Jagannath Sanskrit Vishwavidyalaya, Puri, Orissa from 1989 to 1992. At present he is a Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, the country's premier institute for research in the humanities and social sciences founded by India's philosopher statesman

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan.

True to its title, 'Philosophical Reflections', in 21 chapters, covers a wide but manageable ground. The approach invariably is eclectic but never inchoate. Nayak appropriately begins with the *Vedantic* conception *vis a vis* the *Madhyamika* school and shows how analysis could lead to illumination. Other chapters follow suit: Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti; Satori in *Zen Buddhism*; the Noble Truths; *Maya*, the *Advaitin's* Gordian Knot; Sankara and Yajnavalkya; Tolerance in *Advaita*; and Transcendental secularism.

Equally persuasive are other chapters: Freedom in Indian thought; Rationalism of the *Gita*, Baladeva Vidyabhushana; Sri Aurobindo; The Living and The Dead in Religion; A Plea for common sense; Values: *Dharma* and *Moksha*; *Dharma* and its transcendence; Analytical Philosophy, And The Problem of Universals. The last three chapters are posed in the form of interesting questions: Can there be any indeterminate perception? Must personal identity be physical? And to round it off, his final question: Can there be syntheses of Eastern and Western thought?

In the preface, dated 1987, Professor Nayak explains the reason for composing such essays. Most of these, he declares, deal with

“philosophers of Indian origin, with special emphasis of course on topics in Buddhism and Vedanta”. He contends that these essays are “analytical and ethical and not historical and narrative”. As a philosopher, he had made a steadfast effort “to get rid of the slavery of thought”. He wished to further a “positive task” so that “instead of either being worshipped with awe or being denigrated with malice, they (the various schools of thought) may come to be evaluated and appreciated properly”.

The preface to the second edition is largely informative and regrettably brief. One wishes Professor Nayak had added a detailed note, or provided us with an introduction, mapping out the contours and trajectory of his mind from 1987 to 2002. This would certainly have created a fitting intellectual context against which the revised essays could have been better judged.

In most of his essays, Professor Nayak employs a style that is learned and persuasive. He is scholarly but not pedantic. The knowledgeable reader will be satisfied to find here a healthy scholarship free from a self-conscious parading of jargon and idiom. It is not Nayak’s case to make philosophy easy, as we sometimes speak of doing mathematics without tears or taking a royal road to geometry, as Archimedes was once asked to do by the monarch of a Mediterranean island! After all, the supreme *Vedas* did speak of the need to be a good receptacle or a worthy initiate who prepares himself/herself so as to receive the highest wisdom. Appropriately enough, Nayak’s approach is dialogic in the form of raising fundamental questions and answers.

One is often reminded of the Socratic method in Professor Nayak’s

reflections. In the proper spirit of an enquirer, he is respectful but not credulous. He never gives an unquestioned allegiance to anyone or any school of thought. The devout may feel, at times, uneasy with him. But he is basically right in positing for the most part a sympathetic and questioning mind. Thus while affirming the importance of the Sri Aurobindo’s concept of creative evolution, he declares that we have no way of assessing his philosophy other than through conceptual tools available to us in the mental plane. Following the *Upanishadic* method of *neti, neti*, (not this, not this!) he discards many approaches, and underlines the central role of “intuitive understanding” in the context of Sri Aurobindo. This is evidenced in the quotation on page 134.

To understand the significance of such an “intuitive understanding,” Professor Nayak brings in the example of *Gitanjali* of Tagore. He, however, points out important

differences in the world view of both the poets. For, unlike the *Gitanjali*, in the words of *Savitri*, the aim is “to raise the world to God in deathless light, to bring God down to the world on earth we came, to change the earthly life to life divine.” Finally, Nayak concludes that it is not by “empirical hypothesis” but by a “new extension in consciousness” that we can apprehend the truth of this vision

Philosophical Reflections is that kind of a volume which generates a rare sense of excitement and discovery. It testifies to the working of a mind that is inquisitive, sharp, balanced and sympathetic. Written in a language, lucid and straightforward, it is a welcome addition to a growing genre of popular philosophy.

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