Philosophy and the Crisis of Security

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Abstract

A global pandemic caused by Covid – 19 (and its attendant economic slowdown) has created a new crisis of security. An age of distraction has been transformed to an age of devastation. We have conceptual tools, scientific methods, technical know – how, scientific knowledge and yet recurrence of pandemics and epidemics makes us helpless. Philosophy can give us certain insights and holistic approaches in such a situation. Philosophy urges us to step out of the course of events, enter into the self, come back with a plan of action and a will to impose that plan of action upon the external world. Philosophy derives insights from the past masters and make us rethink about our attitude to literature. A period of crisis is a period full of 'frictions' and thought can function properly when there are 'frictions.' In overall 'smoothness' it cannot function. Philosophy shows us how in society and human life certain positive factors get transformed to negative factors. It enables us to understand the operations of these factors, calls for a holistic approach and enables us to go beyond computational rationality.

Keywords: *exploitative attitude, age of destruction, computational rationality, deadly sins, human predicament.*

Introduction

Philosophy has to give us a critical and conceptual apparatus to understand our prospects in the universe which basically is value – neutral. It raises certain big questions about knowledge, value, truth, beauty etc. and help us to look for answers to these questions. Unanimity is not a characteristic feature of philosophy. It is more a journey than reaching a destination. In philosophy we are not even clear about our destination. In philosophy we are not even clear about our destination. The critical and speculative operations of philosophy are often enlightened by sudden intuitive insights. In the present crisis of security generated by a global pandemic and an overall economic slowdown may we derive some hope and consolation from philosophy? Behind this question there is the echo of the title and message of the book *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius.

Some scholars characterized the resent age as the age of distraction. In this digital age there is a multiplicity of "simultaneous stimuli " (Jacobs, Alan, 2011, p.6). We try to pay attention to all the stimuli at the same time. But it is not possible to pay attention to all the stimuli simultaneously. As a result people become "incapable of seriously focused and single – minded attention " (Jacobs, Alan, 2011, p.6). This inability to focus on a single undivided issue has transformed the current age to an age of distraction. We are distracted and this distraction seems to be an abiding mental stage. A student or a reader fails to get immersed in a text for a long time. The single – minded which seems to be necessary appears to be gone. But the basic character of this situation has now acquired a new dimension. This new dimension is brought by the current pandemic with its emphasis upon isolation. The spirit of the new cave men has

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brought in various economic, psychological and social disorders. Pandemics are not new. But inspite of their devastation they are easily forgotten. Every generation faces a pandemic as something new. It seems new conceptual tools have to be devised by social philosophy to acquire a perspective about them each time they appear. The crisis of security that we have faced currently calls for a new approach to the situation by reassessing our social and philosophical tools. This crisis of security is a predicament and like every predicament it is a difficult situation. A difficult situation demands a careful analysis of the situation. Philosophy can at the most through some light on the general features and provide a conceptual framework. The feeling of helplessness generated by the crisis of security calls for the operation of critical and speculative thinking which are the helping hands of philosophy.

Our Resources

The crisis of security generated by recurrent pandemics (the latest being Covid – 19) calls for a roll call of human resources. One of the major resources of human beings is no doubt thinking. Man has the ability to step mentally out of the circumstances, contemplate, and come out with a plan to reshape the environment. Noting this feature José Ortega y Gasset wrote, ".. man as a technician is able to modify his environment to his own convenience, because seizing every moment of rest which things allow him, he uses it to enter himself and forms ideas about the world, about these things and his relation to them, to form a plan of attack against his circumstances, in short, to create an inner world for himself. From this inner world he emerges and returns to the outer, but he returns as protagonist, he returns with his plan of campaign : not to let himself be dominated by things, but to govern them himself, to impose his will and his design upon them, to realize his ideas in the outer world…" (Brander, L., 1972, p.94).

So we can say that our foremost resource is our employment of thought. We can withdraw to our *self* and come out with a plan of action. In executing this plan of action we impose our will upon the world. The ability to think at a plan of action and the imposition of this plan of action are the key factors that may sustain us in our crisis of security.

Moreover we have to note that the crisis of security creates a set of 'friction.' (We are here using a word borrowed from Wittgenstein.) Wittgenstein stated that on smooth ice there is no friction. There is total absence of obstruction on smooth ice we cannot walk. Friction is required for walking. Similarly some obstruction, some stressful situation is required for the operation of thought. Crisis of security has created a situation in which the operation of thought may reach the optimum level while looking for a solution. It is a situation in which , quite paradoxically, the human mind can elevate itself to a new height. (We may quote what Wittgenstein actually wrote, ".. We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that we are unable to walk. We want to walk : so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!" (Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 2009, p.51). Here in Wittgenstein's thought we find a key to transforming a disadvantageous situation to an advantageous one.

Yet another philosophical dimension of our resources to deal with the present crisis o security may be found in investigating the implications of the famous metaphor called Neurath's boat. This metaphor was used by Neurath to support coherentism. We would like to transplant the metaphor. It is not possible for us to go back to an initial position in which society, human relationship and human existence are designed in such a way that there is a minimization of the possibility of the future emergence of situations in which

crisis of security is present. We can never get such a initial position. So we have to repair the current situation by using the resources that are available with us. Like the sailors of Neurath's boat, we are stranded in mid ocean. We have to repair our boat. We know that the best resources are available in a port. But we cannot go back to the port and repair our boat. We are to use the materials that are in our hand and the technical knowhow that are with us. We have to repair our boat in the mid ocean. In managing the crisis of security we have to derive and use the insights implied by this metaphor. We surely have a vast number of resources that are material and technical in nature. We have effective means of communication, scientific methods, a vast body of scientific and technical knowledge, educational network, means of storing knowledge and programmes of opening up ever – new areas of knowledge. Philosophy's deep engagement with the issues of human predicament has given philosophy a certain amount of ability to provide guidance.

Guidance from Philosophy

Can you expect philosophy to provide guidance in a crisis of security? In a world greatly troubled by pandemics, economic slowdown etc. has philosophy anything to offer? If philosophy which seems to be deeply concerned with values and heuristic ideals has nothing to offer then what is its ultimate justification?

One important characteristic feature is that here past thinkers are not simply consigned to oblivion. A particular science at a particular moment is directly engaged in its history. But philosophy is always considered with its own history. That is because the problems of philosophy are perennial problems. These problems are faced by mankind in almost every society at different times. Therefore the great philosophers of the past are treated in philosophy as living thinkers. We go back quite frequently to them for insights for example to understand the nature of happiness we go back to Aristotle, to Seneca, to Boethius, to Spinoza. To understand the nature of knowledge we go back to Plato. Plato's dialogue *Theatetus* becomes almost a contemporary text for us. To understand the principle of scientific knowledge including the idea of falsification we go back to Bacon. (The idea of falsification found in the writings of Popper has its roots in the thought of Bacon). To understand the operation of prejudices we go back to Descartes, Bacon or Husserl. Thus in philosophy the past thinkers are never relegated to oblivion. They are often treated as contemporaries. In philosophy information is not equated with wisdom. In the recent years there is a growing tendency to recognize the worth of mediaeval philosophy also. It is now generally thought that mediaeval philosophy is not simply an appendage of faith and the religious mode of thinking. Brilliant sparks of critical thinking are found even in medieval philosophy. Philosophy is also not confirmed to the literate tradition. It is held that even in pre literate societies there may be philosophy. The conception of African society is grounded on this idea the extensive study of Indian, Chinese, Arabic, Persian, Japanese and Korean philosophical traditions has expanded the pool of philosophical ideas from which we can derive insights, tools and wisdom.

In mediaeval philosophy seven basic human vices were characterized. The list includes bride, greed, lust, envy, glutton, anger and sloth. Christian theologians classified seven virtues as counterparts of these vices. They are prejudice, temperance, justice, fortitude, faith, hope and charity. These seven sins were personified by Chaucer, Dante and Spenser. From a philosophical perspective we may say that all these sins are operative in our individual and social life and they are responsible for the origin of many crisis.

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Pride may, for example, lead to a mistaken idea of racial superiority. It may lead to misplaced patriotism. It may lead to a wrong sense of power because of our supposed mastery of science and technology. "Knowledge is power' – behind this dictum there is the sense of pride. It is this sense of power generated by pride that has resulted in the exploitative attitude to nature. Instead of co – existence and harmonious relation with nature we cultivate a confrontationist attitude to nature and as a result nature becomes vengeful towards us generating in the crisis of security. The ultimate security that mankind may look for is perhaps an ideal which cannot be attained. But security of an intermediate type can be attained and that security can be supplied by nature. This ideal was implicitly present in the philosophy of Spinoza. Spinoza in his *Ethics* stated that everything including man deductively follow from Nature. ('God' and 'Substance' were two other terms used by Spinoza.) Man can attain total harmony and a sense of fulfillment by appreciating the inherent deductive necessity involved in nature. The affective state that might emerge as a result was called by Spinoza 'the intellectual love of God.' But man, motivated by pride, has failed to recognize this cosmic interrelationship and as a result a negative confrontationist attitude has emerged. We are secure as long as we function as a responsible part of nature. If we refuse to act responsibly and adopt a confrontationist attitude then the result is the crisis of security.

Michael Eric Dyson wrote, "I suppose I still believe that pride can be a sin, and a deadly one, specially when it is wielded by unprincipled forces and immoral people. Pride is also a vice when it traffics in accomplishments that have little to do with genuine moral achievement but instead rest on the exercise of power and wealth. Pride is surely a vice, and a sin, when it is absent or faces twisted into self – loathing caricatures of abasement. Humility is virtuous, but humiliation, whether invited or imposed, is vicious" (Dyson, Eric Michael, 2006, p26). Environmental philosophy has often insisted that the sense of pride and the activities emerging out of it has resulted in our exploitative attitude to nature. The need can be expressed by a very simple and humble word. It is 'friendship.' We are required to cultivate a friendly attitude to nature.

Positive Factors Turned Negative

Almost every positive factor of our civilization has contributed negatively to the crisis of security. First, we may look at greater global connectivity. This connectivity has created a vast economic and intellectual network. Commercially and financially the communities of the world are interdependent. Intellectual ideas travel fast and learning, education and research are now interconnected. But this global interconnectivity has also helped the rapid spread of viruses. Alfred Crosby wrote that international jet travel is like "sitting in the waiting room of an enormous clinic, elbow to elbow with the sick of the world" (Honigsbaum, Mark, 2020, p.280).

Certain boons of technology, which are clearly positive, have been transformed into negative factors. Genetic engineering, gene editing etc. are important fields of research. But who knows they may be behind the genetic manipulation of certain viruses that have resulted in the production of certain new strains of viruses making it very difficult for the scientific community to bring them under control.

There is also a factor called Livestock Revolution. Growing demand for animal protein has brought in a livestock revolution. Many of the ecological consequences of the livestock revolution are unintended. Land – use pattern have changed and one of the reasons of this change is the Livestock Revolution. Human devastation of forest regions has not only brought in climate change, but this has also resulted in

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the great possibility of emergence of newer diseases. These diseases may often be caused by viruses jumping from animal to man. As a result Mark Honigsbaum has pointed out "infectious disease is a part of an ecological web that is itself influenced by a constellation of shifting economic, social, and environmental factors" (Honigsbaum, Mark, 2020, p.281).

The world in which we live is characterized by rapid changes. Here initially what appears o be positive transforms rapidly into negative. We live in a world of rapid changes. The changes are environmental, ecological, social and economic. The cognitive apparatus through which we try to know the environment and society in which we live has not changed so rapidly. There is a gap between these two. We may not be aware of this gap and because of our complacency we may be too sure of the extent and depth of our knowledge. This complacency comes to focus when some sudden emergency appears and our knowledge system turns out to be incapable of dealing with it. We must have a holistic approach to the entire situation. A mere germ – centric or virus –centric approach is not enough. A holistic approach calls for a comprehensive philosophical outlook.

Beyond 'Computational Rationality'

The technological progress which we have seen in the recent years have enabled researchers to understand the function of Artificial Intelligence and thereby to understand the nature of the human mind itself. In artificial intelligence we find a form of rationality and this form of rationality may be called 'computational rationality' (Susskind, Daniel, 2020, p.57). There is a distinction between competence and comprehension. Teleological devices have given us competence. The rationality that these devices exhibit is not computational rationality. But at the moment only the human mind with its holistic approach can go beyond computational rationality and enter into the realm of comprehension. For understanding our prospects in the universe which apparently is neutral and also for looking beyond the crisis of security we require a total holistic 'comprehension' and that definitely carry us beyond the computational rationality.

Conclusion

The crisis of security that we are facing now is caused by an untamed virus and its global economic implications. We can say that we are not simply concerned with taming a virus. There is a need to review our relationship with the entire environment, nature and universe. Our knowledge system must not focus merely on computational rationality. This entire knowledge system is grounded on the exploitative attitude to nature that emerged during the European Renaissance. The exploitative attitude is to be replaced by an attitude of friendship and co – operation. There are many ideas and insights in the philosophies of the past masters. We have to investigate them. The ideal and practice of critical thinking is to be cultivated very rigorously. If everything goes smoothly thought cannot operate properly. Thought can operate only when there is some stress, some friction, some 'swerve' (as some Greek atomists said). A period of stress may enable us to raise ourselves to a greater intellectual height.

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