What philosophy is all about?

Philosophy may be defined as the critical and systematic attempt to understand human existence at its fundamental level. It means philosophy deals with essential questions concerning the meaning of life. It stretches the human intellect to its limits and comprehends the general character of the world and man's place in the total scheme of things.

Philosophy attempts to give a comprehensive theory of reality as a whole. It is the rational investigation of certain fundamental problems about the nature of man and the world he lives in.

Philosophers have tried to provide not only a vision of the world, but standards for individual and social actions as well. There are some normative concerns of philosophers searching for wisdom. They are the principles of right and wrong, the ideals of associative life, the meaning of the good life etc.

Philosophy has, therefore, appeal for everybody. It is ultimately a way of life and every way of life implies some philosophy. After all, philosophy is nothing more or less than the effort to think clearly, critically, rationally, rigorously, coherently and effectively. It is about all that matters to us. When we fail to do this, we fail as philosophers.

KEY WORDS
Philosophy, man, life, wisdom, critical, logical, rational, scientific, spiritual, theory, reality etc.

M. N. Roy’s Scientific Exposition of Philosophy

Manabendra Nath Roy (1887-1954), an Indian philosopher, attempts to give a scientific exposition of philosophy. He tries to find out how far philosophy can help us to solve the social and political problems of the time. Unlike some other Indian thinkers of the twentieth century, Roy tries to make a distinction between philosophy and religion in his thought. According to him, no philosophical advancement is possible unless we get rid of orthodox religious ideas and theological dogmas. He envisages philosophy and science to be rather always together. He thus says:

Philosophy is contemplation, study and knowledge of nature. Its function is to know things as they are, and to find common origin of the diverse phenomena of nature, in nature itself.

According to Roy, philosophy begins when man’s spiritual needs are no longer satisfied by primitive natural religion. Natural religion imagines and worships a variety of gods as personifications of the diverse phenomena of nature. The grown up man discredits the nursery-tales with which he was impressed in his spiritual childhood. Roy insists that intellectual growth impels and encourages man to seek in nature itself the causes of all natural phenomena. It is to find in nature a unity behind its diversity.

Roy defines philosophy as "the theory of life." The function of philosophy, in the words of Roy, "is to solve the riddle of the universe." Elaborating on his definition of philosophy, he says:

Philosophy is the theory of life, because it was born of the efforts of man to explain nature and to understand his own being in relation to his surrounding; to solve the actual problems of life in the light of past experience, so that the solution will give him an encouraging glimpse into the future.
So far as philosophy and metaphysics are concerned, Roy has made a distinction between the two. According to him, metaphysics, like philosophy, begins with the desire to discover unity behind the diversity. But metaphysics leaves the ground of philosophy in quest of a noumenon above and beyond nature. Sometimes it is distinct from the phenomena. Thus, it abandons the inquiry into the wilderness of speculation. It is absurd to say that intangible is the condition for the knowledge of the tangible. It is what metaphysics does.

It is thus obvious that Roy is opposed to speculative philosophy. The metaphysics sets impossible task for itself. Because he thinks that it inquires into the transcendental being above and behind the physical universe, to acquire the knowledge of reality beyond the appearance. For Roy this whole approach is unacceptable. He thus writes:

Speculative philosophy is the attempt to explain the concrete realities of existence in the light of a hypothetical absolute. It is the way not to truth, but to dream; not to knowledge but to illusion. Instead of trying to understand the world, the only reality given to man, speculative philosophy ends in denying the existence of the only reality and declaring it to be a figment of man's imagination. An enquiry which denies the very existence of the object to be enquired, is bound to end in idle dreams and hopeless confusion.

Roy is opposed not only to speculative philosophy but also to the identification of philosophy with theology and religion. According to him, word ‘philosophy’ has a very vague meaning for the average educated man. For that man particularly, it also has a sweeping application. It stands not only for speculative thought but also for poetic fancy. In India, especially, this vague sense is generally prevalent. He says that in India philosophy is not distinguished from religion and theology. Indeed, what is believed to be the distinctive feature of Indian philosophy is that it has not broken away from the medieval tradition, as modern Western philosophy did in the seventeenth century.

According to Roy, faith in supernatural does not permit the search for the causes of natural phenomena in nature itself. Therefore, orthodox religious ideas and theological dogmas should be rejected. This is, in a way, the necessary condition for philosophy.

He argues that there is no room for faith in philosophy. If it is believed that the phenomena of nature are determined by the will of supernatural beings, philosophy must make the room for faith. But supernatural is always beyond the understanding of man. Because man himself is a product of nature even as he is limited by the laws of nature. Roy is of the view that the religion is bound to be removed by science. Because scientific knowledge enables mankind to solve different problems of religions which assume the presence of supernatural forces or agencies behind human beings. Hence, Roy argues that we should start from the reality of physical world. And in order to perform its function, philosophy must break away from religion.

Roy regards rejection of orthodox religious ideas and theological dogmas as an essential condition of philosophy. He envisage a very intimate relationship between philosophy and science. In fact, according to Roy, the philosophical significance of modern scientific theory is to render the old division between science and philosophy untenable. He says:

Science is stepping over the old boundary line. Digging deeper and deeper into the secrets of nature, science has come up against problems, the solution of which was previously left to philosophy. Scientific enquiry has pushed into what is traditionally regarded as the “metaphysical” realm.

According to Roy, all the problems of philosophy, whether cosmological, ontological or epistemological, can be solved in the light of scientific knowledge. He argues that the function of philosophy is to explain existence as a whole. An explanation of the existence requires knowledge about the different phases of existence. This is gathered by the various branches of science. Therefore, the function of philosophy is to coordinate the entire body of scientific knowledge into a comprehensive theory of nature and life. Therefore Roy calls philosophy as the science of sciences.

Since philosophy has yielded its earlier position to science, it can now exist only as the science of sciences. It is a systematic coordination and a synthesis of all positive knowledge. It readjusts itself to the progressive expansion of the store of human knowledge. Roy claims that such a philosophy has nothing in common with what is traditionally known, particularly in India, as philosophy. A mystic-metaphysical conception of the world is no longer to be accorded the designation of philosophy.
Development of Roy’s Philosophy

Roy started as a nationalist thinker and activist but soon gravitated towards Marxism. His critique of nationalist theory and initiation into Marxism was his beginning as a philosopher and a social thinker. Even though Roy was influenced by Marxism, his was not a blind faith in it. He had never been an orthodox Marxist. He began with an attempt at fundamental revision of Marxism and finally he abandoned it in favor of his own philosophy of radical humanism. For instance, Marx presented the philosophy of dialectical materialism. But Roy did not agree with dialectics and developed a theory of materialism of his own. Therefore, it could be said that Roy adopted only those features of Marxism which he thought important.

So far as the evolution of philosophical, social, political and economic ideas of Roy is concerned, it occurred in two stages. First, when he became a Marxist in 1916 and second, when he replaced it by his radical humanism in 1946. It was his understanding of the socio-economic conditions of Mexico at the time of the First World War that brought about a basic change in his mind. It was not a mutation in his political evolution. It was rather a sudden jump from nationalism to communism.

Roy was primarily a revolutionary thinker during his struggle for freedom in India. Even as the first impact on him was that of nationalism, communism as anti-imperialism also appealed to him at this stage. Later on, he visualized that national independence was not enough. It could not cure the evils of any country. There should be a social revolution to emancipate nation. Therefore, mere political and national revolutions were not enough.

Roy thought that Marx was right in emphasizing the idea of class struggle as it was a revolutionary action. Roy therefore called him a prophet of revolution. It was Marx, according to Roy, who had faith in the creativeness of man. The class struggle was the tool of social evolution that brought about the revolutions in society. Therefore, Roy called Marx as a humanist.

Marx was an advocate of freedom. He stood for the freedom of the individual. He also talked of socialism as "the kingdom of freedom." In it man will be the master of his social environment. Roy was impressed by it and thought that the humanist, libertarian and moralist spirit of Marxism will go into the making of a new philosophy for our time.

The basic principles of Marxian philosophy provided for the liberation of the human spirit. Roy found a broader horizon in Marxism. He thought Marxism to be broad enough to accommodate many divergent ideas. Following Marx, Roy believed in the essential goodness of man. It was common to both of them that man would be ultimately rational and free himself from irrational forces. According to him, Marxism is a revolutionary philosophy. It sets new task to philosophy. Previously, philosophy had simply tried to explain the world. But in future it must point out the way to construct it.

Roy believed with full confidence that Marxism was a practical philosophy. It could be used as a set of conditions for the future reconstruction of society. It could open a new vision for building a rational society. He admired Marxism to such an extent that he was prepared to call it independent of time. But, at the same time, Roy had an open mind towards Marxism. He took special interest to save Marxism from a long narrow cut routine. To him, Marxism was not a closed system of philosophy but a way of thinking.

Roy opposed the idea of making Marxism a religion. Marxism was a scientific philosophy. It could not be dogmatic. Roy based his understanding of Marxism on reason and critical thinking. He was prepared to refute and to go beyond Marxism if the conditions and circumstances so required. The scientific approach of Marx's philosophy in the realm of social welfare also impressed Roy.

According to Roy, Marx's contribution to the cause of human freedom was greater than that of any other thinker, past and present. Because he had the advantage of living in an age when scientific knowledge could throw light on the old problems of philosophy.20 Marx's sympathy towards the labor class particularly impressed Roy. He supported Marxian view of social justice. Because he thought that the exploitation of man by the man was not something that could be tolerated.

Roy's philosophy emerged as a response to the forces of revolution that aspired to solve the contemporary socio-cultural crisis. It came at a time when the Fascism had consolidated. All the reactionary influences and even
communism in which Roy had faith was found unequal to the task of meeting its challenges. The renaissance emerged against the backdrop of an age which was dominated by religious faith. And Marxism emerged against capitalism. Roy's philosophy, on the other hand, emerged against the cult of totalitarianism.

Roy's philosophy has had a long tradition and a rich heritage behind it. The main sources of his philosophy are the two major revolutionary movements, namely, the renaissance humanism and communism. Roy believes that the social philosophy must integrate the achievements of these two movements. It should also eliminate their inadequacies in order to give an effective guidance to the forces of social revolution.

Roy's philosophy is an endeavor to consolidate the progressive legacy of the West. It integrates features of the Renaissance Humanism into the purely intellectual and pragmatic formulations of the Marxist philosophy. Marx had suggested that the new pattern of society must incorporate the technical achievements of bourgeoisie. But Roy does not fully agree with Marx on this point. He points out that unless a society has absorbed the moral and cultural achievements of so-called bourgeois culture, the ideal of socialism will remain unrealized.

The basic ideas of the Renaissance Humanism which became the hallmark of fifteenth century Europe are reason, individuality and freedom. Socialism, on the other hand, attaches primary importance to organizational cohesion. But as liberty unconnected with organization has no meaning, organization without freedom is dangerous. In separation both are harmful to the liberty of the individual. Therefore, Roy claims that socialism misinterpreted or simplified the complicated process of social changes. It has done so by reducing it to the dialectics of class conflicts and economic contradictions.

Critique of Totalitarianism

Roy felt that nationalism has lost its utility. If it is allowed to continue, it will only serve the forces of reaction. Nationalism, in his view, is a negative force. Political freedom which is the concrete object of nationalism made anti-imperialism its main goal. But the struggle for freedom of any country cannot succeed if its basic impulse is characterized by differences.

Roy calls ‘national freedom’ an ‘abstract idea’. It presupposes an identity of interests of a country. National freedom does not mean freedom for the entire human community. It is meant only for a particular nation. The struggle for national liberation must be followed by social liberation. It puts a new context in the ideal of freedom. This new conception of freedom transcends national boundaries. Because its attainment pre-supposes efforts and co-operation on a large field. Therefore, the most effective method of promoting such freedom is to participate in the process of remaking the world as a whole.

According to Roy, nationalism is a metaphysical concept. It suppresses individual freedom for the sake of an abstract ideal that is national freedom. Rights here are subordinated to duties which must be performed for promoting national greatness. An individual is to assert his own individuality against the nation. Feeling disgusted with nationalism, he wrote:

It is a metaphysical concept; yet, human beings, of flesh and blood, must sacrifice everything to make the nation great and glorious. That is the essence of Nationalism. That is, to sacrifice a reality at the altar of a fiction, of an illusion. The nation could not claim an undivided loyalty unless Nationalism was of the order of monotheistic religion: there can be no other God, and nobody can claim any share in the sacrifice. A country is supposed to be the shrine of the goddess of nation. All the human individuals inhabiting the country cannot have any other loyalty, not even to themselves, than to this abstract concept of nation—the monopolistic, exacting political goodness whose existence cannot be proved. Unless the collectivity servility accepts this fiction as a truth, the nation cannot exist.

According to Roy, nationalism, whether Indian or German or Japanese, is, by its internal logic, a totalitarian cult. Roy tells that India under the banner of nationalism is not only moving towards totalitarianism but is well advanced on its way. He states that we should look at the reality not only from within the national boundaries but also outside of these boundaries. A true human outlook does not recognize the existence of separate states that provide means for the welfare of particular nations. It rather gives a cosmopolitan outlook for all people living anywhere in the world.

Since Roy was against the totalitarian cult, he found fascism to be equally dangerous. Fascism denies the sovereignty of the individual. It does not give the individual any place in society except as “a cog in a vast
machine.” It also enriches this vast machinery with collective ego. On the basis of these arguments, Roy calls fascism similar to nationalism. Both have totalitarian views. And totalitarianism is against the spirit of human freedom. It negates the welfare of human beings in so far as it is the ideology of particular race that works for its vested interest. It can never be helpful for other human beings while our aim must be same for all.

In his later period, Roy began to express his heretical views regarding communism and Marxism. He differed with Marxism mainly on the role of ideas in shaping the human history and on the primacy of moral values. Roy summarized the philosophy which he was propagating in a number of theses. These theses came to be known as the 22 Theses of Radical Humanism.

According to Roy, Marxism could not be the horoscope of humanity. It was only a method to study and interpret history. Roy attempted to show the inadequacies of the philosophy of Marxism. His revisions in the light of his own experiments either repudiate or made substantial modifications in the teachings of Karl Marx.

Roy was an advocate of Marxism till about 1930. In the light of new developments, he started rethinking about it. He looked at the developments of socialism in the Soviet Union under the leadership of Stalin. It made him a critique of communism and Marxism. The criticism of communism had its natural effect on Roy’s understanding of Marxism.

He found Marxism as being also a totalitarian cult like Fascism and nationalism. He, therefore, began to argue against it, too. He said that since Marxism is based on the national interest, it is also a totalitarian cult. It prescribed a collective ego. It is not meant for the entire society but to a particular class. Therefore, Roy insists on the rejection of communism as he insisted on the rejection of nationalism as a practical ideology. Both of these subordinate men before a collective whole. Since men are creators of social world, any social organization which denies the sovereignty of the individual cannot be wholesome.

Roy identifies communism with dictatorship. So it is as totalitarian as Nationalism. Since the proletariat captures political power, it establishes a state which is supposed to express the collective ego of the class. The ownership of the means of production is transferred from private individuals to that class. Ownership becomes collective. But, as Roy argues, it is not possible. Ownership is simply transferred from one class to another class. So, in that sense, capitalist ownership was also not strictly private. It was also collective ownership. The transfer of the ownership by itself makes no change. Communists say that the ownership of the means of production is nationalized or socialized. Roy argues that, in reality, the ownership still remains “private’. Because it is vested in one class not the entire society.

Roy became an ardent supporter of cosmopolitanism which was not to be found in fascism, nationalism or Marxism. He considered human beings to be all of equal value. He said when we are talking about the welfare of human being, we should not think about the people of India only. All human beings should be considered equal. Humanism is not limited within the boundaries of nation or the ideology of Marxism. It is beyond these narrow ideologies. Cosmopolitanism should rather be the criterion of judging the enrichment and welfare of all human beings living anywhere in the world. Roy thus formulated a philosophy of humanism that he himself called Radical Humanism by rejecting the idea of nationalism, fascism and Marxism.

Characteristics of Roy’s Philosophy

Though Roy’s philosophy bears certain similarities to other systems of thought in some of its aspects, it is also different from them in many other. These differences give it a character of its own. We would discuss here some of the aspects which make Roy’s philosophy peculiar and special.

The methodology adopted by Roy in his system of thought is deduced from a critical consideration of Humanism and Marxism. Besides this, it also puts everything in a scientific perspective. This scientific perspective had been provided by the theory of ‘relativity’ of Einstein. It applies the relativist method. Roy rejects the idea of absolute determinism which allows no choice in human affairs.

Though philosophy of Roy is essentially materialistic, it is not mechanistic. It considers matter as the ultimate reality. This conception of reality is based on the logical implications of modern sciences. It holds that reality exists even if we do not know it. Thus, it opposes both subjective idealism and empiricism. Its perspective can be termed as “pluralistic monism.” The character of reality is monistic in three senses. Firstly, it depends on reason as the only dependable instrument of incidents. Secondly, it traces some objective pattern of mathematical laws. These not only underline knowledge but also the entire space-time dichotomy. Lastly, the test
of progress is harmonization. But it should also be noticed that its monism does not exclude the pluralistic phenomena of the world. In other words, it does not preclude pluralism in the process of becoming.

Roy's philosophy is rationalistic. It cannot accept anything which does not stand the test of experimentation and analysis. Thus everything appeals to reason. But this does not imply that it believes that scientific investigation can give absolute knowledge. It considers science only to be a process. It, therefore, insists that our conception of things must be based on actual investigation and experience.

Roy gives equal importance to ‘ideas’ in his materialistic philosophy. On this he criticizes Marxism. He says that under the influence of economic interpretation of history, Marxism failed to appreciate the creative role of ideas. Roy, on the other hand, finds autonomous process of interaction and emergence in the growth of ideas.

There are some tests of values in Roy's philosophy. On the one hand, it regards ‘freedom’ as a value which means full opportunity and scope to individual. On the other hand, it stresses on the value of progress. Both these tests of values are logically related to each other in the realm of personal ethics. Freedom is looked upon as a value from the individual point of view while progress is justified from the social point of view.

Roy's philosophy derives the criterion of value judgment from the human urge itself. It is because he believes that man is born with an urge for freedom, growth, creation etc. Thus, Roy considers freedom as the highest ideal. Only a free man can have the full joy of living. Freedom is therefore the condition for the self-realization of life.

The philosophy of Roy integrates science into social organization and individual character. It reconciles individuality with institutional life and gives freedom moral, intellectual and social contents. It offers a comprehensive theory of social progress. Both the logic of structural mutations and the dynamism of ideology can find their due recognition in it. It thus deduces from the same idea a method and programme of social revolution in our time.

In sum, for Roy, philosophy is a logical coordination of all the branches of positive knowledge. It holds in a system of thought the endeavor to explain the world rationally and to serve as a reliable guide for life. Therefore, Roy tries to define philosophy in a secular and modern way.

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