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Understanding Understanding and Non-Understanding: The Problems and Possibilities

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Abstract: Life is not limited to the coordinated functioning of millions of cells that make an individual or to one's struggle for survival. It's also about our pursuit to reach the Ultimate or the Absolute in Hegel's terms. In his search for the absolute, he too yearned for someone who would truly understand him. However, it dawns on him, too late though, and says, "Only one man ever understood me, and he didn't understand me". This essay tries to show how "I" expect someone to understand "me" when that "someone" is actually looking at "me" through a very limited understanding of him/herself. Can anyone really have an absolute, objective understanding of me? On the other hand, how much do I understand my own "self" to expect the same from another? Together let us explore and dissect various aspects of

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understanding and how it all comes together in building the relationship. Though we may keep searching for the absolute, it may not be an “absolute” necessity for our everyday living.

Keywords: Hegel, Idealism, Realism, Absolute, Understanding Self and Other

Introduction

Human life is not a solitary journey. We need a companion either to share our thoughts, our life or just for the sake of a human presence. This leads to a relationship and the basis of any relationship is mutual understanding. Most often our life is defined by this pursuit to find that one person with whom we can be truly our “self”.

How much of my “self” do I actually understand? And if at all I do, can I really expect someone else to look at me “objectively” keeping aside the lens of his/ her understanding of him/ herself, through which one often tends to look at the world. The absolute is unattainable and so it is futile to ever expect it, but understanding is the basis of a human relationship.

Being social animals, we naturally get into relationships. A son wants to be understood by his father. A friend expects likewise from his friend. Basically, all of us want to be sure of the other

Understanding and Hegel

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), a German philosopher, was an idealist who wanted to put together all the

great works of his predecessors into a single work. Thus, for him, understanding meant reaching the absolute. His life journey was the search for this absolute (Aftab 2008). Apparently, at his death bed, he said, “Only one man ever understood me, and he didn’t understand me” (Davies 1996). It is speculated that Hegel realized that even his close friend probably failed to understand his ideas completely. However, it could also be interpreted that the man whom Hegel refers to, is himself, as he realized that one cannot truly understand oneself or reach the absolute.

Apparently at his death bed Hegel said, “Only one man ever understood me, and he didn’t understand me” For him understanding meant reaching the absolute. His life journey was the search of this absolute. It could also be interpreted that the man whom Hegel refers to, is himself, as he realized that one cannot truly understand oneself or reach the absolute.

Understanding and Non-understanding

Being social animals, we naturally get into relationships. A son wants to be understood by his father. A friend expects likewise from his friend. Basically, all of us want to be sure of the other understanding us. That is to say that, we want to be on the same page when it comes to knowing each other. Jesus says in Mt 7:5, “....first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly ...”. This verse is often seen in the light of judging others.

But I think Jesus is asking us to first look into our “self”, to know and to understand our “self” - deeper and better. Our

vision is often coloured by “our” perceptions which is embedded deep within and is seldom known to us. Thus, psychologists would say that what we see in others is often a projection of our “self” and not the person who s/he is. We behave or act in a certain way when faced with certain situations. And this behaviour is engineered within our “self”, so much so, that we are often unaware of it. There would be layers of such behaviours which keep happening as a ritual without our knowledge. Only when we understand this behaviour, can we reach the absolute “self”. This ultimate end is when we can genuinely say “I know myself”. Only then we can look at the “other” objectively.

a. Problems

“You don’t understand me!” is a common excuse when any relationship is on the verge of breaking. If person A complains that B doesn’t understand A, then in the context of understanding “the self” we can say that probably A doesn’t understand his/her own “self” and ends up blaming B for the failure of the relationship. Also, A may be seeing only a small part of “the absolute A” while B is seeing another part of this “absolute A”, which A may not have known or doesn’t want to accept at all. Moreover, B could be actually seeing A, coloured in some part of “B”, without even knowing it.

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This is one way of understanding non-understanding. There

could be myriads of such permutations and combinations of understandings. More so, if we take into account the false images we might have of ourselves. None of us is immune to this trap of misunderstanding, except for the very few enlightened ones who can stay still even in the fiercest storms of life.

b. Possibilities

From an objective point of view, I completely agree with Hegel, not out of despair that nobody understands me, but with a clearer understanding that I am a complex being and it is a task in itself first to know and accept myself, and then to even expect someone else, who also understands him/ herself, to understand me. This is the difference between idealism and realism. However, it doesn't mean that we can never have any understanding of the other. We still get into healthy and lifelong relationships without

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completely understanding each other and accepting each other knowing that the absolute is impossible. In the present world scenario, where our relations are strained, thanks to all the distractions like social media, consumerist attitude etc., it is even more difficult to reach the absolute. It is not a surprise that psychiatric diseases are on the rise because we have lost sight of ourselves and our neighbours. Often people struggle in loneliness and depression, even ending

their life (Tiwari 2013). In despair we often hear people complaining, “nobody understands me”.

Conclusion

The character Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, says, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb inside of his skin and walk around it” (Lee, 2006). This leads to empathy. This is probably the absolute that Hegel is referring to. However, to reach this absolute of understanding the other you have to go through a

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb inside of his skin and walk around it” (Lee, 2006)

never-ending task of understanding your own “self”. This is better said than done. Although this might seem depressing, we need not be bogged down because we can still live a very happy life by accepting each other, knowing that absolute understanding may never happen.

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