

REVIEW ARTICLE

On the Banks of the Great River

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Abstract

Life is mysterious and the cabalistic caducity of life is predetermined. The limited human imagination and the small space for decision-making seem to be of secondary importance as long as the enthusiasm prevails and the liveliness of young age. Gaining perspective and calmness one may start to distinguish between what is essential (that should be taken seriously) and what is merely important (that should be considered). When growing old the values and views might change and the quality of being perishable becomes more aware. In classical mythology the river is seen as an allegory for life. The flow of water in a river symbolizes the unstoppable flow of time, the finiteness of being and its transience. The river is a metaphor for a predetermined direction of progression. Within an eternal cycle the occurrence of new existence and extinction, of creation and decay is harmonically balanced. Nothing is lost.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Philosophy, Reality Perception, Religious Philosophies, Sociology.

1. The Parable

During my duty at the base of the helicopter emergency medical system in the alpine region, the pilot told me a parable related to ancient Bhārata. It was permeated with gray wisdom that is inherent in every people. His narration was as follows:

A master lives with his disciples on the banks of the great river Brahmaputra at the foot of the Himalayas. One day the disciples storm excitedly into his hut. "Master", they exclaim, "a new Guru has arrived in our province. This Guru has extraordinary abilities. Standing on one bank of the river he can read from a book held aloft by his followers on the opposite bank". The master smiles indulgently and replies: "If he was really good then he wouldn't have to do that".

This is how the parable ended.

2. Interpretation of a Thesis

Through figurative speech, this parable tells of an unexpected competition between the old master residing in his familiar sphere and the intruder coming from outside. The parable ends in an unconventional way. What is it about? When a new Guru arrives at

a peaceful, tranquil place the usual harmony of the provincial countryside is briefly threatened to get out of balance. The new Guru does not introduce himself to the established master and he does not announce the competition. The intruder chooses the river bank as his stage and begins to display amazing abilities. The surprise effect is definitely taken into account. A conflict is inevitable but the two Gurus act in different planes. When the old master hears from the spectacular event he remains calm and listens to the excited report of his disciples. Then he questions the necessity of the event without going into spectacular. This is all he does. Basically, he ends the unofficial competition with a single sentence that exposes a feat of his opponent as a vain boasting. The profane comment is brilliant. Turning the success of the intruder's action into a defeat without taking any action himself is impressive. He can in the truest sense of the word place himself above an action by refraining from doing something similar.

To avoid direct confrontation is a typical characteristic of stoicism (Becker, 2001). It is better to get around a conflict than to win a conflict. An argument avoided is better than an argument won. Victory without

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aggression requests a higher level of understanding and needs a change of fundamental attitude in the interaction with potential enemies. The distribution of the roles of the attacker and the defender are unclear, especially in disputes where attack is regarded best defense. Not even the attacker needs to always behave like an aggressor. The key is to identify the opponent's weaknesses. This is how the enemy unintentionally becomes a teacher who allows to learn from mistakes (Becker, 2001). Enemies can even inspire. In his poems, written between 1789 and 1805 the German poet Friedrich Schiller postulated: "If my friend shows me what I can do, my enemy teaches me, what I should do".

3. Alternative through an Antithesis

Nevertheless, a victory based on contempt usually is short-lived, as is appreciation. The outcome is often uncertain. Presumably, the old master was angered by the fact that the disciples were so excited from the new arrival. To show the boundaries of his virtual territory was more important to him than to completely ignore the intruder. In any case, a more understanding reaction would have been advantageous for everyone involved. But unless the intruder's true intention is known, it is probably better to launch a preemptive strike. That is understandable but it is not necessarily superior to an open-minded communication. This gives rise to the possibility of a different conclusion of this parable:

The disciples are disappointed that their enthusiasm is shown to be so poorly understood in this way. They conclude that if their master was truly superior then he wouldn't have said that.

In this case the action is relocated within the same horizontal plane. The disciples place their master level with the opponent. The master's reaction becomes subject of criticism and his brilliant argument is used against him. The rivalry between the two opinion leaders now resembles the competition between two roosters. When the old rooster succumbs to the young one the hens flatter the young rooster but they may also comfort the old one. Despite the potential of sympathy for the loser their heart is beating for the winner. This exchange of positions would be rather predictable.

4. Knowledge from a Synthesis

But there is more than the specious competitiveness between the two Gurus in this parable. And far more than selfishness, superficiality and sensitivities of individual persons. Notwithstanding the open

competition between the two Gurus and the tornness of the disciples one must not confuse what appears important (that should be considered) and what is really essential (that should be taken seriously). Considering the sensitivities and the vanities of a short human life then the conscious often remains in the finite within the infinite. How can one stay by peaceful waters at the riverbanks without reflecting on life's volatility? There is the potential of a further conclusion in the transcendental space that even surpasses the preceding thesis and antithesis:

In view of the eternal divinity of nature the real mysticism in this parable is the known metaphor of the wisdom, the mysteriousness and the majestic magnitude of the great river Brahmaputra at the foot of the Himalayas. The calm and placid stream represents eternal return, the present, and the path to enlightenment.

5. The Teachings of the Great River

In his novel *Siddhartha* ("He who has attained his goals") Hermann Hesse (1922) reports of the young Brahmin Siddhartha and his childhood friend and companion named Govinda in their search for knowledge. The framework story is very much based on the central writings of Hinduism about the pilgrimage of Prince Arjuna and his teacher Krishna (from the religious-philosophical didactic poem "Bhagavad Gita" approximately 500 BC). This epic poem tells the story of two dynasties that have fallen out valuing the martial law higher than the right to live. In this difficult situation, Krishna, as a teacher, instructs his student Prince Arjuna in rules of conduct for recognizing the divine. This is where the content of Hesse's novel starts to differ. Siddhartha has no particular teacher in his search for truth and enlightenment. Ultimately, he finds the teaching of the great river as an explanation for his principal questions regarding the meaning of life. Govinda is not a teacher either, but a faithful friend, a travel buddy and his shadow. After a long and strenuous journey which allowed Siddhartha to get to know a wide variety of life circumstances he realizes that the tireless wandering has brought him nowhere at all. Ultimately, when he encounters the great river he considers whether he should end his life in the water, to find rest by wiping out his body. Siddhartha is so exhausted that he falls asleep at the foot of the coconut tree on the banks of the river while his faithful friend watches over him.

Dreams and restless thoughts came flowing to him from the river, from the twinkling stars at night, from the sun's melting rays. Dreams and a restlessness of the soul came to him (Hesse, 1922).

When Siddhartha wakes up after a long and deep sleep, the two remain on the banks listening silently to the water. Devoted to the flow and belonging to unity. The many-voiced song of the river sounds gentle. This helps to regain confidence, to become one with the universe again.

He looked tenderly into the flowing water, into the transparent green, into the crystalline lines of his mysterious drawing. He saw light pearls rising from the depths, quiet bubbles of air floating on the mirror, blue sky depicted in them. The river looked at him with a thousand eyes, green, white, crystal, sky blue (Hesse, 1922).

Siddhartha recognizes the unceasing run of life in the eternal cycle of the water. The river is flowing in many places at the same time. The river always there and always new shows everything is within a unity at the same time. The shadows of the past and of the future have no meaning, only the moment, the present, is what counts. It was the river that taught Siddhartha that everything is constantly changing and yet remains the same. And that everything returns. Siddhartha discovers what it means to arrive deeply in the present.

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein knowledge and certainty belong to different categories. They are not two mental states such as suspecting and being certain (Wittgenstein, 1969). Knowledge substantially differs from wisdom that requires profound understanding at a deeper level. Although everyone has the potential to become wise during his life, wisdom of old age is rarely obtained. More frequently we can observe that a young fool develops to an old fool. While knowledge can be passed on by means of words or symbols, understanding is not conceptual and cannot be passed on.

Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it (Hesse, 1922).

For both, Siddhartha and Prince Arjuna the economic background of their families provided plenty of time without having to work, completely indulging in idleness. Prosperity also allowed access to standardized education and knowledge. However, knowledge does not compensate for understanding. In his essay on “Knowledge and Understanding”, Aldous Huxley (1952) stated that knowledge is acquired when we succeed in fitting a new experience into the system of concepts based upon our old experiences. Contrarily, understanding comes when we liberate ourselves

from the old ideas as we prepare for new insights (Huxley, 1952). Thoughts and learnings do not bring understanding and wisdom, do not come along with the Atman, the eternal essence of spirit deep inside in every being (Hesse, 1922). Siddhartha achieves new insights not until his self-liberation from family and social heteronomy.

6. The Pre-Conclusion

How much time is wasted every day on superficial and peddling activities? How much effort is put into acquiring material properties that are not really needed? Collective greed and quest for profit does not allow to stay in contentedness. In this system of ratings and odds the massive quantities of dictated necessities crush the true desires of the individual. Every day, we are overwhelmed with enormous amounts of knowledge. But we lack calmness and serenity to gain insight and wisdom. We run ourselves tired in a pointless cycle, run old and run sick. Ultimately, we put in a lot of effort to achieve little. Looking back, life is as short as the blink of an eye.

The ephemeral changes quickly (Hesse, 1922).

The speed of technical progress does not yet match the speed of harmonious social development. Becoming slaves to time and dependences, to pleasures and habits, the many distractions keep us away from realizing our selves. Ultimately, when that bright and sure voice deep down becomes silent we may lose refuge in him, the innermost, the Atman.

There is, o my friend, only one knowledge, that is everywhere, that is atman, that is in me and in you and in every being (Hesse, 1922).

The greatest challenge in a person’s life is to know one’s self. Recognize what you are [related to the ancient inscription on the portal of the temple of Apollo at Delphi: *Gnóthi seautón* (Γνώθι σεαυτόν) in the meaning of “know yourself”]. Don’t fear and don’t run away from your self. Don’t give in to finding the original source in your own self, the eternal essence of your spirit. The unstoppable flow of time and the finiteness of being should make you aware of how valuable the individual moment is (Lederer, 2024). Rather than drowning in the river of life you should listen to what the river tells.

The world is perfect at every moment (Hesse, 1922).

7. Conclusion

Transcience gives the moment its beauty and its magnitude.

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8. References

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