

Thinking, Principle and Practice

Deepak Srivastava

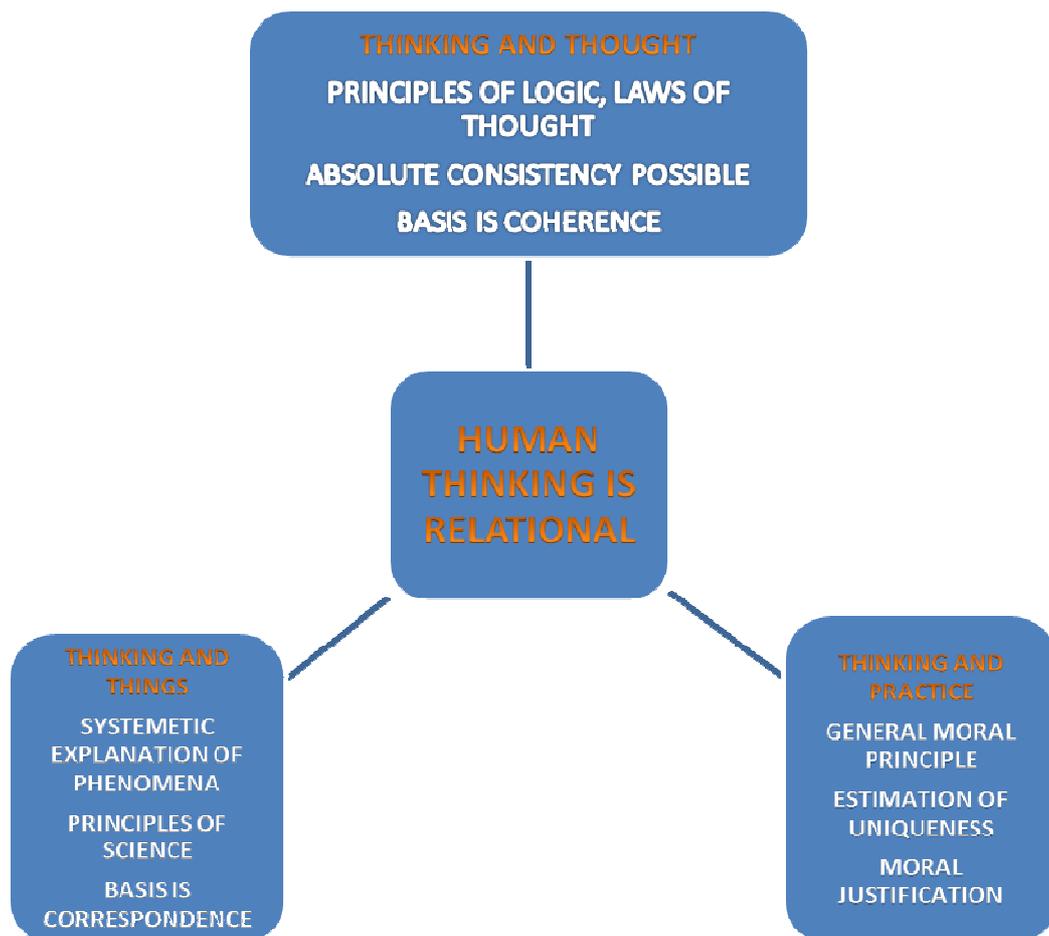
BSR Govt. Arts College Alwaar

Man has always been considered a thinking being. Mankind has been characterized as a kind of thinking creatures. This thinking, of level much higher and complex than found in any other animal that has ever existed, has made mankind itself designated as rational animals, and by virtue of this rationality and dependence and inclination on social existence, man has also been called a social animal. Thinking is integral to human constitution. Philosophers have gone to the extent of declaring that to be is to think. I think therefore, I am.¹ Thereby implying that thinking is essence of man and human existence rests on thinking. There have been others who have held that to be a man is to choose² and this exercise of choice is or ought to be based on thinking. If the choice is not made through proper thinking, the agent ceases to exist as man. The foregoing account of human thinking is presented not to ignite the essence-existence debate on the ontological status of man and thinking, but only to emphasize the truth that thinking has always been there with human kind and human beings cannot be conceived as devoid of thinking.

I am a thinker because I make a choice, or I am because I think, both establish me as necessarily a thinker. If I think, I must think about something.³ I must also have something different from myself to think upon or think about. Thinking presupposes not just a thinker but also the object of thought. Thinking therefore implies not only that I am, but also that, the object of thought also is. A choice of things, of a course of action, of denial or acceptance of situation, all imply at least an epistemological distance between, a dualism of, the thinker and the thing being thought about. Human thinking is thus relational by nature. It is just not possible in an un-relational way. The dichotomy of thinker and object of thought is the condition of human thinking.

How does one think? What is the nature of thinking? I raise this question neither in order to attempt a scientific explanation of the functioning of human brain nor with the purpose psychological explanation in terms of stimulus – feelings and reflexes. I raise

this question only to stress that philosophically the process of thinking tends to be logical. Thinking strives to be consistent and assimilates and corroborates thoughts in rationally understandable way. Thinking has the inherent character of evolving consistency and laying down or discerning for itself, the laws of thought. Logic, thus, is both nature and demand of human thinking. The world of phenomena or experience presented to the senses is understandable to mind only in form of orderly thoughts. Thinking permits chaos neither in thoughts nor in experience.⁴ Thus thinking evolves the principles of science to understand the physical world. This demand of consistency is not confined just to thoughts and things. Even in the realm of action, there ever remains present the demand of validity of choice. Thus, thinking tends also to systematize human actions and choices behind them. Human thinking is essentially relational and has three broad aspects or relation:



THINKING AND THOUGHT

The two words, 'thinking' and 'thought' are not only related but also often have overlapping meaning. The Oxford English dictionary defines thought as, 'a person's mind and all the ideas that they have in it when they are thinking. As, 'process or act of thinking, the power or process of thinking', as, 'ideas in politics, science etc. connected with a particular person group or period of history. It is obvious that thought in any of its forms whether one's own or propounded by other, is essentially something residing in mind, which in spite of being mental, itself is or can be an object of thinking. When thinking is about thought the demand of logical consistency is most fundamental and deep rooted. It is in relation of thinking and thought that the principles of logic or the laws of thought are predominant and exemplified to the fullest. And it is realized to be a logical necessity to keep or bring thoughts through thinking, into the most consistent logical order. Here thinking mind as a rule can admit of no contradictions or incompatibilities. A perfect coherence is desirable, attainable and necessary. Thinking may find expression in imaginations, speculations, fantasies and fictions. These all occasionally seemingly disorderly dimensions of thinking, which have in fact been at the root of creation of classical literature, inventions, achievements and progress are essentially within the fold of systematic thinking which is ultimately orderly. Thinking, in the end, does not admit of disorders for itself. It remains self-rectifying till it strikes non-contradictability. Non-contradiction is its essential and ultimate nature.⁵

THINKING AND THINGS

The relation of thinking and things is somewhat different than the above. In this relation the thinking relates itself not with preexistent ideas in mind but with things out there. The thinking is about the existence external to mind. Thinking relates mind with the world of phenomena and experience. The entirety of non-mental reality, the entirety of natural world is potentially related with thinking. Thinking, determined by its own nature, is compelled to conceive this non-mental or physical reality only in terms of principles of science. Conception or understanding of things, even extremely particular and unique in themselves, is possible for thinking only under and through principles, if the principles are missing, the experience of things remains unexplainable and the existence of

corresponding things, inconclusive. The correspondence of thinking with external existence, presupposes a logical framework of understanding.⁶ Though the correspondence of thinking with things may not demand as much logical rigidity as required in case of relation between thinking and thought, but this demand is sufficiently rigidly present, cannot be denied. The understanding of the physical world or the scientific understanding, in form of principles of natural science, though not at par with the principles or the laws of thought, indeed aims at the same level of logical validity as its ideal. Natural science is of course not a normative one as logic is, yet logic remains, for the development of natural science, the science of sciences.

The thinking demands absolute consistency and state of no confusion not only in natural sciences but also in social sciences. Though social sciences display the promise far less than possible in natural science, none the less the thinking doesn't spare. This is the reason that there are always developments and growths of newer principles in social sciences. Not only the principles, there have been alleged attempts of discovering also the universal laws in social sciences. Some great philosophical system builders like Plato, Hegel and Marx have been specially pointed as such law seekers.⁷ Popper's arguments against Historicism are his effort to explain that human society is too complex, evolving and changing with the growth of knowledge, to be comprehensively grasped at once.

THINKING AND PRACTICE

The debate on the possibility of laws of society or social progress, like many other debates in social sciences is inconclusive. Even if the possibility of such laws, on the basis of which social predictions become possible, is accepted in principle, the philosophers are not unanimous on the set of laws. Notwithstanding the non-availability of perfect scientific principles in realm of natural sciences and almost an impossibility of such principles in social sciences, thinking further insists upon the existence of principles of ethics or human conduct.

In the history of ethics, the evolution of principles of conduct, the moral standards, the expounding of absolute right, duty or obligation, have all been thoroughly attempted.

Much like the principles of social sciences, or rather much more than these, the normative principles of ethics have been mutually confuted. The growth of human society has witnessed various stages and levels of norms of conduct. It is believed that man initially behaved or conducted himself in primitive society on the basis of basic instincts peculiar to him. The level of acting merely on basic instincts must have been realized to be too chaotic and unbearable to human thinking that there naturally emerged the phase of group, tribe and customary morality⁸, which in its turn gave vent to reflexive morality. With reference to the nature of thinking it can be noticed that the departure from the state of nature or from the level of basic instincts to the level of customary morality was actually brought about thinking's demand of consistency in the business of human conduct, a demand of a system of mutual expectations and obligations, its demand of understandable uniform pattern of behavior or ethical conduct. Customary morality, though offers a more widely acceptably standard than the primitive morality does but it still does not propose a universally acceptable standards of morality. Human thinking thus developed a reflexive morality to propound more consistent universalisable moral principles in form of utilitarian and deontological theories etc. such ethical theorists believed that as in natural science, there can be fixed and really universally acceptable principles of morality also. However, in spite of attempting to satisfy the demand of thinking of logically consistent ethical behavior, such moral theorists overlooked two very crucial inputs that 1. Humans and things are essentially different; things have or at least things of same classification have fixed characters and all behave in same way under a given physical circumstance, whereas humans have different natures and each individual is unique. And 2, that humans are not purely rational non-emotional beings; that each individual has a unique response in a given moral situation. It is for these reasons that no universalisable rational moral principle, though partially approved by thinking, has ever evolved as genuinely universally accepted moral principle in practice. A very recent reflection on the nature of traditional moral theory is, "traditional moral philosophy has virtually identified the possibility of genuine moral knowledge with the possibility of universally valid ethical theory, and has supposed that all acceptable moral standards, of every time and place, can be rationally ordered by reference to some set of fundamental principles. Contrary

to this expectation, it has however been realized that the conflict between the putative principle and the thorough consideration of precise practical moral problems has always resulted in refining the interpretation of whatever abstract principle is involved. This has eventually led to a serious if not widespread erosion of confidence in the power of traditional normative theory to decisively guide the resolution of real practical problems.”⁹

Application of thinking, with its demand of absolute consistency as is possible in thinking’s relation with thoughts, on the multifarious aspects of mind such as desires, passions, aspirations, expectations, etc. poses a tough challenge. In the realm of practice each individual is obliged to make a choice of moral action. Each individual has, therefore to develop the capacity to make an appropriate moral choice. Development of the capacity to choose the best possible moral course of action in a given situation is a unique virtue on which the development of morality and justification depends. The putative pre-given moral principle may serve as a guide, to the extent the moral situation is largely general, but to the extent it is peculiar or unique, the choice is based on practical wisdom. Indeed thinking does not diminish its demand of consistency and logical accuracy as an ideal, which is very difficult to approximate in the realm of practice, but more it is approximated more morally developed the agent is.

***Dr. Deepak Srivastava
Head, dept. of Philosophy
BSR Govt. Arts College Alwar
deepvastava@gmail.com***

¹ Rene Descartes

² Jean Paul Sartre

³ Aristotle’s God or Vedantic Brahman or pure Atman not considered

⁴ Kants categories of understanding can give us a clue to understand this. “Understanding prescribes it’s laws to nature”, he held

⁵ Wittegenstein

⁶ Compare Kant’s categories.

⁷ Karl Popper, in ‘Poverty of Historicism’ and ‘Open Society and its Enemies’

⁸ Thomas Hobbes gives a fair account of this chaos. The contractarians speak of contract as something artificial but there never emerged any formal contract. All ethical developments emerged gradually and naturally

⁹ Winkler, Earl and Coombs, Jerold R. (1993) Applied Ethics: A Reader, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford UK and Cambridge USA, p. 2

Dr. Deepak Srivastava
Head, dept. of Philosophy
BSR Govt. Arts College Alwar
deepvastava@gmail.com