

EAST AND WEST – PERSPECTIVES ON HAPPINESS IN THE LIGHT OF TAGORE’S WORKS

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Abstract: This paper aims at presenting from a comparative perspective the concept of happiness, in the light of two cultural typologies – the Occidental and the Oriental one, namely the Indian one, with Rabindranath Tagore as a central exponent.

Parameters such as: identity, otherness, ethics, approaches to nature, science and philosophy are analyzed, underlying their common ground as well as their significant differences.

The Upanishads, Hindu sacred texts, the quintessence of Vedic thought and the basis of the whole Indian society to this day, which we often refer to in this paper, provide a different perspective on happiness than the western approach, as it was envisaged by Aristotel, Kant, Lévinas and others throughout the centuries.

Keywords: happiness, identity, alterity, ethics, Tagore.

Aristotel stated: „Happiness is the purpose and the meaning of life, the only goal and purpose of the human existence, of any culture and society”. But the way each of us understands to pursue it, the proceedings undertaken in this respect bear the imprint of a complex assembly of choices and cultural, ethical, sociopolitical and economical determiners.

In the light of the two analyzed cultural typologies – the Occidental and the Oriental one, namely the Indian one, happiness seems to be sought after in two antagonist directions. The major difference between the two cultures consists in the fact that the Oriental claim to have worked out the enigma of the source of happiness.

Identity and alterity

What is the Occidental’s search focused on in our the postmodern era?

In Occident, the focus is mainly on defining the “identity” concept, which, being relatively new and complicated, is the subject of numerous heated debates.

At present, it is used with double meaning: with the meaning of “social” – referring to the social category, to the membership at a group and, secondly, with the meaning of “personal” – as personal identity, characterized by specific features, viewed as essential, derived from culture, religion, language, reason, democracy, power, ethnicity, nation etc. (Fearon, *What Is Identity (As We Now Use The Word)?* p.1)

At the existential question „who am I?” (the one in search for happiness), the Westerner would respond, according to the context: I am „John”, „Scottish”, „man”, „student”, „liberal” etc.

In this regard, the Upanishads, the Hindu sacred texts, the quintessence of Vedic thought and the basis of all Indian society in the past as well as nowadays, which we often refer to in this paper, however, provide another perspective.

The liberating truth, implicit premise of happiness, is not sought in matters of external and ephemeral order such as the belonging to a culture, religion, ethnicity, race, nation and so on, but it is sought in the opposite direction, namely inside.

The Upanishads explain the doctrine of the soul (*atman*) and the identity of the soul with Brahman (the cosmic soul, the Absolute, the ultimate happiness, the father, the fire, etc.). They compare souls (*atmans*) with sparks jumping from the hearth: each is identical with fire (Brahman), but the fact of being of the same nature does not exclude the autonomy of each spark; all sparks will relapse into embers, but only after an individual path, that is unlike any other.

Thus, in Hinduism, the question "who am I?" can only be answered: "I am the *atman* (the self), a spark of Brahman."

This approach was initially reached by justifying the proposed demarche, explaining that it is possible: possibility which is due to the fact that the living is formed, as well as the universe itself, from an absolute substance, "contained" in a coating material. We find here the principle of analogy that generates all Indian reasoning. Since "what is below is similar to what is above" as microcosm is analogous to the macrocosm, we can find in it the opposition essence/existence, absolute/relative, Brahman (Absolute)/Maya (illusion). The Upanishads say that, obviously, the body is a precarious, relative, transient reality. It is born, grows, decays and disappears; the senses are deceptive, feelings are disappointing; mental activity is often faulty and deceptive; in addition to this, it is closely related to its organ, the brain, or even to the whole body. Hungry people have a bad reasoning, say the Upanishads, and a body is not thinking at all. Thus, neither the body nor the senses, nor the feelings, nor the reason can validly be the base of human personality. The true reality is, therefore, elsewhere: it lies in an Absolute that lies, in a symbolic way, in the "center" of the creature. This absolute, the Brahman, "incarnated" in the living, is called *atman* by the Upanishads.

Regarding the second question, which arises naturally through complementarity, "Who is the other?", Emmanuel Lévinas completely renews the ethical perspective and the issue of the relationship with the Other.

If in modernism "the other was looming in a world based only on coded rules, as a mystifying presence, but, above all, confusingly ambivalent: the potential anchoring of the identity of Self was both a hindrance and opposition to the assertion of the ego; the Other was the embodiment of contradiction and the most impressive barrier on the path of ego to happiness, Lévinas readmits the other as a neighbor, close both physically and psychically, in the heart of the moral self, returned from the desert of mean interests where he was exiled; (postmodernism) redesigns the Other as a crucial figure in the process by which moral self recovers its rights." (Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p 93) For Lévinas, in front of the other and of his face, the pure experience of otherness appears, which merges with ethics, because I am responsible for the other.

By developing "the critique of pure reason, placing the subject in the center of knowledge, whose only source is experience, Kant perfected the Enlightenment philosophy" (Russ, Jacqueline, *Panorama of philosophical ideas*, p.169). In its proposal, the principle of identifying with the other takes the form of the categorical imperative of reason: "act in such a way as the height of your will be always able to serve as a principle of a universal regulation." The main question is „how?“, and then, at the question „how can I become happy?“ the sole answer is in following this imperative, which results in the fact that each man has to be seen as a purpose in itself and not as a means.

Following the Kantian postulates, in the modern times, between *I* and *the other*, there had to be a distance, structured only by legal rules - with no influence of something

spontaneous and imprevisible, no power that wouldn't inspire trust, no moral proximity, as proximity is the domain of intimacy and of morality, and the distance is the domain of alienation and of law.

Postmodernism, the new ethics, on the other hand, restored the moral significance of closeness and focuses on intersubjectivity.

Tzvetan Todorov also states, in his attempt to define and know the Other, that we can discover the others inside ourselves, realizing that we are not a homogenous substance radically different from anything that is not the self: myself is another. Or we can conceive them as something abstract, as an instance of psichical configuration of any man/individ, as the Other, or another in relation to *myself*. We can also discover *the other* as a social group to which *we* don't belong to (*The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, p.7)

In response to the alterity studies in the Western world, the Indian vision has claimed for millenia that, in the light of the *atman-brahman* identity, the question of myself (*atman*)-*the other* (*atman, too*) is illusory.

Only when there is duality can somebody see the other, hear the other, think of the other, know the other. On the contrary, when he acknowledges that everything that exists is *atman-brahman*, there can't be any longer feeling, seeing, hearing, language, thinking, cognition. Who could know the Observer if not the Observer himself, who is no other than *atman*? After all, there is nothing but *atman-brahman* and the world dissapears out of lack of reality....

Ethics

As we know, reason, in modern age especially, represented a purpose in itself, in order to reach an elevated ethical state, assimilated to the condition of happiness. Legislators and the modern thinkers considered that „the *reason* could do what the *faith* could do no longer” (Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 10). Morality was not seen as intrinsic for the human nature but as something that had to be induced into the human behaviour. As a consequence, it was meant to create and impose a coherent code of rules that humans can learn and can be forced to respect. The code was meant to fill the gap left by the authority of the Church, of which „religious dogmas” the modernism had got rid of, in favour of laicization.

Repeated attempts have thus targeted at creating a universal moral code which, without appealing to the divine commandments, to proclaim itself boldly as "human", and in spite of this or rather, precisely because of this to be accepted and followed by all 'rational' human beings. At the same time, it was constantly aimed at seeking " the rational regulation of human coexistence", a set of laws designed in such a way and a society led in such a way that individuals, while exercising their free will and making choices in search of their own happiness, to choose what is good and ethic and to reject what is bad and wrong.

Western Postmodernism rejects the rule of reason and ranks as impossible the finding of a universal, solidly founded code of ethics and of a non-aporetical moral. Postmodernism argues that moral behavior can be guaranteed neither by the contexts of human action better designed, nor by reason of human actions more carefully considered and urges us to learn to live without such guarantees, moreover, with the awareness that they we will never be provided.

The postmodern moral crisis, as Bauman presents it to us is due to the pluralism of rules that determines the moral choices to be inevitably ambivalent, and the moral ambiguities to be strongly felt: postmodernism " gives us the freedom of choice that no one previously enjoyed, but which also takes us in a state of uncertainty that was never before so agonizing. We long for the guidance that we can rely on and trust, so that part of the excruciating responsibility for our choices to be taken off our shoulders. But the authorities that we could

trust are all challenged and none seems strong enough to give us the level of safety we need. Eventually, we do not trust any authority, at least we do not have full confidence in any, not for a long time: we can only be suspicious of any claims of infallibility. " (Bauman , *Postmodern Ethics* , p 26)

The Upanishads also reject, but due to other reasons than postmodernists, the credit granted to reason, claiming firmly that the reason is a false help. It is relatively easy to "think" and to conceive, by means of reason, the identity of the soul with the Absolute. Unfortunately, the activity of rational thinking, participates in the world of phenomena: *Manas* (Sanskrit: mind) exists; it is born, feeds memories, acquires the habits of the environment where life which animates it evolves and dies with it. How could it know (in the full sense of the word) something that is not in its field? Brahmanism insists that "only the ones alike can get to know one other". It is imperative that the individual comes out of himself first, to overcome his existential contingencies in order to allow to speak, inside him, another voice than his discursive thought (*manas*). The other voice belongs to *Buddhi* (the upper thinking, the equivalent of the Platonic nous) , the " inner light " which by intellectual intuition can reach *atman* and to " awaken " it (*Buddhi* signifies mainly "awakening") , in order to know its true nature. When this goal is achieved, the revelation of the identity of *atman* and *Brahman* also appears.

Nature

In the most eloquent way, Tagore, the Indian bard, compares Western and Eastern culture in terms of the relationship between man and the universe: "The civilisation of ancient Greece was nurtured within city walls. In fact, all the modern civilisations have their cradles of brick and mortar.

These walls leave their mark deep in the minds of men. They set up a principle of "divide and rule" in our mental outlook, which begets in us a habit of securing all our conquests by fortifying them and separating them from one another. We divide nation and nation, knowledge and knowledge, man and nature. It breeds in us a strong suspicion of whatever is beyond the barriers we have built, and everything has to fight hard for its entrance into our recognition."

This existential anxiety, which erodes the chances of achieving happiness and this splitting phenomenon were not common in India, as the first natives were able from the very beginning to naturalize the environment, turning it into an asset. The virgin forests on the banks of Indus offered shelter against the elements, rich sources of water, food and wood for the sacrificial fire, and for building houses.

«Thus, says Tagore, in India it was in the forests that our civilisation had its birth, and it took a distinct character from this origin and environment. It was surrounded by the vast life of nature, was fed and clothed by her, and had the closest and most constant intercourse with her varying aspects.

The West seems to take a pride in thinking that it is subduing nature; as if we are living in a hostile world where we have to wrest everything we want from an unwilling and alien arrangement of things. This sentiment is the product of the city-wall habit and training of mind. For in the city life, man naturally directs the concentrated light of his mental vision upon his own life and works, and this creates an artificial dissociation between himself and the Universal Nature within whose bosom he lies.

But in India the point of view was different; it included the world with the man as one great truth. India put all her emphasis on the harmony that exists between the individual and the universal. She felt we could have no communication whatever with our surroundings if they were absolutely foreign to us. Man's complaint against nature is that he has to acquire

most of his necessities by his own efforts. Yes, but his efforts are not in vain; he is reaping success every day, and that shows there is a rational connection between him and nature, for we never can make anything our own except that which is truly related to us.

The fundamental unity of creation was not simply a philosophical speculation for India; it was her life-object to realize this great harmony in feeling and in action. With mediation and service, with a regulation of life, she cultivated her consciousness in such a way that everything had a spiritual meaning to her. The earth, water and light, fruits and flowers, to her were not merely physical phenomena to be turned to use and then left aside.

They were necessary to her in the attainment of her ideal of perfection, as every note is necessary to the completeness of the symphony. India intuitively felt that the essential fact of this world has a vital meaning for us; we have to be fully alive to it and establish a conscious relation with it, not merely impelled by scientific curiosity or greed of material advantage, but realizing it in the spirit of sympathy, with a large feeling of joy and peace. ». (Tagore, *Sadhana*, pp.19-22)

The West in relation to Nature, or rather the lack of a deep, meaningful and happiness giving relationships with it, is plastically described by Bauman in his work *Intimations of Postmodernity*. He claims that, for modernity, the war against mystery and magic was meant to assert the independence of reason. The stakes of this war consists in the right to have initiative and authority in action. To win this war, the world had to be despiritualized, non-animated, and denied the ability of subject, in order to become easily manipulated in the hands of those who had the right to make decisions. The Spirit and the Matter were distinctly separated, favoring the transformation of the world in an object, in raw material processed by human desire. "The world does not have a meaning by itself; only the human desire gave it meaning and purpose. The earth became a storehouse of minerals and other "natural resources", the wood was turned into timber and water - depending on circumstances - a source of energy, means of transportation or solvent for waste. The bond among land, forest and water was difficult to perceive among ores, timber and landfills. As the nature gradually became non-animated, people were becoming more "naturalized " so that the subjectivity and their native "given of their existence" could be denied and they could be transformed into instruments; they became as the timber or transport path instead of becoming forests and lakes. " (Bauman , *Intimations of Postmodernity* , p X)

Conclusively, the visionary experience of the Orientals, whose dimension of the human being and of the myth disappeared from the contemporary existence of the West, can be, in the mechanical and quantitative world of the Occident the valence of a liberating wisdom. To this respect, the budhist saying „There is no path to happiness, the happiness is itself the path” or Mahatma Gandhi’s advice „Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in perfect alignment” (www.citate.ro) can be a leading path in the life of any happiness seeker.

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