

.....

**THE IMPERATIVE OF SOCIAL SELF BY RETHINKING ABOUT  
THOUGHT ABOUT SELF**

.....

**S. Lourdunathan**

*Associate Professor & Head, Department of Philosophy,  
Arul Anandar (Autonomous) College, Karumathur, Madurai – 625 514.*

**Abstract**

The notion of 'self' is central to most philosophical positions both in western and eastern traditions. The issue that I propose to address here is to examine whether the thought patterns about self is sufficiently social or not, for reason that if and if the self is considered social within our metaphysical foundations there is a possibility of being socially authentic and if not, I argue that our claims to be 'social' is either insufficient or not necessarily social in terms of either individual or a configuration of individuals (groups/associations). To this task, "It is necessary to dig deeper, down to the very meaning of the notion of Being, and to show that the origin of all being, including that of nature is determined by the intrinsic meaning of conscious life and not the other way around"<sup>i</sup> hence the central questions that this paper attempts to address as follows: (i) Is there a sense of being that is philosophically considered to be 'worthy being'? (ii) And if so, whether such philosophical sensibilities of a 'worthy being' agreeable? If agreeable, is such agreeability justifiably agreeable or philosophically justified? (iii) And if not, what is the specific forms or sensibilities by which the so-deemed philosophical sensibilities of a worthy being be contested? (iii) The basic issue would then be *-Are the philosophical sensibilities of 'being' worthy enough to be considered the worth of being?* The inquiry thus pertains to whether the notions of Being/Self (within the philosophical traditions) authentic enough and if not sufficiently authentic and how/why do we (need to) argue towards an authentic sense of Being/Self.<sup>ii</sup>

**Keywords:** self, social, Dalit, Ambedkar, Social Intellectuals, activists, pilgrim progress

May I be permitted to propose that 'we need to ponder on the very thought-constructions (philosophical) in-and-through which we have been philosophically habituated to think about the very concept of Self or Being that are congested in our

cultural traditions. And such 'academic paths' I believe, is not farfetched but difficult to pilgrim however an imperative within the changing patterns of Indian society and philosophy. Over the last few decades, within the Indian societal discourse, the socio-political interventions being made by subaltern voices (Feminists, Dalits, Environmentalists, unorganized labour sector etc) seems to be compelling such 'Rethinking about Thought for Authenticating the Self/Being as Social'; primarily conceived by Dr Ambedkar's intellectual inquiry and notable Dalit Social Intellectuals/activists spearhead this 'pilgrim progress' setting their directions, rethinking and pro-acting favorably to propel the needed/necessary sensibilities of worthy being away from its cultural constraints/boundaries in the directing considering the Self/Being as inclusively social, rather put it differently, the subaltern search for authentic being consists in reconsidering the very identity of Being as socially inclusive as against or away from the ontologism of exclusive sensibilities of Being that constructs out thought patterns. This may perhaps be called the beginning of a *salvation of philosophical histories* that needs to be augmented within our cultural contexts of domination and oppression. This does mean that our philosophical discourses cannot remain isolated with a series of discussions on the logistics of self constructed in fine metaphysical foundations "as though subjective life in the form of consciousness consisted in being itself losing itself and finding itself again so as to possess itself by showing itself, proposing itself as a theme, exposing itself in truth"<sup>iii</sup>.

I argue that (i) most thought-constructions of various philosophical traditions are invested with the idea of webbing a sense of being that is rather lopsided and asymmetrical and in so doing these philosophical constructions seems to be violently political (if not ethical) in construing and projecting an ontology of dominant Self vs. dominated self and to position the latter to a sense of not-sufficiently-authentic and hence the philosophical constructs on worthy being seems to be rather not sufficiently authentic, and they need to be either eroded or suspended in favour of a re-research of authentic self and this calls for alternate philosophical ways of rethinking our thought-constructions for Authenticating the Self/Being as Social.

**Philosophical/Cultural Multiple Context of Inauthentic Self**

Most often scholars in philosophy have been lured into thinking that the field of philosophical inquiry is philosophy itself. i.e. either the boundaries of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics of specific philosophical traditions or crisscrossing the boundaries of each other classical philosophical traditions in terms of their mutual metaphysical, epistemological and ethical terrains. In so doing we (Most Indian philosophical scholars) seem to be habituated to think within the thought patterns that has been traditionally and classically passed on without infringing into the analysis of such territories, and if at all philosophical analysis is meant, it is meant to rewrite the same in either similar or dissimilar manner. Such an attitude to do philosophy hitherto has constrained the very philosophical research (in India) in terms broader social relevance or rather they seem to be relevant within the self same traditions.

The proper field of philosophical analysis, I hold, is the realm of the non-philosophical. By addressing this non-philosophical, philosophy remains to be authentic and philosophical in the real sense of being philosophical. When philosophy addresses itself, then there is the problem of sophistry, or mere idealization; Knowledge for its own sake lacks human social interest. Philosophical texts are pondered as pedagogical tools to the interpretation of the non-philosophical. Philosophical texts are pondered not necessarily for promoting 'textual authenticity' (Textual authenticity itself is a philosophical issue) but for contextual authenticity based on an ethic of social living. Because Philosophy involves *reflection*, it sets itself free to reflect on its own reality by way of distancing itself from what already is, from its own world, from its own system from its own space. Habermas points out that philosophy remains true to its tradition by renouncing it. This is exactly is the way of thinking philosophically. If it (philosophy) does not set itself free from its own system, it is endangered to the level of a dogma, a tradition; a thought pattern to be blindly adhered to; such thinking system limits any reflection. It falls back to itself. It is self-enclosure within its own world. It is a refusal to think critically. It is a refusal towards any mediation, relation, and proximity of the-other. It tends to promote (at times forcefully) a habitual adherence to the centrality and totality of Memory of the past; this is a militant refusal to think anew.

The history of philosophy has always emerged from and responded to -the realm of the non-philosophical in doing so it claims itself meta-physical, a sense of going beyond the physical. The 'non-philosophical' here refers to the geo-political, social and cultural space, responsible for the emergence of a particular type of meta-physical, a system of thought(ism) or thought-governance which in turn pave way for consolidation and ruling justification of the existence of a 'ruling-being' as against or in appropriation of relegating status of the non-being or not-sufficiently being.

Most world views (that include the classical Greek, the Roman, the Aryan, the Christian, the dominant Asian) seems to have perpetuated the ruling-Being in a privileged status by means of which the Other beings are relegated to specific distributed and encircled locus of non-beings in an hierarchical manner. The entire Aristotelian metaphysics and logic witness the designation of Being as substantial and the non-being as accidental through logic of thought -fundamentals of thought. The European quest both in antiquity and the medieval for human freedom and dignity in terms of the 'omnipotence and omniscience and omnibenevolence' seems to be at odds with the idea of human self as free and dignified and as worthy of being. The human being and his/her self-worth are always defined in a vertical dependency to the deistic/theistic fundamentals. Devoid of such lineage the being-of-human seems to be devoid of any meaning per se.

For the Greeks, 'Being is and 'Non Being is not' (Parmenides). This means that being is that which is Greek, the lumen, the episteme or the pan-optican of the Greek culture. And this Being extends as the frontiers of Hellenism through a politics of war. Over the other borders of Grecian Hellenism, there exists or relegated the realm of those non-being(s) and as such these non-beings have to waged a war in order to be brought under and to be politically ruled by the 'privileged being', namely the Greeks -'the philosopher king.

It is this overarching idea of Being (according to the Greeks) provided the very foundation (that which encompassed) or provided the totality and the political space for defining 'existence of and nature of Being 'in itself, 'as such' pure, devoid of any 'pollution'. That is why Parmenides defined being as self subsistent and later the medieval church traditions carried on this invested idea of the ruling Being as 'The Being' and the others (non-Greeks, non-Romans, non-Europeans) to be a evangelized, approximated, manifested, colonized, ruled/governed but within the

terrain of non-sufficient-beings; and if not able to be appropriated then these non-sufficient-beings (accidentals) need to be excommunicated as non-beings. This is the birth/nativity/political site of the not-sufficient-being treated as vulnerable, unworthy, insufficient, sinful, dirty, earthly, material, illusory, *tamasic*, sinful, karmic, cosmic, teleological, causal, conditional etc. Thus the birth of the non-sufficient-being is sourced from the political locus of Being itself. The very ontological constructs of Being presupposes the cosmological status of the not-sufficient-beings. In other worlds, I believe, holiness is the very locus/womb from which ungodliness springs forth. Augustinian 'City of God' in itself is the locus of the city of the devil. The city is the birth of the slum and slum is already located within the political borders of the city.

Being (both in the Greek and the medieval traditions) is like the light that illumines an area but not itself seen. Being is not given to see-ability or sense perception. And what it illuminates or takes hold of, or enslaves are the things, the objects, and the slaves, the non-Greeks, the terrain of non-being(s). The non-being therefore is an 'is not entity' as that of a typical 'maya' reality. This sense of ontology is found in entire history of western philosophical tradition from the Greek to the modern. The tension between Being and Non Being, Permanence and Transitory, Eternal and the Temporary, Spirit or Matter, One and Many, Non-Dual and Dual, Soul\Mind and Body\Matter, Divine and Human, Male and Female, Human and Animal, Culture and Nature, Science or Pseudo Science, Civilized and uncivilized, etc are not only the so-called philosophical categories of understanding but deep down they are the political cum historical-cultural categories that constitutes to 'thinking the very thought' as ontic. These are the '*philosophical sites*' in whose cultural context, I believe, any philosophical analysis on the question of worthy being needs to be pondered upon.

The quest for human freedom and dignity and worthy of being within modernity epitomized as radically dualistic in terms of *res extensa* (corporeal extended thing) and *res cogitans* and God as to establish *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) though politically advantageous to liberate the human self from its antique and medieval constructions however seems to be at odds with and not necessarily sufficient with the idea of *sum res cogitans* (I exist therefore I am)<sup>iv</sup>. Within modernity, however advantageous, by employing the method of deduction and the

method of doubting the-other, Descartes' cleverly establishes such center of a rational Being to be considered 'worthy being' as against the not-sufficiently or irrational beings namely those who are relegated to the realms of the body/matter. The nature of Self/Being for Descartes (derived logically) is *sui-generis*, that which exists in itself', there by Descartes establishes the supremacy of the thinking ego, and consequently the subordination of the Other beings (the spatial) as secondary a specific metaphysical way of practicing exclusion of the other.

It is not far from truth that before we claim 'ego cogito' there was already the phenomena, the appearance and political (non-philosophical) practice of 'egoconquiro'. 'egoconquiro; this is the practical foundation of *ego cogito*. Ontology emerges from the practical context of the tension between the conqueror and the conquered in human history. (Ambedkar traced conflict as the source of Casteism) The 'ontologism' is the thinking of the center; the politics of the center; it refers to the Being of the political center-space. It is the thinking in manifestation that manifests and expresses as being in itself and for itself. Hegelian thought in terms of the Absolute Idea dialectically turning back to its own thesis is the way the dominant Self is justified to be the Being in a construed-authenticity in order to consume/susume the non-being into itself; It is an all-encompassing totality; an already totalized totality in a sort of 'ontological dominant presence';

The history of European colonialism projected a story of philosophy that explained and justified political and cultural domination of the Other Beings with in the life world. The technocratic European male represents the 'ego-conquiro and the *ego cogito*. The ability to be a perceiver and the vulnerability to be treated as an object of perception (perceived ones) (subjective idealism) again veils the above-mentioned sense of ontologism of the Being of the center. History of philosophy as well, is largely a story of the political supremacy of the ontological centrality of what is positioned as the Being of the center in a theory laden value hierarchy of other-beings. Dominant Western philosophical thought is the 'manifestation' of the Being of the center over/against the 'non-being or lesser beings in the world. Such a manifestation is purposive, interest bound. This is why I invoke a sense of 'thinking about thought'.

The Heideggarian 'question of Being' is to be situated in this context of the tension between Being and Being-in-the-world. It is radical question in the sense that

it purports to unveil the ontology and the orthodoxy of the center or the technocracy of being of the center and alternatively it is a vocation for Being-in-the-world. (A call to fundamental ontology). The form of manifestation (according to Heidegger) is either comprehension or appropriation or both. This is also known as 'mediation'. Treating the-Other as the enemy, the Being of the center distances itself; or else, treating the-Other as vulnerable, the Being of the center 'appropriates' the-Other in specific forms of continuous subordination. The cumulative effect of such mediation (comprehension or appropriation) is the phenomenon, the political/ cultural territory of what has been self-imposed as Being vis-à-vis the non-sufficient-beings. Levinas would put it: 'Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by the interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being. This primacy of the same was ... to receive nothing of the other but what is in me"<sup>v</sup>. ...It "rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in ipseity, its egoism. Philosophy is an egology'. "Concretely, the relationship of identification is the encumbrance of the ego by the self, the care that the ego takes of itself, or materiality. The subject - an abstraction from every relationship with a future or with a past - is thrust upon itself, and is so in the very freedom of its present. Its solitude is not initially the fact that it is without succor, but its being thrown into feeding upon itself, its being mixed in itself. This is materiality."<sup>vi</sup> Hence the modernist idea of Being as Rational, pure, autonomous, is in a sense a shift away from the medieval deo/theo-centric Self, falls shortly as not only anthropo and andro-logical, but gets itself encircled and privileges itself as the rational self and in doing so, the realm of the not-sufficiently-rational remains as the periphery in subordination to such idealized self. Yet again an improved/humanized form of unworthy being is already constituted with in this paradigm of metaphysics.

#### **Inauthentic Being in Indian thought/cultural constructions**

Parallel discussions can be held within the domain of dominant Indian philosophies. The predominant ancient Indian and the classical quest for human freedom and dignity and self-worthiness in terms of the Vedic/Vedantic philosophies such as Nyaya-Vaisesika, Samkhaya, Advaita, Dvaita, Visistadvaita with their high sounding conceptual constructions like Self-realization either through the denial of the world of illusion and trespassing the cycle of karmic manipulations or transition from *prakrti-parinama* (transformation of *prakrti-Samkhya* system) to

Brahma-parinama (the transformation of Brahman) i.e., the homogenous Brahman becoming heterogeneous or the heterogeneous becoming the homogeneous etc seem to be at odds with the idea of all-human selves as worthy of being. The high ideals such as the *absolute/unqualified/transcendental /Brahman pure Self* of that of Sanakara's *kevaladvaita* or the qualified/differentiated self of that of Ramanujas's Visistadvaita, or the radical dualistic positioning of *Prakriti*, (matter) and *Purusha* (spirit) or the Supreme Self (God) as the efficient cause of the World (Nyayavaisesika Position) – none of these seems to be positioning the authentic human self and instead they strongly promote a value hierarchical heavily loaded thought constructions that ultimately projects a serious construction of those who could be considered andas ought not to be considered worthy self. The ontological foundations/presuppositions of such Indian philosophical categories thus cannot be considered to be promotive of worthy being and they need to be entirely exposed of their self-imposed totalization by means of which these categories of understanding practiced and justified a politics of domination, exclusion, suppression and subordination.

'Consciousness offers itself to thought only as self-presence, as the perception of self in presence'.... so the subject at consciousness has never manifested itself except as self-presence. The privilege granted to consciousness therefore signifies the privilege granted to the present; and even if one describes the transcendental temporality of consciousness, and at the depth at which Husserl does so, one grants to the "living present" the power of synthesizing traces, and of incessantly reassembling them. (*Derrida, Jacques*. For Levinas, western metaphysics philosophy has consistently practices the suppression of the Other. By disembarking ontology from its privileged position, Levinas positions ethics of responsibility towards the other as the necessary condition of human existence.

In the history of thought (west or east), the Other is regarded as something provisionally separate from the Same (or the self), but ultimately reconcilable with it; otherness, or alterity, appears as a temporary interruption to be eliminated as it is incorporated into or reduced to sameness (Levinas).



### **The need for a transition in our thinking of the Self**

On the other hand, those philosophies that emerged from the periphery social reality, have always done not by distancing \ isolating themselves but as an ethical need to place themselves in opposition to the center of its total exteriority towards authentic totality in terms of critical inclusivism and identity and relationality claims. For instance, Pre-Socratic thought appeared from a political, economic and geo-political periphery and not exclusively from Greece. In the modern times, existentialism emerged as a response to the dehumanizing war-center. Marxian thought emerged as a response to economic social reality. The Indian carvaka and Buddhist discourse have emerged from the periphery as the thought pattern that resisted the supremacy of any dominant centre for reasons of the affirmation of an authentic sense of being.

There are different approaches within post Independent era to question of the affirmation of the worthy of the human self. This is usually identified as 'the Indian reform narrative. By ways of reformation narrative some propelled the idea of 'returning to the Vedic-Caste past'; and some others with a fantasy project of classless society (*return to the west*), insufficient to address the caste question) still bargain for political representations for the self same/self enclosed oneness; some others retain the idea of 'renewing the present by doing good here-and-there; and very few propel a *radical departure* to the question of caste manipulations. The life-long struggle towards the 'annihilation of caste' by Dr Ambedkar, the Dalit interventions is one such radical departure. Philosophically speaking it is the struggle to deny the ontological centrality of the so-deemed high caste being and promote the sociality of all beings as worthy beings. For Ambedkar, the relation that exists in caste system is of domination and domestication for subordination. The value-hierarchical wherein the high caste remains to be the subject or the unitary substance to whose benefits every successive caste groups has to serve respectively. He observes that isolation of each other, between any two higher and lower castes (subject-object) is mutual. That an X from one caste excludes Y of another caste, and as such exclusion seems to be mutual, inclusive, mental and spatial or structural with purposive and dominative social interests. The caste political ego (autonomous self) attempts to formulate the norms and rules in accordance to the social status and survival of the high-er caste which is being baptized as democratic *cum* representative politics. Genuine relation is

sacrificed for reasons of rational and functional stability of dominant social and political groups. Knowledge and Social Power are made identical in the totalized-self. Consciousness is characterized of the higher castes in gradation whereas earthliness, materiality, ugliness, unholiness, eternal condemnation, excommunication and use and *thrownawayness* etc., is characterized of the lower castes. Underneath the caste social order, there lies violence. According to Ambedkar, Caste by its very construct, lacks, relationship and laces caste morality like that of a web.

The philosophies that have emerged as a response to social problems purported to the affirmation of the existence of the 'Non-Being' or so called not-sufficient-beings which is otherwise treated as the exterior other by the self-enclosing systems. It is sort of 'path from ontology or metaphysics of domination towards the propelling of a metaphysics of affirmation and emancipation. It is a double way - a sort of double negation in practice. Negating the very negations that have been culturally produced and reproduced becomes imperative. It is as well a movement of the so-called Other, who suffered denials (metaphysical, epistemological and ethical and cultural *thrownawayness* not necessarily towards the centre but towards affirmation of the social by ways of not (political) representations alone but specific ways of presentations.

However a caution has to be spelt out here; we should also take note that the philosophies, which emerged from the periphery, unconscious of its need of reflection, have also fallen back to the center-stage. Philosophy as critical thinking that originates from periphery is unfortunately ends by directing itself to the center. Truth here is assumed to be singular, ONE and that too the truth of the center. Truth as the truth center reduced to a monolithic all pervasive dimensions is its death of philosophy as critical engagement. Ontology and ideology is an end to critical thinking. In grounding in and ending upon as an ontology (a self-closed thought) philosophy loses its social and critical significance. The history of philosophy is filled with the facets of such ontological reductionism to the center-stage. Critical thinking especially by/in-favour the not-sufficient-beings (the broken-particulars), when it shelters to the primacy of the hierarchical center, (however safe it may be) it turns out to be memory, a sheer matter of repetition of the tradition of violence. Where critical thinking ends, ontology begins. Ontology ends up by thinking itself as

the only reality. It defines itself as the only Being. By distancing, it defines itself as the Being as against the idea of Being-in-the-world in relation with the other. By defining itself as a privileged being, thought (ontology) separates \ distances itself from the presence of the beings of the others. Such a denial is violent and political.

Arguably the dominant intellectual traditions (intellectual tyranny) seems to project a strong sense of inauthentic self and tactically construe a culture of domination and subordination veiling relations of cultural and political power interests and appropriations and de facto they seem to be constitutive of a culture of violence. If so, the actual quest in view of *an authentic self, remains to a contested territory*, lies in the specific intelligent ways through which we let ourselves free from the dominant/oppressive any dominant centric (Euro-Indian) intellectual tyrannies (thought patterns). For us what is significant here is to see the configuration of these thought patterns in constructing and projecting as if an authentic self is pivotal. By way of revisiting and analytically examining of how Euro-Indian thought patterns projected and constructed the idea of Being/Self as lopsided and alternatively reposition self as authentic in terms of being social is the discourse in continuum. The very attempt to turn away / resist/ pronounce death to such thought-enslavements, I believe is first step to engage a discourse towards the authenticating self; an ethic of transformation of our mind sets away from the illegitimate allegiance to such philosophical/political orthodoxy. To do this, positioning the philosophical thoughts in the sense a-political nature as if purely metaphysical, epistemological and moral devoid of any social content discourse may increasingly be resisted be bracketed and we may consider/examine the similarities of thought patterns that continually construct a value-hierarchical inauthentic human self in favor of the promotion of authentic selves in terms of identity in critical pluralities.

---

<sup>i</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel and Andre Orianne (Translator). *The Phenomenological Theory of Being*. 1930

<sup>ii</sup> The terms 'Self' or 'Being' are used interchangeably though out this paper.

<sup>iii</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel and Alphonso Lingis (Translator). *Substitution*. 1968

<sup>iv</sup> Rene Descartes philosophical method of doubt is perpetuated to affirm the totality of the rational self project the primacy of the individual who is rational and it does not necessarily promote the possibility of the social inclusive selves.

<sup>v</sup> Totality and Infinity, p. 43

<sup>vi</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel and Richard A. Cohen (Translator). *Time and the Other*. 1946.