

Vedanta and Human Management

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PETER DRUCKER, the guru of modern management, in his famous book *The Post Capitalist Society*¹ says that in future industrial societies ‘knowledge’ would be the chief resource driving them forward. The main workers in such postmodern societies, he thinks, would not be people working on resources like land and labour but instead on a new sort of capital called know-how. These he terms ‘knowledge workers’.

But defining labour in such a way also means redefining what knowledge itself means, which in turns leads to a redefinition of human nature. And this is what Peter Drucker does, not only in this book of his, but in his project taken as a whole. Knowledge according to him is that which is useful for the progress of society, knowledgeable people being people who are socially and industrially usable. This utilitarian definition of knowledge involves its inevitable corollary: the utilitarian definition of human worth. Management as a science or art could be defined as a science or art dealing with the management of human beings or the knowledge resource embedded in humans. This being the case, the definition of the nature of the human being has a very crucial, and often ignored, connection with management. This connection, owing to the subject it treats of, is essentially philosophical. Human nature is not a management subject as such, but is a subject of philosophy, and so the correctness or otherwise of Drucker’s conception of the role of humans in society and the knowledge they own as their capital resource, is to be challenged or studied philosophically.

I venture in this paper to make bold that the prevalent underlying conceptions of modern management are more or less incorrect in their understanding of human nature. Human beings, even in the most liberal systems of management thought, are viewed ultimately as tools of the social and industrial machinery. Their understanding of knowledge and its usability in serving the wheel of the social and industrial complex, defines their understanding of human utility. Both these understandings of human nature and human knowledge are in the root flawed and are the major causes of the mismeasurement of humans—and so also their ‘mismanagement’—and environment that modern industrial capitalism could be held accountable for.

The Vedantic Point of View

The word ‘Vedanta’ is a cognate of two separate Sanskrit words *veda* and *anta*. Literally, it means the end or conclusion of the Vedas. Thus understood Vedanta means literally the last or concluding chapters of the Vedic literature: Upanishads. But understood at a metaphorical level it means the summum bonum or the conclusive point or final understanding of the whole philosophical endeavour of the Vedas; understood in that way too the meaning is not inapt. The teachings of the Upanishads indeed represent the highest and most sublime philosophical statements of the whole of the Vedas. The *Vedanta Sutra* or *Brahma Sutra* of Badarayana is the defining text summarising in a succinct and systematic form the whole philosophical

teaching of the Upanishads and thus stand as the cornerstone text of different schools of Vedanta.

I have, for the purposes of this essay, extensively made use of the *Kena Upanishad*, and a short didactic poem of Vedantic epistemology called *Drig-Drishya-Viveka*, as also the book *The Vedantic Self and the Jungian Psyche* by Dr Carol Whitfield.² The exposition now presented about the nature of man, knowledge, and the ends of human life has been written with these texts as the basic materials of study.

The Human Being According to Vedanta and Management Theory

Management—whether business, political, or otherwise—is managing or controlling of the persons, capacities, and resources of human beings. Being that, the science of management ought to first of all have a firm understanding of what human nature itself consists of. So far, management scientists seem to have just taken in the prevailing scientific notion of human nature as though it could just be taken for granted like that. That I think is a very pernicious mistake. For unlike the physical sciences, social sciences—and management according to me is a branch of social science—have deep, far-reaching, and really consequent bearing to human destiny in a society. Mistaken theories of human nature were what led to the atrocities inflicted on the Jews in the holocaust in Nazi Germany. And so it is very pertinent in my view that the understanding and proper defining of human nature stand at the very inception of any discipline among the humanities.

It is not untrue that most books on management will have a very humanistic and liberal view of human nature. This is because of the above-mentioned inheritance by modern management theories from the liberal social and libertarian movements in Western political and ethical philosophies around the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. Taken on face value it may be really difficult to see what is so wrong about such a generous and humanistic view of human nature. Libertarians like Humboldt, anarchists like Bakunin, socialists like Proudhon, and the like, would invariably define humans as essentially free, creative agents whose intrinsic purpose is to explore their own capacities to the highest physical, artistic, and spiritual possibilities in an environment of freedom and free association. Such views are theoretically held but practically ignored for no simpler reason than that taken to their literal implication and application they would make a large-scale industrial capitalism impossible to practise.

For all intents and purposes, as Peter Drucker clearly elucidates as shown in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, management looks at human beings as agents working in a collective, serving their own needs by jointly serving the needs of the society in which they live and function. This society is mainly being driven by a few individuals with high concentration of wealth—in the form of the four factors of production; five if knowledge is included as a factor. Thus human beings, in the final analysis, are nothing but objects to be managed and manipulated so as to serve the needs of the few that control the very drive of society. That this problem, the problem of human manipulation, is mainly due to a misunderstanding of human nature, is what I am trying to point out. It is not to be understood that the essay is advocating a class-less socialist utopia or a government control of all resources and modes of production of society as communism advocates. Those alternatives have, in the course of history, produced blunders and laid human life to waste as much as capitalist ones. The essay holds that no matter what alternative you choose, the only surety for its success—in human and ethical terms and not just in terms of efficiency—is the proper understanding of human nature.

The Vedantic Answer

The human being is not an object. In fact, to say the opposite is a contradiction in terms. Human beings are, severally speaking, subjects. The Vedanta philosophy principally holds that human beings are not just beings of flesh, blood, bones, and minds. They are seen to be rather spirits or souls. The primary function of the self or soul in man is that of the eternal witness. This has to be first understood epistemologically or cognitively.

Speaking from the theory of knowledge, an object is that which is perceived. In the human being there are five senses for this perception: the eye, the ear, the tongue, the nose, and the skin. With the help of these organs of perception 'we' gain knowledge or perceive things external to ourselves, thus making them the 'objects' of our knowledge or perception. If external reality is the object, the perceiver of this reality is the subject of this perception. In order to become an object, the entity has to be perceived by another, which itself is not perceived. This is a cardinal maxim of Vedantic cognitive theory. In order to better understand this subject-object divide, we need to study the *Drig-Drishya-Viveka*. But before that is done let me clear a few things and then proceed. The whole of reality is divided into subject and object—this rule applies to grammar too. The object is that which is being perceived or acted on and the subject is that which perceives and acts upon; more on this in the discussion that ensues below.

The Subject-Object Problem

Let us introduce a small thought experiment here. Let us say there are two entities in the universe: an eye and a stone. The eye sees the stone and knows it and its various characteristics. In this case the eye is the subject of perception and the stone is the object. The eye here cannot see itself—which will make it an object of knowledge and not the subject—for it requires itself for all

seeing to happen. Now let me introduce a third entity into this imaginary universe of ours: mind. When the cognition of the mind is introduced we find that the pure subjecthood of the eye is gone and the eye along with the stone becomes an object of knowledge. The mind can know the eye, the dimness of its sight, the strength of its vision, or simply its very existence. This makes the eye an object of the knowledge of the mind. Here, the ultimate subject seems to be the mind. For it knows the other entities—thus making them the objects of knowledge—and itself remains unknown to them or even by itself—for it forms its own basis for all mental knowing. Now let me introduce a fourth element into our analogy: consciousness. Even the mind, we observe, is subject to our knowledge. We know when the mind is awake or asleep, when it is attentive, when disturbed, and when in other states. That which shines its torch of knowledge even on the mind is consciousness, on which no other torch can be shone because it acts as the fundamental basis of all other knowing.

Thus by a step-by-step method, we come to the conclusion that the real subject of all objects is consciousness, pure and simple. Consciousness is absolute and thus it can never be the object of knowledge. Thus the search for a subject of all other objects of knowledge—which itself can never be objectified—took the Vedic seers to this conclusion: consciousness. It is the ever-subjective and never-objectifiable subject and that is what you truly are. That is the real 'I' in the depth of the human person. The human subject is not the organ, the body, or even the mind, but that which is the knower and witness of all these. This unknowable, un-objectifiable, non-material, and immortal essence behind the gross outward manifestation is the truly human person.

It is this core of the person that the *Kena Upanishad* points towards in its opening verses: 'Willed by whom does the directed mind go towards its

object? ... Who is the effulgent being who directs the eyes and the ears?'³ And to this question, the Upanishad provides its answer in a rather elliptical and paradoxical fashion: 'He is the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, the Speech of speech' (1.2). So it is the knower of the knowers, the perceiver of the perceivers, and the subject of subjects, which is the impeller of all knowing and all action.


Human Implications

Human beings are naturally, racially, and socially various. But they are essentially one. They are of different colours, creeds, races, and financial and social backgrounds but these differences among them are what pertain to the outward and superficial aspect of the human, attributable to the mind and the body alone. The truly real aspect of the human being is beyond these ephemeral, bodily and other differences, and pertains to the eternal.

Here the conception of maya comes really handy. Because of ignorance, human beings fall prey to superimposition and confuse something for something else. The classical Vedantic allegory for this is the rope and the snake analogy. In the dark, one may misconstrue a rope as a snake, and thus try fleeing away from it. But if light were to shine on it, then the true nature of the entity would become manifest and our behaviour with respect to it would be altered radically—the radical nature of change caused by the force of the knowledge of truth. The false notion of the snake was superimposed on the rope due to ignorance. In the same way the truth of the human personality is superimposed by innumerable falsifications caused due to the ignorance inherent in our nature and due to the lack of light. The Upanishads abound with stories where a seeker asks the guru to locate what and where really the human being is, and many do the mistake of considering the body, the breath, or the mind to be the human person. The realised sage alone understands, as we understood

through our thought experiment above, that all these are objects of knowledge known and acted on by a separate subject which doesn't itself have a subject to know or act upon. The sage thus declares all these answers to be wrong as these instances are merely instances of the object, the 'that', and not of the subject, the 'I' which is what the human being truly is. Objectification—considering the object to be final—is seen to be the primary illusion.

Thus a truly sagacious person doesn't see human beings as being essentially objects but rather the eternal and unknown subjects within. But being bound in flesh and blood that humans are, they cannot but objectify other beings around them to some extent, but the difference here is that that is not according to the realised sage, the final reality of people. People of course are rich and poor, with haves and have-nots, but these are merely external, bodily, social, and their ultimately ephemeral characteristics, and not their ultimate subjective reality which is unknowable, un-objectifiable, and eternal.

This has incalculable implications for human relations, which is the fundamental subject of management. The view of humans as spiritual entities helps increase the possibility of genuine ethical and moral human relationships with them. Worker-friendly policies of the management based on the notion of human equality gets profound emphasis by being reinforced by a philosophy that looks at human nature in a radically subjective and consequently, in a highly positive and healthy perspective. This leads to a decrease in totalitarian and dictatorial management policies and an increase in humanitarian approaches to human management in social, political, or organisational frameworks. A truly holistic approach to human relations is hereby developed, leading to a vision of the human being as neither a tool of knowledge nor labour but as a human being alone, eternally infinite. 

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