Søren Kierkegaard has left insightful and penetrating texts on the inner life. He gave context to contemplation on and surrender to God. The awareness of agency in a spiritual aspirant creates the obstacle of letting the grace flow freely into one. The lily of the field and the bird of the air breathe a freedom that the conscious agency of a human being restrict. Jesus Christ, Ashtavakra Gita, the Bible, the Upanishads, and countless other spiritual tracts point to immense possibilities offered by an unrestricted spiritual life brought about by the complete rescindment of agency. Intrinsic to the sense of agency is the possibility of this freedom. This is brought out well in this new translation of the original Danish by Kierkegaard. Aphoristic in expression, profound in content, these words propel the reader to make profundity one’s nature. From the ‘domesticated Christianity’ that has led to an ‘established Christendom’ (xiii), Kierkegaard beckons us to let ‘Nature Point beyond Nature’ (vii). If ever the size of a book could be misleading it is here! One cannot read this book without getting pulled into an involuntary spell of meditation.

The one thing that always comes in the way of becoming free of any will is the great burden of desires. Kierkegaard informs us that ‘the wish is the consolation that disconsolateness invents’ (12). Kirmmse has retained the original mystique and poetry of Kierkegaard. That he has been able to do that in English is indeed a feat that deserves poignant accolades. Childlike simplicity is integral to the spiritual life of an aspirant. One has to practise this simplicity in order to eventually attain it. The child is sincerest as ‘the child never looks for an evasion or an excuse’ (14). Kirmmse has given us a most accessible primer to Kierkegaard through this translation. His masterly introduction locates the text and its author, and also gives a lucid preamble to Kierkegaard’s thought. He prepares the reader to wade through the eleven-volume Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks, of which Kirmmse is the general editor.

It is indubitable that Kirmmse is the best expounder of Kierkegaard; he doubles up as Kierkegaard’s modern pen. Who else can bring to English this wonderful truth: ‘Only the person who is joy itself becomes unconditionally joyful, and only by becoming unconditionally joyful does one become joy itself’ (75). The first discourse is about the birds and the lilies, but in essence, it is about silence. Kierkegaard emphasises that silence ‘expresses respect for God’ (29). The Upanishads talk about the choice between shreyas, the preferable and prayas, the pleasurable. This choice determines one’s proximity to God. We choose to be either with God or without God. It is human fallacy to think there is a middle path. As Swami Vivekananda echoes the sentiment found in many scriptures of world religions, one cannot worship both God and the world. Here too, Kierkegaard is profound in meaning: ‘God’s patience corresponds to human disobedience’ (62).

If one reads this book, or more likely, contemplates on its content, one would be wondering why is Kierkegaard not studied by all school or college students. While material enhancements have brought comfort to our lives, they have also made our hearts and thoughts narrower. Polarised beyond measure, the present-day youth needs to get a perspective on things and life, and
nothing can put things in perspective like this slim volume. The scripture loses its relevance and becomes meaningless if it is not practised. Kierkegaard emphasises the praxis of scripture: ‘The most important thing for the gospel is not to reprimand and scold; what is most important for the gospel is to get human beings to follow its guidance’ (38). This book inspires one to take the first step towards practising the guidelines and also to know more about Kierkegaard and what he has to say.

Editor
Prabuddha Bharata

Why Philosophize?
Jean-François Lyotard
Translated by Andrew Brown

Philosophy is seen as a dry business. It is often considered to be the pastime of overread zealots, who are desperate to have some fixed world view. In the same vein, many have stereotyped Jean-François Lyotard to be just a postmodern thinker. Lyotard was definitely one, no arguing that, but he was more importantly a great philosopher. This book that raises a pertinent question, a book that questions the very need for philosophy, is a timely addition to the library of all philosophers and philosophy students. Lyotard substitutes the almost cliché question, ‘What is philosophy?’ with the more far-reaching question, ‘Why philosophise?’ He does this because he is concerned that ‘philosophy misses itself’ (17).

This book is a translation of a typed text preserved at the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris. The text is the transcript of a series of lectures Lyotard gave to the students of Sorbonne University, Paris and the French original was first published only in 2012. Of the many merits of Andrew Brown’s translation, striking is his giving the French original of words that cannot be properly translated into English. Lyotard situates the need for philosophy in the more basic need for desire. He asks the important question: ‘Why desire?’ Lyotard contends that philosophy has gone out of the space of philosophy and has lost its form because the need for philosophy comes from the need to be, the need to exist.

While analysing the need for desire, Lyotard clarifies the contribution of Freud: ‘If … Freud’s work has had and continues to have the impact that you are aware of, this is definitely not because he put sexuality everywhere … rather, because Freud embarked on forging a link between sexual life and emotional life, social life, and religious life, and brought sexual life out of its ghetto’ (27). Lyotard intends to give a Freud insight to the need for philosophising: ‘What the philosopher desires is not that different desires be convinced and conquered, but that they be inflected and reflected’ (37). Philosophising, according to Lyotard, is a basic desire, and to question this desire is absurd. To him ‘to philosophise is to desire wisdom, it is to desire desire’ (38). He concludes that ‘we philosophise because it desires’ (43). To philosophise is to bring order and bring out philosophy that has become concealed, and lost unity.

Lyotard continues in this strain and positions speech as following thought and says ‘we need to realize that to think is already to speak’ (73). Lyotard emphasises the need for action but cautions: ‘If the world needs to be transformed, this is because it is already transformed. There is in the present something that announces, anticipates and beckons the future’ (112). Just as thought is integral to speech, it is integral to action: ‘Transformative action cannot manage without a “theory” in the true sense of the world (sic), in other words a speech that risks saying’ (113). Lyotard gives a wonderful summary of the need for philosophising: ‘So this is why we philosophize: because there is desire, because there is absence in presence, deadness in life … and finally because we cannot evade this: testifying to the presence of the lack with our speech’ (123). Lyotard ends his book by asking how is it possible to be without philosophy. That is the correct question to ask: how is it possible to be without thinking? This book is a welcome addition to the philosophy corpus and enlightens us on Lyotard’s early thoughts.

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