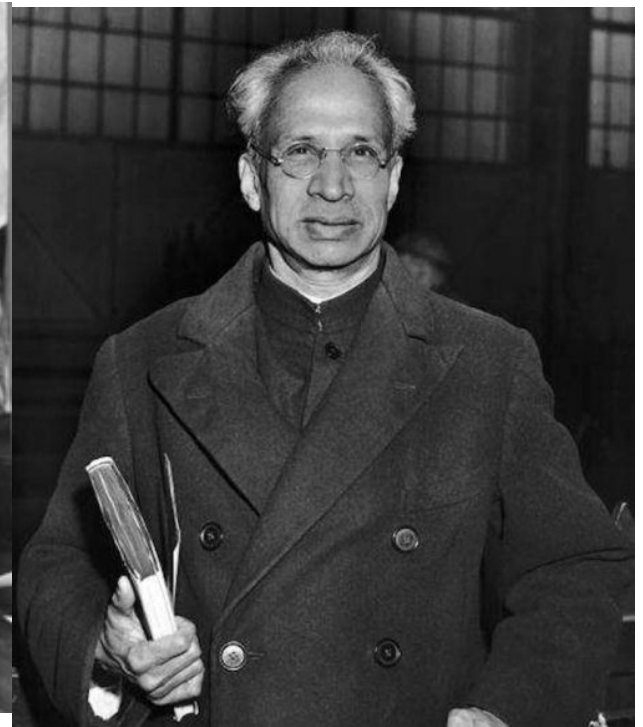


# Radhakrishnan and Comparative Philosophy

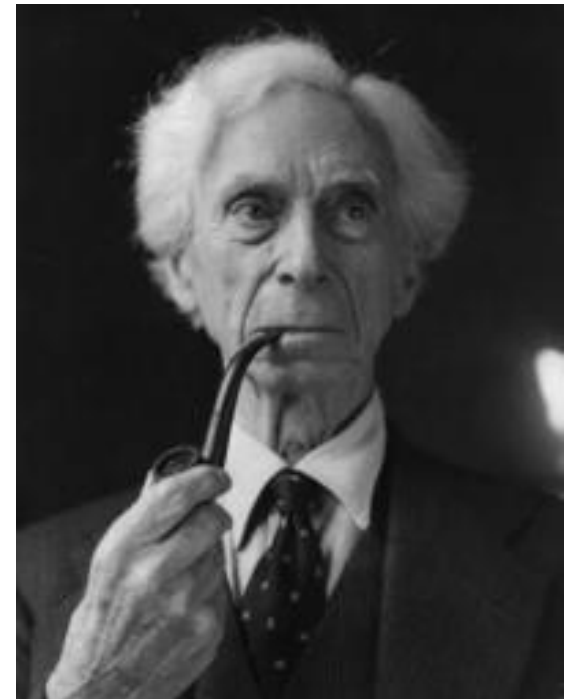


# Synthesis of eastern & western philosophy

Radhakrishnan represents a synthetic approach to philosophy, religion and spirituality. His life is a remarkable journey from poverty to the presidency of India. His ascendancy from these humble beginnings was animated by his powerful intellect and scholarship. Though he was born in colonial India and was a victim of Macaulay's system of education, he seems to have been immune from its deleterious effects. As we have seen, the dream of many Indians was to go to English universities and obtain their degree there and then come back to India to serve. Radhakrishnan did nothing of the kind. His entire education was in Madras and in fact, the reverse happened. His vast erudition, his mastery of Indian thought, his voluminous literary output attracted the attention of leading universities in England and so in 1936 he was invited by Oxford University as the Spalding Professor of Philosophy which he held for sixteen years from 1936 to 1952. He had to return to India in 1952 simply because Nehru offered him the vice-presidency and from 1962 to 1967, he became the President of India. India being a parliamentary democracy, the role of the president is symbolic, and often held by those who are great scholars and have the responsibility to oversee the workings of the parliament and ensure that it is according to the constitution.

# Bertrand Russell on Radhakrishnan

When he became the President of India, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell remarked that “It is an honor to philosophy that Dr. Radhakrishnan should be the president of India and I, as a philosopher, take special pleasure in this. Plato aspired for philosophers to become kings and it is a tribute to India that she should make a philosopher, her president.” (Murty and Vohra, 154)



---

# Radhakrishnan's response

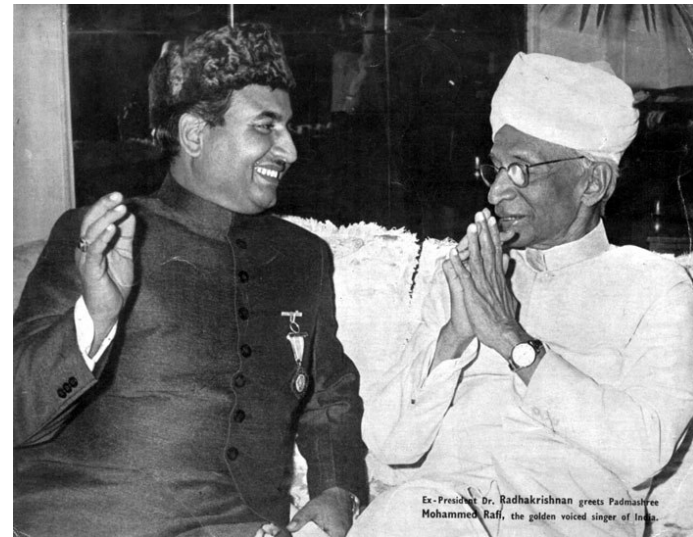
The invoking of Plato's name with the ideal of the philosopher-king, immediately evoked a response. Citing the examples of Sri Krishna and Janaka, who were both kings and philosophers well before the time of Plato, he said, "Generally, wherever addresses are presented to me, Plato is brought out as one who said that philosophers should rule the state. This is not a Platonic axiom. It is something common to all great cultures. In our own country, we said that thinkers must also act ... Even Sri Krishna and Janaka were men not only of philosophical wisdom but also of practical efficiency. We should also behave in the same way. So the Platonic axiom is something which is common to all great cultures. ... We must have vision, we must have practical work ... Once you have the vision, you must try to transform the vision into reality, by efforts, dedicated work. ... All students of philosophy are called upon not merely to interpret but to change the world, not only to exert their vision but also to exert honest service, honest dedication." (Murty and Vohra, 155)

---



# Radhakrishnan's idealism

Thus, Radhakrishnan combined idealism and internationalism in his global outlook. He was also India's ambassador to the Soviet Union in the 1950's and he used this position to promote world unity and international dialogue, building a bridge of understanding between the east and west, north and the south. In 1954, he was awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest honour, for his contributions both to India and the world. In 1975, he was awarded the Templeton Prize for his humanitarian work. He died shortly after receiving this award on April 17, 1975 in Mylapore, a suburb of Madras.



Ex-President Dr. Radhakrishnan greets Padmasree Mohammed Rafi, the golden voiced singer of India.

---

# His response to Christianity

Summarising Radhakrishnan and his life, Gopal wrote that “a philosopher, like any other thinker, is influenced by his environment. Radhakrishnan’s early writings are set in the context of British rule in India, with Christianity appearing as an alien ideological force making unreasonable demands and many scholars writing off the thought of India as having nothing positive to contribute to the world. In reaction, Radhakrishnan’s creative impulse was inspired by the passion of Indianness. His study of Indian philosophy served as cultural therapy. Finding his country trapped in Western paradigms of thought, he turned the bars into gates by interpreting Indian thought in Western terms and showing that it was imbued with reason and logic as any intellectual system anywhere. In this sense he restored India to Indians and helped them to recover their mental self-esteem. But he also made clear to them that their long and rich tradition had been arrested and required innovation and further evolution.” (Gopal, 366) His facile pen was indeed mightier than any sword.

---

# Tirutani and Tirupati

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was born in 1888 in the south Indian town of Tirutani. He went to school in Tirupati, famous for its Venkateswara Temple. He was one of eight children and the family lived in extreme poverty. In spite of their poverty, the parents made every effort to get their children educated. When Radhakrishnan was seventeen, they enrolled him in the Madras Christian College for his higher education. But how did he come to philosophy?





---

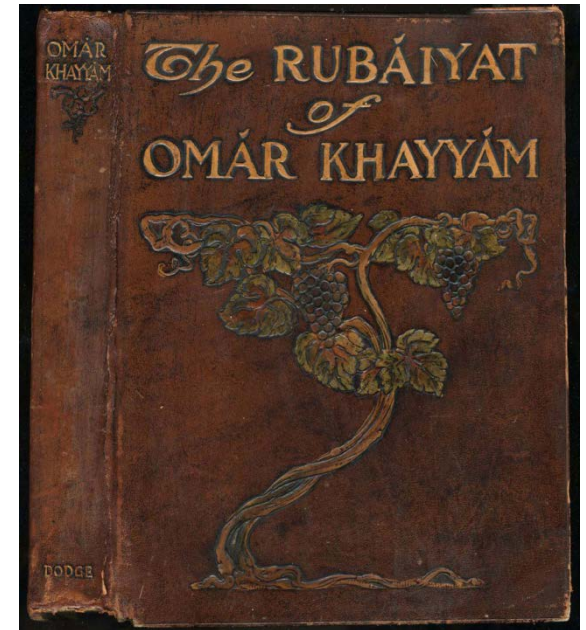
# How Radhakrishnan came to philosophy

Radhakrishnan explains that while he “was vacillating about the choice of a subject from out of the five options of mathematics, physics, biology, philosophy and history, a cousin of mine, who took his degree that year, passed on his textbooks in philosophy to me ... and that decided my future interest.” (Schilpp, 6) Thus, too poor to buy books, he took his cousin’s books and began an ardent study of the subject saving himself considerable money. Reflecting further on this episode, he continued, “To all appearance this is a mere accident. But when I look at the series of accidents that have shaped my life, I am persuaded that there is more in this life than meets the eye. Life is not a mere chain of physical causes and effects. Chance seems to form the surface of reality, but deep down other forces are at work. If the universe is a living one, if it is spiritually alive, nothing in it is merely accidental. ‘The moving finger writes and having writ moves on.’ ” (Schilpp, 6)

---



# The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam



This last sentence is characteristic of the wit and wisdom of Radhakrishnan. It is from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. "The Moving Finger writes, and having writ, moves on: nor all the piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all the tears wash out a word of it."

# Philosophy as a pilgrimage and function of life

Regarding the purpose of philosophy, he viewed it not just as an interpretation of life, but rather a method to change life according to a higher ideal. Thus, one can discern idealism at the core of Radhakrishnan's philosophy. He wrote, "Although in one sense philosophy is a lonely pilgrimage of the spirit, in another sense it is a function of life." (Schlipp, 6)

He saw the twentieth century in a meaningful and significant way against the landscape of world history. Though colonialism rooted in economic exploitation had its negative side, it also had a positive side in that it brought diverse cultures together. "The prominent feature of our time is not so much the wars and the dictatorships which have disfigured it, but the impact of different cultures on one another, their interaction, and the emergence of a new civilisation based on the truths of spirit and the unity of mankind." (Schlipp, 7) This is how Radhakrishnan viewed the British rule of India. For him, the time has come for a world philosophy where we combine "the best of European humanism and Asiatic Religion, a philosophy profounder and more living than either, endowed with greater spiritual and ethical force, which will conquer the hearts of men and compel peoples to acknowledge its sway." (Schlipp, 7)

# East-West synthesis

Radhakrishnan's vision of a world philosophy was rooted in a deep study of both eastern and western thought. His synthetic mind could survey the panorama of philosophy and extract its essential meaning. He refused to be seduced by one system or one thinker. "If we take any philosopher as a *guru*, if we treat his works as gospel, if we make of his teaching a religion complete with dogma and exegesis, we may become members of the congregation of the faithful, but will not possess the openness of mind essential for a critical understanding of the master's views." (Schlipp, 8) This has been the essential message from time immemorial. Quoting the Bhagavad Gita and especially the last verse spoken by Sri Krishna, Radhakrishnan underscores its central message that each individual must learn to think for themselves and after having reasoned it out, move into the field of action: *yathā icchasi tathā kuru* <sup>1</sup>





---

# Faith and philosophy

The traditions that we grow up in lead to instinctual behaviour. There may be security in the herd. But the true philosopher must rise above this mentality. "Tradition in human life takes the place of instinct in animals," wrote Radhakrishnan. "We are all born to our traditions. ... Insofar as a person lives according to tradition and obeys it instinctively, he leads a life of faith, of a believer. The need for philosophy arises when faith in tradition is shaken." (Schlipp, 9)

India is a land steeped in tradition. Radhakrishnan was fully aware of this when he entered the Madras Christian College. He saw it as an opportunity to learn about other perspectives. Speaking about his teachers, he wrote that "they were teachers of philosophy, commentators, interpreters, apologists for the Christian way of thought and life, but were not, in the strict sense of the term, seekers of truth. By their criticism of Indian thought they disturbed my faith and shook the traditional props on which I leaned." (Schlipp, 9)

---

# Inheriting the greatest of thought

Thus, he viewed his education as an opportunity to not only learn about the greatest of European thought, but also to critically examine Indian philosophy. He realised that in its long meandering journey through history, Indian philosophy, though rooted in logical and disciplined reason, had in the course of time adopted “many arbitrary and fanciful theories and is full of shackles which constrict the free life of the spirit.” (Schlipp, 9) The time is now ripe when each of us can “become the inheritors of world’s thought.”



---

# Ancient and modern Indian philosophy

In 1909, at the age of twenty-one, Radhakrishnan took up a position as a teacher of philosophy in the Madras Presidency College where he worked for the next seven years. During that time, he studied the classical texts of Hinduism, beginning with the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, as well as the commentaries on the Brahma Sutra by the principal philosophers of antiquity such as Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka and others. He also studied deeply Buddhism and Jainism. With respect to Western philosophy, he began with Plato and Plotinus and then moved on to Kant, then Bradley and Bergson. Being a contemporary of Gandhi and Tagore, Radhakrishnan saw yet another great opportunity for learning. He could see how the ancient thought can be applied to the modern context. "My relations with my great Indian contemporaries, Tagore and Gandhi, were most friendly for nearly thirty years, and I realise the tremendous significance they had for me." (Schlipp, 10) Though he admired great thinkers, past and present, he was a follower of none.

---



# Learning from others

Radhakrishnan wrote, "I do not suggest that I refused to learn from others or that I was not influenced by them. While I was greatly stimulated by the minds of all those whom I studied, my thought does not comply with any fixed traditional pattern. For my thinking had another source and proceeded from my own experience, which is not quite the same as what is acquired by mere study and reading." (Schlipp,10) Thus the synthetic mind of Radhakrishnan fused the greatest thoughts of the past in the crucible of his own personal experience and thus forged a grander view of life. It is this view that we will now delineate.



---

# On reading a book

In the midst of his childhood poverty, Radhakrishnan found solace in reading and study. To him, reading was a meditative process because it offered the opportunity for reflection and understanding. He would later say, "Reading a book gives us the habit of solitary reflection and true enjoyment." In his readings, he always divested himself of any pre-conceived notions about the topic and tried to see the philosophy as objectively as possible. He wrote, "When we think we know, we cease to learn." Thus, he began his ardent and academic study of all the ancient Indian philosophies, understanding their essential ideas and seeing them as part of a vast mosaic of the human aspiration and the search for understanding.

---

---

# Fragments of a confession

In his semi-autobiographical work “Fragments of a Confession”, Radhakrishnan wrote, “The debt we owe to our spiritual ancestors is to study them. Traditional continuity is not mechanical reproduction; it is creative transformation, an increasing approximation to the ideal of truth. Life goes on not by repudiating the past but by accepting it and weaving it into the future in which the past undergoes a rebirth.” (Schlipp, 10) Pursuing his graduate studies in the midst of India’s independence struggle and against the backdrop of the First World War, Radhakrishnan saw his scholarship in a larger context as being “essential not only for the revival of the Indian nation but also for the re-education of the human race.”

---



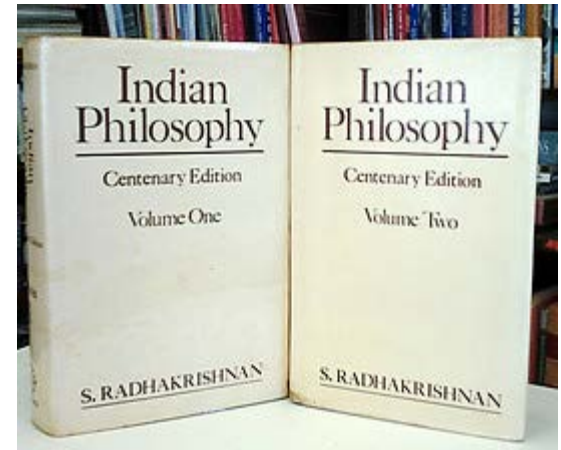
---

# Ethics of Vedanta Philosophy

His thesis dealing with the ethics of Vedānta philosophy was a response to an attack by Christian missionaries that without a Personal God there can be no basis for ethical behaviour. He later wrote reflecting on his early period that “the challenge of Christian critics impelled me to make a study of Hinduism and find out what is living and what is dead in it. My pride as a Hindu, roused by the enterprise and eloquence of Swami Vivekananda, was deeply hurt by the treatment accorded to Hinduism in missionary institutions.” (Brown, 153) Thus, he viewed the missionary attacks in a positive way. They enabled him to study both eastern and western thought and develop a mode of comparative philosophy and religion.

---

# Two-volume work on Indian Philosophy



In 1917, he was invited by J.H. Muirhead to write a two-volume survey of Indian philosophy. This was a difficult task and Radhakrishnan felt it cannot be done by a single person. Yet, he took on the difficult task. Regarding this mission, he wrote, “Historical writing is a creative activity. It is different from historical research. By the latter we acquire a knowledge of the facts in their proper succession, the raw material. It is the task of historical writing to understand these facts and give us a feel of the past, communicate to us the vibration of life.” (Schlipp, 11) Underscoring the method of knowledge by identity, he wrote that when writing about ancient philosophers and their philosophies, “we must learn to feel and understand their world even as they felt and understood it, never approaching them with condescension or contempt.” (Schlipp, 12)

---

# Systems are complementary not contradictory

How then does one begin such a narrative? Looking at several millenia of Indian philosophy, Radhakrishnan realised that it was not a progression of ideas and systems “where systems succeeded each other in intelligible order.” Rather, each system was a response to a need of the time and one must view it in the natural landscape of the historical and cultural evolution of the society that gave birth to it. Each system was to be judged “on the basis of their finest inspirations.” He devised a comparative method of study of these philosophies and found that their differences were “complementary, not contradictory.” (Schlipp, 13)

---



---

# The comparative method

He emphasized that this approach was the need of the time in the new emerging world of the twentieth century. He wrote, “the comparative method is relevant in the present context, when the stage is set, if not for the development of a world philosophy, at least for that of a world outlook. The different parts of the world cannot anymore develop separately and in independence of each other.” (Schlipp, 13) The nations of the world have become interdependent. Thus, it was important that we understand each other. This shows the importance of the scholar who can give a faithful and simple expression of the thought and feeling of his or her expertise.

---

# The Spalding Professorship

After this two-volume work was completed, Radhakrishnan was recognized for his vast erudition and was invited to Oxford University and given the Spalding Chair of Philosophy. He held this position for sixteen years, from 1936 to 1952. He had to resign from the Chair only to accept the vice-presidency of India at the request of the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. His life and thought demonstrate the invincible power of the scholar and its role in human evolution.



---

# The comparative method of study

The two world wars and their aftermath form the background for the evolution of Radhakrishnan's philosophy. He wrote, "My one supreme interest has been to try to restore a sense of spiritual values to the millions of religiously displaced persons, who have been struggling to find precarious refuges in the emergency camps of Art and Science, of Fascism and Nazism, of Humanism and Communism. The first step to recovery is to understand the nature of the confusion of thought which absorbs the allegiance of millions of men. Among the major influences which foster a spirit of scepticism in regard to religious truth are the growth of the scientific spirit, the development of a technological civilisation, a formal or artificial religion which finds itself in conflict with an awakened social conscience, and a comparative study of religions." (Schlipp, 14) It is because religions do not adapt to these challenges that they become extinct or irrelevant.

---



# Vivekananda on three components of religion

Vivekananda identified three components in every religion. They are philosophy, mythology and ritual. Often, these three are not clearly defined or delineated. The essence of a religion is its philosophy, the core spiritual values that enable communities to live in harmony and not in conflict. But the rituals which may have been useful in the past are no longer effective and thus one needs to modify these in the course of time. Indian philosophy distinguishes *sruti* and *smriti*. The former represents the core eternal values essential for sustaining human society for all time (such as ethical and moral principles embodied in the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you). This is what is meant by the word *sruti*. By contrast, *smriti* is really a code of rituals and injunctions that may have been valid at one time are no longer valid now. The inability to distinguish these two elements and to adapt the *smriti* with the changing times leads to religious conflict and to the irrelevance of religion. The modern era is dominated by the scientific temper and any belief if it cannot withstand scientific scrutiny, must be discarded.

---

# Science and philosophy

It is thus with this view that Radhakrishnan approached his exegesis of comparative philosophy. He wrote, "From the time Copernicus removed the earth from the centre of the universe, the primacy of man in the universe has disappeared. Till Galileo founded modern mathematical physics, the mathematically exact movements of the heavenly bodies were traced to psychic forces, supernatural agents, a vast hierarchy of angelic beings who inhabit the stars and control our destiny." (Schlipp, 14) This was a shock to modern man who realised that the earth was no longer the center of the universe, but rather a tiny speck in the vast ocean of the cosmos. Another shock came from biology when Darwin wrote his celebrated "Origin of the Species" in which he gave experimental evidence of the evolution of the human being from the animal world, implying that the human being has an animal component prone to violence and destruction. In the twentieth century dominated by European imperial forces that promoted a Christian world-view, Galileo and Darwin shattered time-honored Biblical cosmology and man's place in it. According to Radhakrishnan, a third blow came from psychology with Freud and Jung showing that man was not a master of his own mind and that there were irrational forces lurking within him.

---

# The universality of science

Radhakrishnan identifies the positive and negative aspects of the scientific world-view. He writes that “the most remarkable feature of the scientific culture is its universality. it is one, though its achievements may be in different places and by different persons. There are no competing scientific cultures as there are competing religions or competing codes of law. In the geographical sense also it is universal, in that it has penetrated all parts of the world. Nature is one, and therefore science is one. A universal human community is the social aspiration of science.” (Schlipp, 17)

On the other hand, science does not seem to give us any comprehensive world view or the meaning of life. With a tinge of sarcasm, Radhakrishnan writes that according to science, “all that remains for man to do is to be born, to grow up, to earn and to spend, to mate, to produce offspring, to grow old, and at last to sleep forever, safe in the belief that there is no purpose to be served in life except the fulfilment of the needs of man set in a vast and impersonal framework of mechanical processes. The earth turns, the stars blaze and die, and man need not waste his thought on seeking a different destiny.” (Schlipp, 17)



---

# Science and moral and ethical values

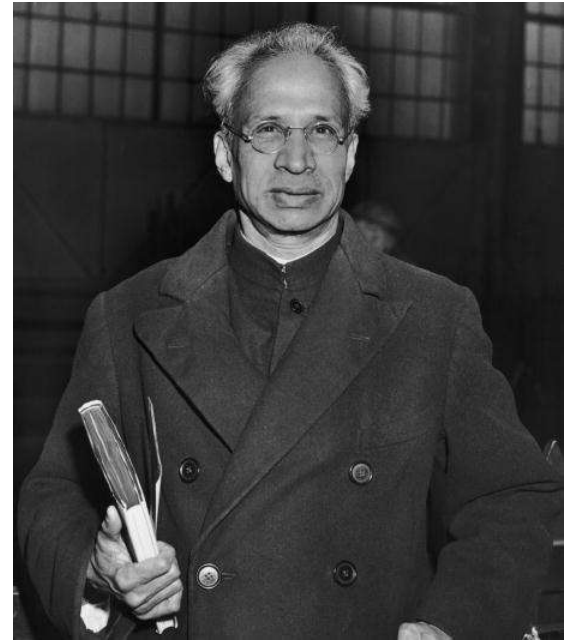
Neither does science bestow upon us the wisdom to use the energies that it has unleashed. It disavows any responsibility on the moral and ethical uses of its discoveries. Does this mean that these ethical and moral values must be provided by religion and philosophy? Perhaps. But in the present climate of warring religions, it is unlikely that any religion can answer to this challenge. The answer, according to Radhakrishnan, must come from a critical philosophical analysis of the situation.

Surveying history and looking at previous eras, Radhakrishnan observes that “man, not the machine, was still the master. Today the machine has become the dominating factor of civilisation.” (Schlipp, 20) The triumph of the machine is embodied in the industrial revolution. “The application of machines to agriculture and industry has revolutionised the conditions of life. *If we have the will*, it is possible to eliminate from the world, hunger, want, poverty, disease, ignorance. We are capable of nourishing, clothing and housing every inhabitant of the earth.” (Schlipp, 20)

---

# The collective will is lacking

The problem is that we don't seem to have the will. Diagnosing this disease, Radhakrishnan writes, "What is wrong is not technology but the social and cultural life of man, its purely industrial and utilitarian view of life, its cult of power and comfort." (Schlipp, 20) Technological advances took place in a world deficient in moral and ethical values. "A society spiritually and ethically enfeebled allowed the development of great industries without proper safeguards."



# The challenge of technology

Perhaps Gandhi saw this when he advocated the use of the spinning wheel and the promotion of cottage industries. However noble such an endeavour had been and whatever symbolic value it had in the Indian independence struggle, Radhakrishnan does not see a future where we would go back to such a Gandhian ideal. He suggests that we look at the whole process critically and see what it has done and what it is doing to the human being. The juggernaut of technology has not brought prosperity to the masses nor has it given them freedom as promised. Rather, it brought “all the evils of class distinction of rich and poor, advanced and backward nations ... There is concentration of productive power and wealth in a few hands or their monopolization by a State bureaucracy.” Identifying a violation of the Gandhian theorem regarding the ends and the means, Radhakrishnan noted, “The means have become more important than the ends. Men are being used for the production of material goods at the expense of their mental and physical health. The machine invented by man now controls his will.” (Schlipp, 21) Today, with the rise of artificial intelligence, human beings may very well lose their means of vocation. This is a danger that was also highlighted by the late astrophysicist, Stephen Hawking.



---

# Religion: the positive and negative

Radhakrishnan identifies that the root of the problem is the spiritual crisis of man. "As our enslavement to the economic machine is rising, human values are declining. We are at war with others because we are at war with ourselves." (Schlipp, 22)

Surveying the whole of history, he sees that religion has been both positive and negative in its influence on human society. On the one hand, it had a great civilising force and "inspired spiritual life, encouraged the arts, disciplined the mind and fostered the virtues of charity and peace." On the other hand, it had a negative feature as it has "filled the world with wars and tortured the souls and burnt the bodies of men." (Schlipp, 24) In many ways, religions as they have been functioning are the problem. They have not been made scientific, nor have they risen to have a global view to approach the psychological needs of the human race. Because of this incoherence in world religions, there is now a certain indifference. With his characteristic wit, Radhakrishnan writes, "some think God exists, some think not, it is impossible to tell, but it does not matter." (Schlipp, 25)

---

---

# A collective rational purpose

What is now needed is a collective rational purpose. "We need a philosophy, a direction and a hope, if the present state of indecision is not to lead us to despair." (Schlipp, 25) He sought a spiritual interpretation of the universe in which the world is a process. "The world process is not an incessant fluctuation comparable to a surging sea. It is a movement with a direction and a goal." (Schlipp, 27)

He saw Darwin's theory of evolution as a component of a larger theory of evolution proposed in the ancient Upanishads. "The idea of evolution is not unknown to Indian thinkers, though they conceived it as a metaphysical hypothesis rather than as an empirically verified theory. If the cosmos is a process, what is it that proceeds, and what is its destination? In the ancient Upanishad, the *Taittirīya* (eighth century BCE), cosmic evolution is represented by the five stages of matter (anna), life (prāna), perceptual-instinctive consciousness (manas), reflective consciousness (vijñāna), and the spiritual or creative consciousness (ānanda). In the cosmic process we have the successive emergence of the material, the organic, the animal, the human and the spiritual orders of existence." (Schlipp, 27)

---

---

# The psycho-physical process of evolution

So in Radhakrishnan's philosophy, evolution is series of overlapping gradations, matter and life, life and mind, mind and intelligence, intelligence and spirit. The narrow scientific view that the human being is a random, chance event he sees as dangerous and pernicious. In fact, he sees it in more dire terms as threatening the existence of the human race. The individual is not insignificant nor is he just an animal in the larger animal kingdom. To extrapolate the law of the jungle as a law for human societies as manifested by theories of social Darwinism in the age of imperialism is a fundamental error. Citing the example of Nazi Germany, Radhakrishnan wrote, "Hitler, for example, argued that the individual is nothing, it is the group that counts. Nature, he argued in his *Mein Kampf*, is ruthless in regard to individual lives and considerate only for the development of the species. He thought of man as merely the highest of animals. "It is not necessary that any of us should live, " he said. "it is only necessary that Germany should live." " (Schlipp, 28)

---



---

# Colonialism and the Second World War

The Second World War is largely a war among colonial powers. After having carved out Asia and Africa, one of them decided to expand their empire into Europe! The horrors of that war and its aftermath, the unleashing of atomic weapons, should be a wake up call for the entire human race, according to Radhakrishnan. To extrapolate the course of human destiny from biology is a fundamental error. "History is not a branch of biology," he wrote. "The drama of human personalities is distinct from life in the animal kingdom. Social sciences which deal with the story of man in society are a separate category from natural sciences." (Schlipp, 29)

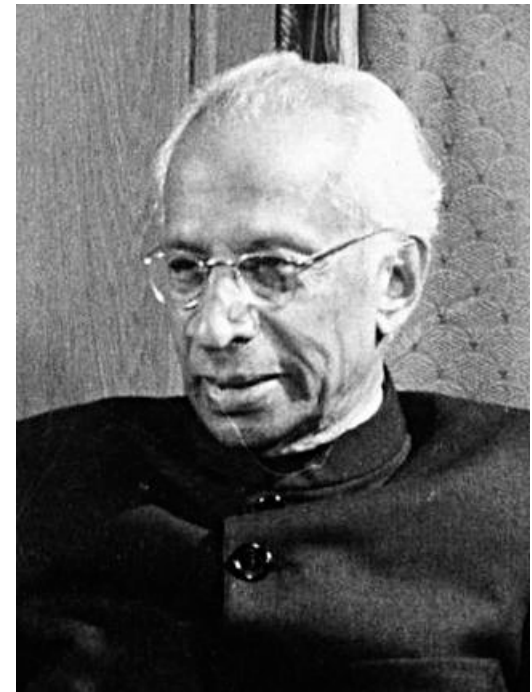
In the evolutionary spectrum of consciousness as delineated by the Taittirīya Upanishad, Radhakrishnan sees that the human being is now at the interface between mind and intelligence. The human struggle represented by current history is a struggle to rise to the level of intelligence. "Men have a restless reaching out for ideals. The human individual has to work his evolution consciously and deliberately. His growth is not effected fortuitously or automatically. He has to act responsibly and co-operate willingly with the purpose of evolution." (Schlipp, 29)

---



# Man is a transitional being

Echoing Aurobindo's view that man is a transitional being, Radhakrishnan writes, "Looking back on the millions of years of the steady climb of life on the path of evolution, it seems presumptuous for us to imagine that with thinking man evolution has come to an end. The Upanishad affirms that there is a further step to be taken. Animal cunning has become human foresight; human self-consciousness must grow into comprehensive vision, into illumined consciousness." (Schlipp, 29)



# The present mercantile civilization

The present mercantile civilization is not the summum bonum of human evolution. Today, we have not only the dangers of atomic weapons but also the dangers, both seen and unseen, of artificial intelligence. With his caustic wit, Aurobindo laments "this perfection of machinery will not allow the soul to remember that it is not itself a machine." He then asks, "Is this then the end of the long march of human civilisation, this spiritual suicide, this quiet petrification of the soul into matter? Was the successful businessman that grand culmination of manhood toward which evolution was striving? After all, if the scientific view is correct, why not? An evolution that started with the protoplasm and flowered in the ourang-outang and the chimpanzee, may well rest satisfied with having created hat, coat and trousers, the British Aristocrat, the American Capitalist ... For these, I believe are the chief triumphs of the European enlightenment to which we bow our heads. For these Augustus created Europe, Charlemagne refounded civilisation, Louis XIV regulated society, Napoleon systematised the French Revolution. For these Goethe thought, Shakespeare imagined and created, St. Francis loved, Christ was crucified." (Aurobindo, Vol. 3, 454)

---

# The meaning of history

In Radhakrishnan's view, history has a meaning. It is a process to transform the animal man into the human being and then the human being into the spiritual being. But this will not happen if we do not bring into our life reflective consciousness. "The infinitely rich and spiritually impregnated future, this drama of the gradual transmutation of intellect into spirit, of the son of man into the son of God, is the goal of history." (Schlipp, 30) One of the tendencies of the human being, Radhakrishnan says, is to apply an idea in one branch of knowledge which has been useful to all other areas of knowledge in the hope of finding a comprehensive theory. "In the eighteenth century Laplace conceived a theory of world mechanics. In the nineteenth century the Darwinian principle of natural selection was extended to all phenomena ... We can explain the lower by the higher, not *vice versa*. There is not a single type of law to which all existence conforms." (Schlipp, 31)

---

---

# History as “spirit working through matter”

It is this historical error that is leading to conflicts. The spiritual dimension of the human being must be acknowledged. This was recognized by some of the great ancient civilisations and is not unique to India. “The Upanisads believe that the principle of Spirit is at work at all levels of existence, moulding the lower forms into expressions of the higher. The splendour of Spirit, which in Greek philosophy was identified with the transcendental and timeless world of Ideas, or in Christian thought is reserved for the divine supernatural sphere, is making use of natural forces in the historical world. ... Spirit is working in matter that matter may serve the Spirit.” (Schlipp, 31)

---



# The three components of Nature

Nature has three components: physical, biological and psychological. Through mathematics, quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity, science has penetrated into the understanding of the laws of physical nature. The laws of biological nature are just beginning to be unravelled through the discovery of DNA and how it operates. As for psychological laws, we have not even scratched the surface. The present growth of artificial intelligence is predicated by a mechanical view of the human being. The potential dangers of this current trend have already been highlighted by physicists such as Stephen Hawking.

The laws that govern the physical, biological and psychological worlds were subsumed in Indian philosophy as the law of *karma*. This is essentially the law of cause and effect. In Indian thought, *karma* plays an essential role especially in deposing God as an “Absolute Monarch” rewarding some and punishing others. Underlining this idea, Radhakrishnan writes, “In this world there are no rewards or punishments but only consequences. There is no arbitrariness in this world. The laws of nature are expressions of the divine mind.” (Schlipp, 42)

---

# Determinism and free will

The problem of determinism and free will has always perplexed philosophers from time immemorial. Radhakrishnan admits that there is an element of choice mingled with our consciousness. The exercise of choice, energized and directed by higher knowledge, is the essence of *karma yoga*. “When we are self-willed we surrender to the restraint exercised by the play of mechanical forces. We are then victims of Karma. We are free to do differently. We can turn our eyes towards the Light in prayer, make an effort of genuine attention to empty our mind of selfish desires and let the thought of the Eternal fill it. We will then bear within us the very power to which necessity or Karma is in subjection.” (Schlipp, 43)

---

---

# Karma, *kāma* and moksha

The cycle of karma is caused by *kāma*, or selfish desire. This has been the eternal refrain of the Upanishads and was also the message of the Buddha who “declared that all suffering is due to ignorance of the impersonal nature of things and selfish craving. When we are the victims of ignorance, we absolutise our own ego, oppose it to society and miss our moral vocation. Ignorance is not something outside of man. he lives in it, for it is that in which historical man is involved.” That is, the burden of the past is our ignorance. Being unaware of our higher potential is ignorance. And the drama of human life is meant to reveal this universal truth about the human being. “So long as he lives his unregenerate life in time, the life of craving and aversion, suffering will be his lot. ... But he can free himself from suffering, by the awareness of eternity, by the enlightenment that liberates the ego and transfigures its temporal experience.” (Schlipp, 49)

Thus, Radhakrishnan sees that the drama of human life is an evolution towards freedom, *moksha*. Even atheism, he says, is a declaration of independence, a movement towards freedom. But the underlying theme is one of learning. “The purpose of the trials and temptations is not that we may fall but that we may rise.” (Schlipp, 51)

---

---

# Spirituality as an attitude and not a goal

In Radhakrishnan's philosophy, spirituality is not a goal but an attitude augmented by learning. Surveying the present predicament of man, torn apart by religious and political conflicts, he writes, "The arrogant dislike of other religions has today given place to respectful incomprehension. It is time we accustom ourselves to fresh ways of thinking and feeling. The interpenetration of obstinate cultural traditions is taking place before our eyes. ... Mankind is still in the making. The new world society requires a new world outlook based on respect for and understanding of other cultural traditions." (Schlipp, 73)

---



# Reflections on his life

Reflecting on his life as India's ambassador, Radhakrishnan wrote, "While I never felt attracted to travelling for its own sake, I have travelled a great deal and lived in places far from home, In England and France, America and Russia. ... The qualities of the English people such as their love of justice, their hatred of doctrinairism, their sympathy for the underdog, made an impression on me. ...Whatever one may feel about the character of the Russian Government, the people there are kindly and human and their lives are filled as anywhere else with jokes and jealousies, loves and hates. Though I have not been able to take root in any of these foreign countries, I have met many, high and low, and learned to feel the human in them. There are no fundamental differences among the peoples of the world. They have all the deep human feelings, the craving for justice above all class interests, horror of bloodshed and violence. They are working for a religion which teaches the possibility and the necessity of man's union with himself, with nature, with his fellowmen, and with the Eternal Spirit of which the visible universe is but a manifestation and upholds the emergence of a complete consciousness as the destiny of man." (Schlipp, 81)

This summarises Radhakrishnan's universal philosophy. He had the firm conviction that such a world-view is essential for the future of the human race. Man is still in his infancy. The future requires a global philosophy.

# Epilogue

In Radhakrishnan's world view, philosophy is more of an attitude, rooted in a scientific approach regarding different philosophies and religions. A comparative study of these will enable us to extract what is positive in them and discard the negative. This synthesis must be done from a global perspective, to preserve the entire human race. Life has a meaning and that is for the human being to realise divinity. Idealism matters.

