

## **Limitations of Man**

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December 13, 2009 (Sunday)

## Introduction

The topic of his existence has always intrigued man and several books have been written on this subject. A popular book entitled – *Man, the unknown*, was authored by Dr. Alexis Carrel in 1935. In his book, Dr. Carrel tried to explore why man was still an unknown entity and suggested that a very learned scholar be deputed for the next 25 years to study all aspects concerning human life. This he indicated would unveil facts about the existence of man and provide an answer to ‘*Who am I?*’

Unfortunately, this observation of Dr. Carrel was a mere supposition. This is because the study of man’s existence was not a new phenomenon even then. Since time immemorial, great minds have striven to find the answers to the mysteries of human existence - both at individual and universal level. For example, the renowned British philosopher, Bertrand Russell (d. 1970) dedicated eighty years of his life in extensive study and research work but the philosophy he developed, earned him the title of ‘*philosopher of no-philosophy*.’ Likewise, several eminent reformers and thinkers attempted to address existential issues but their thoughts and ideas could not garner a consensus amongst the intelligentsia.

The failure to fathom his existence is attributable to man’s inherent limitations. According to Einstein, knowledge possessed by man is restricted within the realm of space and time. This can be explained using a simple illustration. If two trains running on parallel tracks are heading at the *same speed and in opposite directions* then to the observer stationed in any one of these trains, the other train would appear to be moving at twice the speed. If however, the trains are heading at the *same speeds in the same direction*, to the observer in one, the other train would appear as stationary. This was the theory of relativity which meant that every observation is relative to a context and not absolute in essence.

This limitation of man seeks compensation and creates the need for revelation. I would now deal with three broad areas that manifest man’s limitations. These limitations are with respect to his *life*, *knowledge* and *civilization*. Let us understand this further.

## Limitations pertaining to man’s life

Each one of us must die. No man has ever been able to save himself from death. The Quran says,

**“Every human being is bound to taste death.” (3:185)**

While man wants to live, death cuts his ties from life. This is the greatest limitation of man’s life - he can neither prolong his life, nor delay his death. Despite the extensive research in the field of life sciences, no venture has been successful in reversing the destiny to which man is bound.

Man must reconcile with this harsh truth. While not being in-sync with it, inculcates an unrealistic approach, being cognizant of his limitation, inculcates wisdom in man. A Persian couplet succinctly describes this in the following words:

*“A man who does not know and thinks otherwise, never gets to know. But one who knows but thinks otherwise, might initially plod like a frail mule but would eventually reach its destination.”*

Socrates, the renowned Greek philosopher was once questioned by a pupil about the learning he made during his lifetime. To this, Socrates replied by saying, '*I leant that I have not learned anything*'. This realization of Socrates was actually an expression of the inherent limitation of man's life. It is therefore imperative that we first face the fact that we shall not live forever and then look further for answers pertaining to the purpose of our present life and the destiny that awaits us after death.

Such a realization leads to the development of **death-based thinking** in man. In other words, having understood that he is journeying towards death and not *life*, man begins to spend much of his time in introspection. Failure to comprehend this fact is tantamount to being led astray.

### Limitations in acquiring knowledge

Philosophy as a discipline, laid the foundation of a structured way of thinking. But most unfortunately, it did not leap any further from there. Even though the brightest minds in history devoted themselves to the study of philosophy, they could not produce rational answers to existential questions. This was because man had a limited framework of thought. In the famous words of a scientist, as the knowledge of man expanded,

*"We got to know more and more about less and less".*

For example, it was not long ago when matter was considered to be an aggregate mass of atoms. This belief was run over by splitting of the atom which led to the discovery of electrons, protons and neutrons. But science could only give the physical description of the phenomena, not an answer to "why". According to Sullivan,

*"Science gives us but a partial knowledge of reality."* (Limitations of Science)

It is the knowledge of these limitations of science that refrain a scientist from exhibiting outspoken behaviour. He understands the limitations associated with acquiring knowledge and therefore has an unassuming approach. The same is conveyed by an Arab proverb, which says that *I do not know is half the knowledge*. This is because acceptance of this fact reconciles one to the truth of not knowing which, in turn becomes *the stepping stone* of knowledge. A similar learning can be derived from the following incident that took place with Swami Vivekananda. When asked about the gist of Hindu philosophy, he quietly drew a '0' (zero) on the blackboard. This meant that man starts by thinking that he knows, only to realise that he knows *nothing*. Therefore it is foremost to understand that our starting point in life should be – '*I do not know*' because to presume that '*I know*' is extremely unscientific.

Here I would like to introduce the **concept of revelation**. Einstein famously opined,

**'The most inconceivable fact about nature is that it is conceivable.'**

He said so because he could not take the help of revelation (*wahy*) to explain nature. As is known, no discipline - scientific or secular can provide knowledge in entirety. This gap creates the need for revelation (*wahy*). Explaining why revelation was chosen as a method of dissemination of knowledge, the Quran says,

**'You have been granted but little knowledge.'** (17:85)

Since no man has access to unlimited knowledge, failure to obtain help from revelation would only lead to perpetual disillusionment. To save oneself from meeting the fate of living and dying in confusion, it is essential that man considers revelation as a source of explanation to the hitherto unaddressed issues of existence.

### Limitations in creating a civilisation

Man's inability to carve a civilization of his choice has come to pass in this age. Thinking that he could go on developing the civilization, he incessantly exploited the natural resources. Since man's greed knew no bounds, Earth decided to refuse to relent any further.

In his book, entitled 'Future Shock' (1971), Alvin Toffler had predicted that our civilization is forging towards an industrial age, which would soon enter into a super-industrial age. But contrary to his prognosis, the civilization entered the age of pollution. According to a recent news item, if man continues to exploit Earth at its present speed, we would soon be in need of another Earth. In fact, it also said that if every man were to adopt the American lifestyle, five Earth-like planets would be required to fulfill their demand!

The Copenhagen summit is being attended by delegates from 192 countries. As per the reports, several hundred private jets will be used to fetch the high profile delegates to the convention. The irony is that in a convention which is being held to address the climate change impact, the opinion-makers themselves are using '*private*' jets instead of public planes. Moreover, the participating countries are refusing to reach a consensus because they are seeking more development for themselves. What they are failing to understand is that global warming is a phenomenon threatening our very existence. Lands are changing into desert-lands, water bodies are drying up and natural resources are depleting. Nature has given up on any more exploitation. Mahatama Gandhi had very rightly said:

*"Earth provides enough for our need, but not for our greed."*

It is this insincerity that will not allow the Copenhagen summit to yield any result and like other conventions, it would rightly be branded as a mere '*talking shop*'.

### The end is near

The scientific fraternity has been trying to raise concern over the issue of climate change, for quite some time now. Media has actively taken up the cause and is highlighting alarming facts so that public attention can be drawn to the unprecedented changes that are taking place. Strong captions are being used to convey the gravity of the situation. While some read, '*Two degrees from doomsday*', the others say, '*The countdown begins*'.

According to my understanding, the limitations faced by man in further developing his civilisational edifice were deliberately put by God. He did this so that man recognizes that fulfillment of his unlimited desires is not possible in this world and therefore, he must confine himself to simple living.

The impacts of global climatic changes are extremely worrisome. To take one example, the melting glaciers that are reaching the rivers would soon mark an end to the natural fresh water reserve and subsequently raise the level of water in the seas and oceans, which would have drastic consequences. Copenhagen summit could have been the case of taking a 'u-turn' but no one is ready to pay heed.

Global warming is in reality a global "warning" - to make man wary of the fact that the present world is not to relish any *reward*. According to a tradition, Prophet Muhammad said:

**"Good life is only for paradise" (Al-Bukhari)**

And since no other planet can support life, the only choice before man is to opt for '*Simple living, High thinking*'. These are two facets of a coin and cannot exist in seclusion. Therefore, one must dedicate oneself towards one's spiritual development so that we may find a place in the better world of hereafter.

The other crucial task at hand is dissemination of the word of God. Be it the weekly markets (at Mecca) or any opportunity they had to interact with people, companions made painstaking efforts to disseminate the word of God. This is the real *sunnah* of Prophet which must now be replicated.

May God guide us so that we can exert our utmost in spreading the word of God!

### **Final Word**

People are so ignorant that they do not talk about death. it is the psyche of taking things for granted that does not let man view life as an eternal journey. People only talk about themselves and hue to his ignorant thinks he knows it all. Instead of acknowledging his ignorance, man develops arrogance. Such an attitude makes man unreceptive to cues that enhance knowledge.

Nature has reached its final point, where will we go now? Despite a week long talk at Copenhagen, countries have parted saying that we have not progressed sufficiently till now.

We must know about our own limitations and tell others about it because only then will our own knowledge increase and we will become seekers!

May God guide us!