



My Way Or The Highway

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Abstract :

How a person decides is largely influenced by personal judgment, shaped by the environment and culture they are exposed to, past experiences, future outlook, and the current context. However, there are occasions when one disregards other competing perspectives and sticks to one's own. This can be understood using the concept of a "blind spot" in driving. The rear-view mirrors in four-wheelers often miss an area on the side known as the "blind spot." If a driver does not look directly at the sides while changing lanes, they may miss an incoming vehicle, potentially resulting in an accident. Similarly, in life, innate blind spots can lead to poor judgment and decision-making. Blind spots make people adamant and unwilling to hear the opinions of others. Most disagreements can be resolved quickly if people are aware of their own blind spots and try to address them. This essay draws upon the ancient wisdom of Sanskrit literature to explore how perspectives influence decisions. It also shares suggestions from our sages on how to clear your mental blind spots for a clearer view.

Introduction

"My Way or The Highway" could stem from some people's belief that they are always right and their unwillingness to accept any alternatives. People have differing perspectives when looking at the same things. This phenomenon is metaphysically explained by the Jain philosophy of Anekānta or Syād Vāda, which posits that seemingly contradictory knowledge can coexist regarding an object.

Also, the poet Sri Nīlakanṭhadīkshita subtly illustrates this concept in the following verse from Mahākavyam Śivaleelānava:

रसं रसज्ञाः कलयन्ति वाचि परे पदार्थानपरे पदानि ।

वस्त्रं कुविन्दा वणिजो विभूषां रूपं युवानश्च यथा युवत्याम् ॥ १-६० ॥

rasam rasajñāḥ kalayanti vāci pare padārthānapare padāni|

vastram kuvindā vaṇijo vibhūṣāṃ rūpam yuvānaśca yathā yuvatyām (1-60)

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"In a given sentence, some people try to find 'rasa' (essence), some focus on the words, and others on the meanings. Similarly, a tailor notices only the clothes of a young woman, a jeweler sees only her jewelry, and a young man has eyes only for her beauty." In short, people see only what they want to see!

Another aspect of perception is emic perspectives, which we will explore through an anecdotal story below.

The missing tail

From the story of the Rāmāyana, it is clear that the battle between Rāma and Rāvana caused significant destruction and loss of life among the warriors on both sides. In the play Hanumannātakam (anonymous), the poet captures the state of the bereaved families of the vānar senā (monkey army) who lost their loved ones in the battle. They wonder why Rāma had to wage a war to get back his wife. He was a handsome king, and hundreds of beautiful women would have gladly come forward to be his wives. This curiosity leads them to question what made Sītā so important to Rāma that he chose her life over the lives of many of his soldiers.

The bereaved vānar families request to see Sītā, and upon seeing her, they declare:

गौरी तनुरनयनमायतमुन्नता च नासा कृशा कटितटी च पटी विचित्रा।
अङ्गानि रोमरहितानि सुखाय भर्तुः पुच्छं न तुच्छमपि कुत्र समस्तवस्तु॥
gaurī tanurnayanamāyatamunnatā ca nāsā
kṛśā kaṭitaṭī ca paṭī vicitrā
aṅgāni romarahitāni sukhāya bhartuḥ puccham
na tucchamapi kutra samastavastu

"She is pale-skinned with big eyes and a raised nose. She has a slender waist with a

strange drape. She has no fur on her body, which could be pleasing to her husband. However, how can she be considered beautiful when she doesn't even have a small tail?"

This passage highlights the cultural and perceptual differences in what is considered beautiful or desirable and is an example of emic perception differences. What humans consider as beautiful is completely opposite to what the other group thinks.

Real life examples

The earlier tale about monkeys and their fascination with tails serves as a hypothetical example of emic perspective dilemmas, where a culture has a unique mode of thinking that differs from the outside world. This concept is relevant in today's globalized society as well. To illustrate this, I will share a couple of examples from my career at BFL Software and Intel Corporation.

At BFL Software, the management team responsible for bidding on contracts from a Japanese company underwent a quick Japanese language training. Although international negotiations were conducted in English, it was felt that learning the local language would give BFL an edge. This is an example of managing emic perceptions by understanding a different culture to reduce the scope of errors. For instance, the number four is considered unlucky in Japan because it sounds like the word for "death" (shi). Therefore, a negotiator might avoid using that number to achieve a favorable outcome. In essence, attempting to learn a different language was the means for getting a glimpse of a different culture.

The second company I worked for had dedicated training sessions to acclimatize

employees from different cultures. This global company employed people from various parts of the world, making cultural sensitivity essential. One anecdote shared by a "human factors engineering" architect highlighted the impact of cultural differences on a failed advertisement for a famous drink. The ad agency used huge billboards in strategic locations to showcase the soft drink. The billboard featured three pictures arranged from left to right. The first picture on the left showed a person exhausted, likely from running. The second picture depicted the person drinking the soft drink with great satisfaction, and the final picture showed the person completely energized and refreshed. The intended message was that no matter how tired you were, a sip of the drink would make you feel rejuvenated.

While this theme was successful in most places, it failed in Gulf countries, notably causing a significant drop in sales, especially in Saudi Arabia. Upon conducting a root-cause analysis, the reason became clear: Arabic people read from right to left. Consequently, when they viewed the billboard, they saw an energized and refreshed person in the first picture, the person drinking the soft drink in the second picture, and the exhausted person in the final picture. They inferred that a seemingly healthy and energized person was getting drained after having a sip of the drink! This cultural misunderstanding led to the failure of the advertisement and the drink in that market.

Blind Spots

The examples given above are that of multinational companies having their employees and customers spread across the

globe. However, such mismatches in thinking processes can exist within employees in local organizations as well. When there are more than one person, there is bound to be conflicts in one form or the other. In this context, it is interesting to look into the book "Thinking Fast, and Slow" by late Prof David Kahneman, a Nobel laureate in Economics.

As per the professor, a person has two modes of thinking necessary for decision making – System-1 and System-2. System - 1 pertains to "fast, automatic, frequent, emotional, stereotypic and unconscious" decisions. System- 2 mode of thinking processes information in the background and constitutes "slow, deliberate, infrequent, logical, calculating and conscious" decision making. In this fast-paced corporate world, where time is considered money, many may fall back on System 1 mode of thinking, instead of time and effort consuming System - 2 mode of thinking. System 1 mode of thinking reinforces one's biases based on their past experiences and also may be because of lack of expertise on the subject. These biases could eventually become cognitive biases and blind spots.

While each one is entitled to one's views, blind spots prevent people from having healthy, fruitful discussions that are necessary for people to work together as a cohesive unit, decisions need to be made based on data, and not individual whims and perceptions.

The following verse from Hitopadesha explains that it is not an object that makes it desirable, but the person's own desire -

किमप्यस्ति स्वभावेन सुन्दरं वाप्यसुन्दरम्।
यदेव रोचते यस्मै भवेत्तत्तस्य सुन्दरम्॥

kimapyasti svabhāvena sundara ।
vāpyasundaram । yadeva rocate
yasmai bhavettattasya sundaram ॥

“Nothing is inherently beautiful or ugly. It is one’s fancy that makes something either beautiful or unappealing.”

Another blind spot is information about oneself, as this verse from Mahābhārata explains-

परवाच्येषु निपुणः सर्वो भवति सर्वदा ।
आत्मवाच्यं न जानीते जानन्नपि च मुह्यति ॥

paravācyeṣu nipuṇaḥ sarvo bhavati sarvadā.
ātmavācyaṃ na jānīte jānannapi ca muhyati.

“One is an expert in finding faults in others, however, one does not know one’s own faults. Even if they know their faults, they choose to ignore them.”

Removing Blind Spots

Reading literature of various genres, traveling, meeting people from different backgrounds, and stepping out of our comfort zones can help develop emotional intelligence, reduce blind spots, and address cognitive biases. This raises the question: what does ancient literature offer in this area? While Darshanas and Upanishads are profound tools for self-realization, they may not appeal to everyone. Interestingly, many ancient texts contain verses about fools that are both humorous and subtly insightful, helping people recognize their blind spots.

Works such as Bhartrihari's Nītiśatakam, Viduranīti from the Mahābhārata by Vyāsa Muni, Chanakyanīti, Panchatantra, Hitopadeśa, and the poems of Kshemendra

include verses dedicated to fools. These verses can be seen as cheat-sheets for identifying human weaknesses and blind spots.

In the interest of brevity, I would like to share only a couple of verses here -

Viduranīti describes a fool as someone who blames others for one’s own faults:

परं क्षिपति दोषेण वर्तमानः स्वयं तथा ।
यश्च क्रुध्यत्यनीशानः स च मूढतमो नरः ॥

paraṃ kṣipati doṣeṇa vartamānaḥ svayaṃ tathā ।
yaśca krudhyatyanīśānaḥ sa ca mūḍhatamo naraḥ

“The one who accuses others of misconduct while behaving similarly, and directs anger at them for one’s own incompetence, is the greatest fool.”

Kshemendra in Kalividambana describes self-praise as a sign of a fool:

स्तोतारः के भविष्यन्ति मूर्खस्य जगतीतले । न स्तौति चेत्स्वयं च
स्वं कदा तस्यास्तु निर्वृतिः ॥७॥

stotāraḥ ke bhaviṣyanti mūrkhasya jagatītale ।
na stauti cetsvayaṃ ca svaṃ kadā tasyāstu nirvṛtiḥ (7)

“There is no one to praise a foolish person, so it is natural for fools to resort to praising themselves. How else can they find satisfaction?”

Conclusion

Problem-solving is an integral part of the journey we call life. While life encompasses interactions, decision-making, and conflict management, it also involves managing perceptions. It is important to stand firm

on issues that matter to us, but it is equally essential to consider and accommodate the views of others. This requires developing emotional intelligence and being aware of one's own fallacies and biases.

Ancient literature offers valuable tools for self-awareness, serving as checkpoints for our own shortcomings. Various ancient Sanskrit texts provide guidance in creative ways, even though they may not explicitly list specific do's and don'ts. To illustrate this, I would like to share a snippet from the book Bhoja Prabandha by Ballāla (11th century).

The book features the eleventh-century King Bhoja as the main character and weaves a fictional narrative incorporating many ancient poets. One day, King Bhoja enters the queen's chamber unannounced. Irritated by his unexpected arrival while she was engaged in conversation with a friend, the queen calls him a fool, "Mūrkhā". Confused by her reaction, as he felt entitled to enter the room, the king storms out in anger and goes to his court.

In his frustration, he starts addressing each person entering the court with the words, "Mūrkhā, Aagaccha" (Fool, come in). The courtiers, though upset by this address, are too frightened to respond. When the poet Kālidāsa enters the court and receives the same greeting, the others smirk, relieved that even the greatest of poets is being called a fool by the king. However, Kālidāsa replies -

“खादन् न गच्छामि, हसन् न भाषे, गतं न शोचामि, कृतं न मन्ये।
द्वयोस्तृतीयो न भवामि राजन्, किं कारणं भोज भवामि मूर्खः”।
“khādan na gacchāmi, hasan na bhāṣe, gatam na śocāmi, kṛtam na manye.

dvayostṛtīyo na bhavāmi rājan, kiṃ kāraṇam bhoja bhavāmi mūrkhah.”

"I don't eat while walking, I don't laugh while talking, I don't worry about the past, I don't boast ab

The moral of the story is that our ancient literature serves as a mentoring guide. Without directly advising us on do's and don'ts, it provides a mirror through poems and stories, helping us identify our blind spots in life.

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