

Comparison of Culture Philosophies of Spengler and Kroeber

Dr. Nisha Soni

Introduction:-

Spengler and Kroeber are poles apart as far as the fundamental presuppositions of their philosophy of culture are concerned. And yet they have so much in common that on many an occasion Kroeber seems to be arriving at the conclusions intuited by Spengler. But the empiricist in him pulls Kroeber back. Like an anthropologist Spengler viewed culture as an integrated whole, though of course, Kroeber would certainly not view it as completely integrated as Spengler did. "Some anthropologists divisions." It may be pointed out here that Spengler's approach to culture was radically different. His cultures are spiritual and could only be apprehended intuitively. And the anthropologists, Kroeber included, hold that cultures are part of nature - expressed through human behavior - can only be apprehended empirically.

Methodological Differences:-

On the matter of procedure Kroeber is diametrically opposed to Spengler. Kroeber characterizes Spengler as an "intuitive dogmatist perfervid about a complete system." He does not really present evidence. The facts that do not fit into the system, he does not see, ordinarily, and so does not have to meet. Not only this, those which do fit are only exemplifications, and so do not have to be arranged in any order. It is always the system, the cardinal idea, which counts, so this is restated and restated in variable context. It is really an altitude which he is illustrating over and over. As for inductively built-up proof, there is none, Kroeber on the other hand is very particular about facts and evidence. He is a stickler for details. Spengler, as we have seen, goes with his intuition to explain the processes of cultures, fact being, as Kroeber would say, mere exemplifications.

Spengler has been criticized for avoiding evidence and using facts arbitrarily. This criticism has been leveled mostly by the empiricists, who are stickler for details. While assessing Spengler it should be kept in mind that Spengler was not working empirically and was not writing history. He was trying to explain history in the light of the vision that dawned on him in a moment of illumination.

Problem Of Cultural Congruity:-

Culture is defined in terms of a prime symbol, as has been done by Spengler, the question of coherence and congruity of its parts does not remain a problem as this has been with Kroeber. Spenglerian culture is the expression of a prime symbol. Therefore, its coherence and congruity issues from within. On the other hand, Kroeber does not view culture as an expression of, what he calls, an 'expanded style, For him culture is a conglomerate of styles.

As we have pointed out earlier as well, Kroeber's approach to culture or civilization and his method to study it, is steeped in empiricist-positivist tradition. This makes it very difficult for him to formulate a theory of civilization based on creative synthesis and generalizations, which Spengler could do. At many places he comes close to doing so, but he pulls himself back at the last post.

Transmission Of Cultural Material Among Cultures Or Cultural Give And Take

Spenglerian cultures are self-contained complete worlds, each essentially peculiar and the only one of its kind. According to Spengler there cannot be any kind of relationship or give and take whatsoever between two cultures. But the fact remains that borrowing does take place. For this Spengler says that whatever is borrowed is made over to harmonize it with the native cultural content. he makes it clear that in the end the borrowing Culture' invests the borrowings with a meaning of its

own which is quite different from what it had in the original one.

Kroeber on the other hand rejects Spengler's mutual exclusiveness of cultures. He says that vast quantities of cultural material – inventions, religions, alphabets and much more - are shared between cultures. Kroeber shows that how diverse cultures have drawn from each other, so much so that none of them can claim to have a really separate total history of its own.

The Question Of Culture Death

Spengler and Kroeber are at variance with each other. According to Spengler cultures have determinate time-spans. He says, "The notion of life-duration as applied to a man, a butterfly, an oak, a blade of grass, comprises a specific time-value, which is quite independent of all accidents of the individual case."

This is a clear-cut formulation of culture death.

But Kroeber's position on cultural death is at variance with that of Spengler's. The difference lies in the fact that Kroeber says that it is inconceivable that there can be human societies without culture, therefore so long as there remains a society it would have some level of culture, though its cultural content as well as its highest values may have congealed.

Conditions are the conditions of culturelessness. For culture, according to Spengler is the higher culture. This view is not much different from the Kroeber's view. But Kroeber does not rule out the possibility of revival of creative impulse within the same culture, Spengler does not see any such possibility.

Conclusion: -

There is no denying the fact that Kroeber sees culture as events organized into patterns. A pattern is a system, a manifestation of order. Secondly, culture patterns grow, and these growths themselves follow patterns. Kroeber describes their life cycle in such terms as "growth,' realization,' exhaustion', and death or growth, saturation and exhaustion".

There is nothing in Spengler that I can find which would suggest that he considers culture growth an organic process in the modern biological sense of the word organic.

Now, the two Spenglerian principles with which Kroeber's own study, Configurations of Culture Growth, is in essential accord are; First, the existence of certain fundamental patterns characteristic of each major culture; second, these occur in limited growths. But what Kroeber finds trouble with is, first, that there is a basic pattern of culture which can be reduced to a single principle or master key, which in turn controls the culture; the second is that cultures necessarily pass through essentially parallel stages; and the third, that they die of themselves. These according to Kroeber are wholly unproved and difficult to investigate because of the difficulty to evaluate the objective comparability of the facts." Therefore, Kroeber comes to different conclusions regarding the "patterns of culture", their origin, development, consummation and exhaustion. According to Kroeber a fixed schema cannot be formulated which could hold good for all the cultures.

References:-

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3. Kroeber, Configurations of Cultural Growth
4. Spengler, The decline of the West
5. Kamal Nayan, History as Biography