



Arnold Joseph Toynbee: Challenge And Response Theory As Reflected in '*A Study Of History*'

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to elucidate the operational dynamics of the Challenge and Response theory. Arnold Joseph Toynbee articulated this theory in his monumental work, A Study of History, comprising twelve Volumes, wherein a particular volume is dedicated to this concept. The discourse herein posits that civilizations, confronted with myriad adversities, advance solely through the agency of those who adeptly respond to such challenges Civilizations globally have persistently encountered tribulations, yet those that embraced these challenges have not only endured but have also flourished.

Keywords: Challenge, Response, Adversities, Civilization, Apparented, Egyptian, Babylonian, Minoan, Magnum, Graeco.

Introduction

The Challenge and Response theory posited by Arnold Joseph Toynbee in his book *A Study of History* articulates that the trajectory of civilizations oscillates between growth and decline contingent upon their capacity to confront adversities. He contended that civilizations emerge when a 'creative minority' adeptly addresses formidable challenges, thereby galvanizing the broader populace to emulate their endeavours. Conversely, Civilizations inevitably decline when they falter in confronting such exigencies, or when the once-creative minority morphs into dominant elite. This premise encompasses various formidable tribulations that civilizations encounter, including climatic shifts, external pressures from rival civilizations, and intrinsic dilemmas such as burgeoning populations. Integral to this discourse is the proactive engagement of the creative minority, which entails innovation, leadership, and the motivational impetus required to inspire collective adaptation.

Arnold Joseph Toynbee was born in 1889 he studied at Winchester at Balliol College, Oxford, where he was given an old fashion education in Greek and Latin classes. He spent a year in the British Archaeological School at Athens. In 1912 he returned to Balliol as a fellow and tutor and taught ancient History until 1915. Then he entered Government service working on Turkish affair in Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office. Later played an important role the Paris Peace Conference from 1919 to 1924 he was professor of Modern Greek and Byzantine Studies at King's College, University of London. Since 1925 he served as



Director of the Research Department of Foreign Affairs. He is the author of a number of books and his *magnum opus* is *A Study of History* in twelve volumes. Its abridge edition of the first six volumes brought out by D.C Somervell in 1947 game in world renown. Some of his other major works are *Nationality and War*, *Greek Historical Thought*, *Civilization and Trial*, *A Historian's view of Religion* and Autobiographical work. His celebrated work *A Study of History* is undoubtedly the greatest single handle historical achievement, since Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In this monumental Toynbee has examined the growth and the decay of all important civilization of mankind.

Toynbee philosophy of history as expounded in his *Study of History* relates to the thesis as so what forms the proper field of historical study. His contention is that it is neither or description of singularistic happening contiguous in space and time nor a history of the states or bodies of mankind as a unity .But the intelligible fields of historical study are societies which have greater extension in both space and time than national states or city states or any other political communities. Societies thus, for Toynbee are the atoms of which history is composed. Toynbee thesis is based on the comparative, study of the cultures of living society or, in other words, civilizations. His interpretation is an amalgam of organism evolution and Christian outlook. He argues that societies are more extended in 'space and time' than national states therefore, the former, not or the latter, are social atoms with which history must deal, Therefore, he perceives civilization as "specious of society", a fit of object of historical studies. Unlike Spengler, who takes just eight civilizations for his study, Toynbee takes up twenty- one as related and unrelated species of human society. Thus his canvas is very wide.

Combining partly religious characteristic and partly political traits, he perceives 'civilizations' as the proper objects of historical study in which a civilization is 'a species of society'. Toynbee examined the rise and fall of twenty six civilizations of related and unrelated species. They are the Western Orthodox Christian (in Russia and near East) the Iranian, the Arabic ,the Hindu and to far- Eastern, the Hellenic, the Syriac, the Indic, the Sinic, the Minoan, the Sumerian, the Hittite, the Babylonian, the Andean, The Mexic , the Yucatec, the Egyptian plus five 'arrested civilizations' which are Polynesian , Eskimo, Nomadic, Ottoman and Spartan.

In writing *A Study of History*, Toynbee tells us, it was his purpose "to try out the scientific approach to human affairs and to test how far it will carry us". He has spent twenty – five years of his working life on mental operations with twenty-one specimens of the species 'civilizations' without having any assurance that this number was, in truth, large enough. Toynbee has been accused for example, of attempting to support his conclusion by directing his reader attention to myths; and although the extent to which he does this can easily be exaggerated, he does the form time to time seems to provide some justice introducing his concept of "challenge and response", having discuss the cases of Faust and Job, he declares: "By the light of Mythology, we have gained some insight into the nature of challenge and responses".

Following Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, Toynbee's twelve volumes *A Study of History*, appeared between 1934 and 1961. It is the most ambitious project in historical synthesis ever



attempted by a singular author. It seems beyond ordinary grasp and Author Marwick notes that immense cop and lofty aims of work make it meta-history. The writing of meta-history seeking laws and pattern of historical development and human destiny belong to positivistic tradition of nineteenth century. Toynbee has repeatedly referred to his method as essentially 'inductive'. His aim was to "try out the scientific approach to human affairs and to test how far it will carry us". In undertaking this programme he has been insistent upon the need to treat as the fundamental unit of study whole societies as opposed to "arbitrary insulated fragments of them like the nation state of the modern waste".

In contrast with Spangler who examined eight civilizations, Toynbee identifies twenty one civilizations for his study. Why did some civilization try while others, no less advantage, fail? The specific theme of Toynbee's work is thus a philosophical investigation into the origin, growth and breakdown of civilizations. The monumental study put forward of a philosophy of history based on an analysis of the cyclical development and decline of civilizations. He charts the rise and fall of twenty – one 'Civilizations' or 'Societies' in six thousand years of history. Of these, fifteen years are 'apparented' or affiliated older or predecessor cultures of the same species, while the Egyptian, the Sumeric, the Minoan, the Sinic, the Mayan and the Andean have emerged direct from primitive life. Again some civilization like the Egyptian, Babylonian and Minoan are dead; Polynesian, Eskimo and Nomad, are arrested; while some –the Western Christian, Orthodox Christian, Islamic, Hindu and Far Eastern are still alive.

Having distinguished civilization from society and having defined the former as the face of creative activity in the latter, he then proceeds to explain the appearance of the creative phases. He dismisses the theories of race and geographical environment in their conventional formulation the true cause must be as dynamic as a civilization itself, and this cause of Toynbee finds in 'Challenge and Responses'. Toynbee's theory is that societies are exposed to variety of 'challenges'. Some of them come from outside; hard climate, rigourss of migration, poverty of the soil etc. others rise from within society itself; over population, penalization of minorities etc. Some are due to events in physical world: desiccation, the spread of forest. Others are due to human agencies the pressure of neighbouring society the assimilating action of foreign cultures. But whatever its nature and origin, the challenge make the existence of society on pre-existing terms impossible. The society must either decline and disappear or accept the challenge and adapt itself to the new conditions.

It is accepting the challenge says Toynbee and in the process of responding to it that societies generate that intense form of activity which distinguishes the creative state of civilization from the passive state of mere social existence. Yet not every response to every challenge will let us society to civilization. Challenges can so serve and the responses they produce so exacting that the whole of social activity is absorbed in re-establishing and maintaining social existence. Toynbee tells us that in order to generate a state of true civilization challenge must be moderate; neither too hard nor too easy. The 'Golden Mean' is rule of the truly affected challenge and of the truly creative response.



Toynbee gets to work on his main task, which is the comparative study of civilizations. His first chief question is how and why civilisation arises: his second question, how and why they grow; his third, how and why the break down. He then goes on, according to general plan prefixed to his first volume, to study the nature of universal states and universal churches, heroic ages, and contacts between civilisation in space and time.

In its details his work is enormously impressive by virtue of the almost incredible mass of erudition contained in it. The main principles seem to be that the subject matter of history is the lives of certain unitary divisions of human species which Toynbee call societies. One of these is our own, which he calls Western Christendom. Another is Eastern or Byzantine Christendom. A third is Islamic society; a fourth, a Hindu society, a fifth, Far Eastern society. We are not allowed to say that one shades off into the next.

Theory of Challenge and Response

Regarding the genesis of civilization Toynbee begins his analysis by posing a pertinent question: why do some societies become static (the primitive ones) and others die prematurely and a few reach the high watermark of development? While answering the question himself, he does not ascribe to the phenomena, of the factor of climate, soil or situation, but suggests that the civilizations grow due to the presence of creative minority which tries to overcome obstacles. Toynbee examines conditions, particularly adverse condition, with which a society is confronted under a number of heading 'hard conditions', 'blows', 'pressures' etc. The civilisation in these conditions is formulated as interplay of mechanism of the birth of challenge and response.

It is a movement in human history, a rhythm them which influences the entire human action .It is also said that the formula of challenge and response from the science of psychology and has effectively applied it to history. He finds that the process of birth of civilization in their respective geography conditions is due to the interplay of challenge and response. The environment challenges the society and the society through its creative minority responds to challenge to solve the immediate need. A new challenge follows and a new response ensues, the process continuous, with the rest or pause, finally resulting in the birth of a civilization. It is designating as a process of externalization indicating the creative spirit in minority at work.

Toynbee continuous, "Encounters taking the form of challenge and response are the most eliminating kind of events for a student of human affair if he believes, as I believe, that one of the distinctive characteristic of man is that his partly free to make choices, and this partial freedom is not merely apparent but is genuine. Encounters are the occasions in human life on which freedom and creativity come into play and on which new things are brought into existence. God reveals himself in encounters, not in propositions and act of creation are one of the activities, in which he thus manifest himself".

Toynbee extends his argument further, believe that outcome of a response to a challenge is not casually predetermined, is not necessarily uniform in all cases and is there for intrinsically



unpredictable. But this is difficult to demonstrate empirically by applying to phenomena the hypothesis that responses have varied in encounters in which the challenge and circumstances have not. In contrast to mathematical abstractions, human phenomena are so complex and so mobile that it is always possible to represent that either the challenges or respondents or the circumstances or all three elements were not, after all, exactly identical, and then to argue that success of the one response and the failure of another have been due precisely of these differences.

The concept of challenge and response as presented by Toynbee has been criticized on several grounds. Encounters are fictitious, since the distinction between the alleged parties to them is artificial. The concept is unanalysed, undefined and vague. It is a simplification, or a truism or a tautology. The argument implied in it is a circular one. It is incompatible with other hypothesis of his study of history and so on.

The first of these criticism is discussed in volume twelve *A Study of History* in which the challenge is presented to Man through his geography environment, and he give my answer is to it in that context. He admits that the distinction between the given and the receiver of a challenge is a mental misrepresentation of Reality. This is true not only when the challenge comes through Man's non-human environment and not only when a mind is thinking in terms of challenge and response. All thought is a misrepresentation of Reality in as much as to mentally divide what, for all we know, is an individual whole. But, without this distorting mental division of Reality, there would be no thought at all. This inherent imperfection of Man's intellectual powers has been noted in the first chapter of this volume. He submitted to intellectual necessity by taking the phenomenon of encounters at its face value and inquiring into the operation of challenge and response in terms of encounters between (a) God and a human being, (b) between human being and their non-human environment, (c) between one human being and another, (d) and between different elements within a single human psyche.

Toynbee himself says that **Challenge and Response** is a pattern in human life. It is a pattern which texture of freedom, not of necessity. The question in his mind was whether or not every challenge in all circumstances evolves differing responses from different parties when these parties are uniform, and therefore comparable, in all relevant points. In putting his question to the phenomena of human history, over as wide a field as he could, he came to the conclusion that at one end of the scale, there were some challenges that had been met so easily by all parties confronted by them in some particular episode that they gave them no stimulus. At the another end of the scale he found that there were some challenges that had been met so easily by all parties all alike had been defeated by them. In between these two extremes there was a range of challenges which had been met successfully by some parties but not by others, in circumstances in which this difference between the responses could not be accounted for any relevant difference between the parties whose respective responses had been successful and unsuccessful.

The most striking statement of Toynbee's libertarianism is to be found in the passage in which he introduces his concept of "Challenge and Response". When an encounter takes place,



he tells us, there is one thing which must remain an unknown quantity to the best informed onlooker, because it is beyond the knowledge the combatants, or the players, themselves; and their ignorance of this quantity makes calculation impossible, because it is the most important term in the equation which they would be calculator has to solve.

Toynbee believed that in order to develop a civilization requires the stimulus of challenge. The assertion that civilizations develop in response a challenge of adversity, grow through a series of responses to successive challenges each arising out of the response to the last breakdown through throw eventual failure to respond to a repeated challenge, and disintegrated into a dominant minority, an internal and an external proletariat. It is clear that this generalisation is to warrant the status of an empirically validated hypothesis of the life cycle of civilizations.

Toynbee's objective is not significantly different from the Spengler's. Both look for patterns in civilization or culture history. So far procedure is concerned Toynbee draws distinction between his "English and empiricism" and Spengler's "German of priori method". A reader of the *Decline of the West* must be impressed with the wealth of concrete detail contained in its pages, just as he must acknowledge the astonishing erudition of *A Study of History*. When it comes to syntheses the grasp of pattern, the vision of configuration, the sense of stating, Spengler listens to a 'wonders music of the spheres' he calls openly on his intuition. Toynbee is, indeed, more cautious. Yet, his reliance upon myth, his self-conscious recognition of his own life experience as a clue to history and his comparison of histories of various civilizations are important. The service that Toynbee has done should not be obscured by passionate rejection of his as a prophet.

From his point of view civilizations are the 'handmaids of the religion' and the most useful function of Graeco- Roman civilization has been to give birth of Christianity, before disappearing. Comparing religion to a chariot, Toynbee thinks that "the wheels on which it mounts towards heaven may be the periodic downfall of civilization on earth". Thus he combines a cyclic view of the development of civilizations with the linear view of evolution of religions. "The continuous upward movement of religion may be served and promoted by cyclic movement of civilization round the cycle of birth, death, birth ". Once broken down, however Toynbee says a civilization is irretrievably doomed. It enters upon a period of disintegration which even the most active, most original, most courageous of its members are powerless to stop. The creative personality, or the creative minority, cannot then do any more than fight rear-guard actions and put off the evil day without preventing the final catastrophe. "Challenge and Response" as this state become root and rally he is full of hope says that of course this is not the end of all things.

Peter Geyl great Dutch historian is one of the strongest critics of Toynbee's thesis of civilizations and Challenge and Response theory. He even critics the spiritual angel of Toynbee's argument yet he pays highest tribute to Toynbee when he says that "daring and imaginative spirits like Toynbee have an essential function to fulfil".

So, on the basis of Toynbee's Challenge and Response theory as reflected in *A Study of History* we can say that at any rate civilizations may go on growing indefinitely. In practice, history



shows most of them succumbing sooner or later. But if they do succumb it is owing to a failure to respond to a challenge; it is not a matter of iron necessity. It is a matter of human shortcoming. He gives us hope that if we check our shortcoming and accept the challenges, we may go on. The abundance of his knowledge and the unflagging vigour of his presentation are simply amazing.

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