

Ethics in Indian Philosophical thought

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Abstract: *Before we go into the details of ethics in Indian Philosophical thought, we must first of all know what ethics is. Ethics is the study of what is right and wrong in human behaviour i. e. belief of what is morally correct or acceptable. It is so to say ethics is a moral philosophy which investigates normative questions about what people ought to do. Importance of ethics in our daily life is responsibility, loyalty integrity and respect. Socrates, the greatest Greek philosopher was the father of ethics. Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804), the German philosopher is considered as the father of modern ethics and one of the greatest philosophers in the history of philosopher is regarded as the father of philosophy. Aristotle, the greatest Greek philosopher is regarded as the father of philosophy and morals.*

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Morality is man's special privilege

No other animal is moral. In fact, an animal other than man has neither the capacity of distinguishing between right and wrong nor it is called to be right or wrong for any of its actions. That is why morality or ethics is a world phenomenon in human sphere, meaning thereby that people everywhere in the world are bound by certain obligations. Notwithstanding the above fact, the westerners have often disputed the possibility of any scope for Indian philosophical thought. This is obviously wrong in the face of the fact that there is a lot of do's and don'ts for man prescribed in the various philosophical and religious texts of traditional India. These do's and don'ts are obviously connected in man's conduct and character and it is in the light of them that an act of any Indian is called right or wrong or his conduct good and bad. Morality is based on primarily on a distinction between is and ought between the demands of our lower animal life and those of the distinctly higher elements of life. It consists in raising oneself from a narrow selfish plane to a wider selfless plane. And that is possible only when we are active on both the planes individual and social. We know that the natural inclination of any individual is towards the satisfaction of his sensuous demands which are unlimited. The natural demand of man is sensuous pleasure. But we do not control our senses are always engrossed in satisfying selfish desires for the attainment of sensuous pleasure, we could be hardly inclined towards our social obligation. Virtues like love, passion, social welfare, social brotherhood can be precised only when we first regulate and control our animal demand of excessive sensuous pleasure. Self - sacrifice is the first condition of social morality. Controlling the senses is practicing individual morality. Thus, practicing the virtues like in drianigrah (control of sense), anasakti (non attraction towards objects), niskamata (control of desires) cittasuddhi (purity of mind) is as much necessary of being moral as the practicing of virtues like love, compassion, forgiveness friendship, brotherhood etc. The former are elements of individual morality while the latter are elements of social morality.

Apart from the full - length arguments of Dr Radhakrishnan which have proved ample room for ethics in Indian thought including Sankars Vedanta, it is right from the Vedas to the modern times that Indian philosophical thinking is full of the ethical virtues and duties which men are advised and expected to follow. These list of virtues and duties speak loudly to those who are skeptical about the presence of any ethical deliberations in Indian thought. Of course, morality in India has been, for the most part, a matter

of authority, such that the virtues and duties given in the sastras are to be observed without any doubt or questioning, but does not follow there from that reason has been given absolutely no place here. The role of strict logical reasoning has perhaps hardly been recognized, but reason in some general sense has been given its due place here. Moreover, besides authority, the roles of the path shown by great saints and seers, the voice of one's own conscience etc have also been recognized as due sources of morality. Dharma' is the general term used here for denoting the virtues and duties, but the term on the whole has a wider connotation that what generally goes by the name of morality. Two types of dharmas have been recognized the sadharana and the varnasrama. The former relates to the duties which every individual has to observe simply by virtue of his being a man. The varnasrama dharmas, however, relate to the class or the particular stage of life that a man belongs to. Hinduism has divided the society of people in four classes brahmana, khatiya, vaisya and sudra and has assigned specific duties to each class such that there may be a division of labour in the society according to the best ability of man with which he can perform a particular duty. Then again, the life - span of an individual has been divided into four stages brahmacharya, garhastya, vanaprastha and sannyasa and specific duties have been assigned to the individual according to the stage of life he belongs to at a particular time. Whenever someone performs some action and we have to pass a moral judgment upon the action as to whether it is right or wrong, on what is the judgment to be passed on the overt action itself or on the inner root which has prompted the action. In India the general answer to the question seems to be that it is the inner motive or intention which has prompted the action that is to be the proper object of moral judgment. It is the purity or impurity of the intention which is to be judged as right or wrong and not the overt action. Therefore, it has always been advised in Indian tradition to get rid of these two. Actions are to be done not with raga or dvesha but with a sense of non - attachment (an asakti or niskamata). It is such actions which are truly moral actions and which pave our way for our highest destiny.

Indian philosophy, we have seen, is chiefly spiritual and therefore the basic root of morality also is spiritual in India. The essence of man is spirit or soul. In the nature of this spirit, all men are one, at least essentially. The only difference between them is only outer which is unreal and which vanishes with the advent of knowledge. Virtues like mutual love, brotherhood etc. are implicit in the very nature of man. When all men are essentially one, where is the scope for differences or enmity amongst them? Then again,

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because man is essentially soul, the natural obligation upon him is to realize the soul, and rise above the demands of the senses. In Christianity there is a moral percept. 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. This percept is an epitome of love which is perhaps the essence of Christian morality. But if somebody asks the question 'why follow such a moral percept?' the answer will be found not in the Bible, but in the 'Tat twan asi' doctrine of the Upanisads and the Advaita Vedanta of Samkara. Dr. Radhakrishnan's endorsement of the point is very relevant here when he brings to the statement of a westerner himself in this connection in his book *Eastern Religious and Western Thought*. He writes there, "At the end of his Indian tour Dr. Paul Deussen said to a gathering at Bombay. "The gospels quite correctly establish as the highest law of morality. "Love your neighbour as yourselves". But why should I do so since by the order of nature, I feel pain and pleasure only in myself, not in my neighbour? The answer is not in the Bible but it is in the Veda, in the great formula, 'That art there', which gives in three words the combined sun of metaphysics and morals. You shall love your neighbour of yourselves because you are your neighbour"

One more important thing about the Indian moral system is to be noted here. On the face of it, the Indian moral system seems to be teleological, because Moksha is obviously the goal of any moral (or philosophical or religious) effort. But on a closer look at things, that will not prove to be true. Moksha, of course, a motivation for morality, but morality has never been defined here in terms of moksha. In other words, it has never been said in the Indian tradition that only that is moral which leads to Moksha, rather than what has always been said here is that only that is moral which the sastras enjoin us to do. Moksha is our goal, no doubt, but that is not the condition for being moral. Be whatever the consequences, if you perform the duties assigned to you as your dharma by the sastras, you are moral. Thus, what is emphasized here is a deontological morality, a morality which takes duty for duty's sake to be the ideal of morality. This is very clearly depicted in the ethics of the Bhagwat Geeta but as matter of fact, it is present in an overall manner throughout the Indian thought.

Indian concept of Morality

What is 'morality'? is not a very easy question to answer, ordinarily if may appear to be so. It is a 'vague' and 'ambiguous' question because morality has got "multiple associations" which are a "bar to summing it up in any one way. Due to the vagueness that lurks around the term "morality", if hardly seems to be "clearly and sharply bounded various shades of the vagueness or ambiguity of morality may be exposed, but here it will suffice for our purpose to bring out only one of such ambiguities which is quite obvious.

Whenever someone asks the question, "What is morality"? it is not very clear whether the question is about the nature of morality as distinguished from non - morality or from immortality.

Morality as distinguished from No morality

Morality in this sense in the classical Indian context is an institution of life where the distinction between what is and

what ought to be is a matter of primary concern for man. The concern sometimes may be seen to be felt more explicitly in the form of a distinction between the animal demands of human life and the demands of its higher faculties. The concern for such a distinction in man is mainly due to the fact that man in compared to other livings is the being of a distinct nature. All other living beings are merely conscious but man's special privilege is that he is also self - conscious. Besides being conscious about the entire world around him, he is conscious about himself also, about his species, about his inner being his feelings, emotions and thoughts etc. The self - consciousness beings in man the awareness that there is something unique and special about him which makes him different from all other living beings. All such distinctions and the awareness thereof in man may be generally attributed to the presence of reason in him, but the Indian mind as a matter of tradition attributes the distinction of man to the presence of a special being called soul (atman) in him. This soul, according to the Indian thinking, constitutes the essence of man and is a kind of "surplus" in him which makes him aware of his self - transcending nature. Traditional Indian thinking is mainly spiritual in nature with a firm belief that man has a soul with in him which is immortal and is really the spark of the divine in him. It is this soul which sets for man a goal higher than the one which his physical inclinations naturally demand. So man has to adopt a point of view which helps him grow towards the higher, spiritual plane.

In the West, generally speaking, the first sense of morality (and naturally therefore the second sense also) carries with it, more or less, essentially a sense of social reference. Outside a society there is no question of morality or moral point of view. In India the matter has been different, morality may be both social and personal and sometimes the latter has been more emphasized. Morality as an institution of life has been recognized as a social enterprise in the sense of being an instrument of the society to help guide the people living in a society. It is rather engrained in the very stuff or being of the universe. Man has simply to adopt it from here.

The Vedic cosmic principle of Rta is as a matter of fact, the foundation of morality. It gives perhaps the in dictation to man for adopting a moral point of view. The Rta amongst other things implies that there is an eternal moral order involved in the very constitution of the universe and therefore man has to adopt a moral point of view. Although the Rta sometimes is characterized as an impersonal principle which also transcends the authority of the gods. It is more often seen working under the authority of some god like Varuna. Varuna is regarded as the custodian of the charioteer of the Rta and in this sense morality may be taken as having a divine origin. In no case, however, morality has been taken here as a social enterprise. It has its origin in the scriptural references the references as made in the Vedas and the Upanisads.

The Vedic distinction between Rju (straight) and Vrjan (crooked) and the Upanisadic distinction between Sreyah (desirable) and Preyah (pleasurable) have much to do with the origin of the sense of right and wrong the hence of morality or the moral point of view in India. The Rg Veda

contains a large number of passages illustrating the distinction between right and wrong, as straight and crooked, one of which man may be cited here because of its poetic beauty.

“The turbid darkness vanished, bright the sky stone, upward the light of Dawn, the heavenly, hastened, unto his fields on high the sun ascended. The ways of mortals straight and cooked, seeing”.¹

The Upanishads distinction between the desirable and the pleasurable is as follows:

“The desirable is one thing, and the pleasurable quite another. Both these, of different aim, find a person.

Of these two, well is it for him who takes the desirable. He fails of his aim who chooses the perishable”²

The concept of ‘dharma’ also, as it has been understood in the Indian tradition, owes much for the origin of the sense of morality. The term comes from the root ‘dhr’ which means upholds or ‘supports’. So, dharma is that which upholds the universe from within. And this dharma again in its broadest sense represents in the Indian tradition the moral law of the universe which regulates or governs the moral life of man (or in brief morality) which upholds or sustains the universe. One has therefore to adopt the moral point of view i. e. . one has to adopt the life of morality.

The objective or social ethics refers to questions of morality in relation to others, whereas the subjective or individual ethics refers to the questions of morality in relation to oneself. One is adopting a moral point of view not only in making judgements about the conduct and character of someone towards other members of the society, but also in his behaviour to himself as a man, when he lives far from society.

Man, as distinguished from a brute, has to live a life worthy of a man. Even confined to himself he was to perform certain duties and inculcate certain traits of character. He has, for example, not to set his sense - organs free and unsaddled like the animals. He has rather to bridle and control them. In other words, he has to practice *indriya nigraha*, he has to undergo the process which leads to the purification of mind (*Chitta Suddhi*) *Chitta Suddhi* is assumed to be an indispensable condition for the attainment of the higher values of human life. Man has to subordinate his lower impulses to the higher ones through a proper understanding of his inner nature and through the observance of some practical discipline. All these come, according to the Indian point of view, under the domain of morality. In other words, this individual or subjective process of discipline also constitutes a part of the moral life of man. According to Maitra, the psychological ethics of the Hindus includes not merely the analysis of the will and its inner springs and their psychological as well as ethical classification, but also a part of their practical ethics as embodied in the various practical schemes of *Chitta Suddhi* through external and internal aids.³ The recognition of both the subjective and objective morality constituting parts of the moral life of man corresponds to the acceptance of the morality of doing and the morality of being as part of the

Indian concept. The morality of doing refers to the do’s and don’ts and the morality of being refers to the virtues and vices. It may be pointed out here that because the whole Indian scheme of moral life is directed towards the attainment of individual liberation (*Moksha*).

1. Summary and Observation

Summarizing what has been said above it is seen that the Indian concept of morality is not easy to define morality in contrast with immortality. What is ‘morality right’ or ‘morality good’ in the Indian tradition does not lend itself to clear understanding as a matter of definition. “As the dust that lies on earth, if propounded between two stones, becomes finer and finer, even so questions morality, the more they are reflected upon become finer and finer”⁴ Perhaps that is why no serious effort has been made in the Indian tradition to understand the precise nature of morality, the more we are drawn into problems. Perhaps this is why no serious effort has been made in the Indian tradition to understand the precise nature of morality, although a lot has been talked about various virtues, duties and obligations that men ought to inculcate or follow. In general, therefore, we can say that morality consists in inculcating certain virtues and doing certain duties while avoiding others. In other words, being moral means inculcating certain virtues and performing certain duties which out to be inculcated or performed in virtue of one’s being a man. Morality therefore basically consists in following the dictate of the *sastras* (the *Vedas*, the *smritis* etc.) As *Samkara* says, “The holy writ is the ground of discriminating between right or wrong. ‘This is immortality’ all this can be known only by means of scriptures *sastras* alone constitute our basis for moral knowledge.”⁵

‘Dharma’ in the Indian tradition may be broadly taken as equivalent to morality. The equivalence is by no means perfect and unambiguous. As a matter of fact, ‘dharma’ as used and understood in the Indian tradition, is a term of very wide connotation including within it, the sense of a whole host of duties (as well as virtues) which ought to be performed by man. These duties do not always consist of acts ordinarily regarded as moral. Thus, although the word ‘dharma’ cannot be held synonymous with ‘morality’, the way how Indian thinkers have tried to define ‘dharma’ will give us the idea as to what they understood by ‘morality’ or what was for them to be moral as different from being in moral.

The famous *mimamsa* definition in this regard as given by *Jamini* is as follows – “*codana laksano artho dharmah*”. This, according to *Sabara*’s interpretation, means that whatever is indicated by the Vedic injunctive (or enjoined by the *Vedas*) and leads to the good is *dharma*. ‘*Codama*’ refers here to the injunctive text, ‘*Laksana*’ is by which something is indicated. Thus ‘*codana laksano*’ means what is indicated by the injunctive text. ‘*Artha*’ means something conducive to good. Thus the entire *sutra* means ‘that which is indicated by the injunctive text and which leads to the good is *dharma*’.

Another important definition of dharma we find in the Indian tradition of the Vaisesiks yata abhyudayni sreya saas iddlh dharma.6

Dharma is that through which both (material) prosperity and highest good are achieved. Whatever is conducive to worldly prosperity as well as to highest good is dharma, according to the Vaisesika. Obviously, this concept of dharma or morality is necessarily teleological. If asked, what actions (or traits of character) lead to happiness and nihsreyasa the Vaisesikas general reply that they are laid down in the Vedas and the sastras. On the whole, therefore, it can be said that 'morality' in the Indian tradition has been understood (rather defined) in terms of the mandates of the authority. This authority, for the most part, is contained in the Vedas. The two distinguishing features of Indian concept of morality survive through the process of evolution (1) Authority has the basis for deciding what is moral and what is immoral and (2) Morality refers not only to the social obligations but also to obligations related to one's self.

- [3] S. K. Maitra, Ethics of the Hindus (University of Calcutta 1963) P/4
- [4] The Mahabharata – Shanti Parva – 136.11
- [5] SB III 1.25
- [6] V S.1.2

2. Conclusion

Every religion consists of certain beliefs and practices. We have seen that in many respects, the different religions contain similar types of belief, but in many others they differ also. In respect of the practices, the differences seem to be more glaring than the similarities. The ways of prayer, the observance of various rituals and ceremonies and such other religious practices sometimes sharply differ from one religion to another. We can very well mark these differences out by going through the account of various religious practices carried out in different religions that we have given earlier. However, there is an underlying similarity in spirit and that is that all these practices in their own distinctive ways are directed towards the God or gods to secure their grace, so that man may find himself out of the sufferings he faces in the world and may strive for a better destiny. What is to be wondered at is not that there are differences, but that there are a few striking similarities. For example, fasting is very important in religious practices such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Islam. Similarly fire-worship is regarded as very sacred in both Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, pilgrimage is given a great religious value in both Hinduism and Islam. Even religions like Buddhism and Jainism which originally did not believe in any God have found place for such temples. Every religion without exception teaches the observance of such ethical virtues as liberality, humility, chastity, purity, love, kindness, truth etc to be the sacred duty of every religious man. All religions unexceptionally teach universal brotherhood. Similarly, all of them teach abstention from cruelty to creatures. There may be difference of emphasis, but that does not affect the inner similarity of conviction. The three religions of Indian tradition Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism assert with equal emphasis the desirability of the observance of five ethical virtues Non-Violence, Truth, Celibacy, Non-stealing and Non-attachment.

References

- [1] Rg Veda – 4.1.17
- [2] Katha Upanisad 2.1 (Also chapter X for this)

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