

Morality of Being Versus Morality of Doing: A Critical Survey of Moral Beliefs and Ideas in Classical Indian Thought

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Abstract

In order to understand the trend of morality in India, we need to analyze the idea of morality (used synonymously and interchangeably with ethics and ethical) and moral beliefs associated with different Indian Philosophical thought. There are many scholars of philosophy who have posited that there is an absence of discussion about morality as such in the Indian thought. However, our analysis of the systems will show us that ethics was always there, in fact, it is discussed widely as a way to attain the perfection, mokṣa. Another general notion which is prevalent due to western influence is that morality is out and out social. This view shall be falsified with our discourse. In Indian Philosophical thought, we shall find the presence of individual ethics along with social ethics. Some systems emphasize more on the former and some on the later. Nevertheless, the idea behind this is that society is formed by individuals inter-related with their fellow beings and surroundings. The orientation of each and every individual forms the picture of the society. This paper focuses on depicting the essence of Classical Indian ethical thought i.e. it is the amalgamation of both Individual Ethics and Social Ethics by analyzing the stream of moral beliefs and ideas present within the systems, thus, by the discourse, it will be reflecting upon the presence of ethics in Indian Philosophy.

Keywords: morality, ethics, Indian tradition, philosophy, conduct, values

Introduction:

Classical Indian philosophy is a great collection of rigorous discussions of various topics ranging in epistemology, logic and metaphysics. However, the status of ethics in Indian Philosophy has always been a debatable topic. Many scholars have the opinion that there has been no definite and distinct discussion on ethics, politics and aesthetics as such by different systems. As B. K. Matilal writes in his book *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata*:

Professional philosophers of India over the last two thousand years have been consistently concerned with the problems of logic and epistemology, metaphysics and soteriology, and

sometimes they have made very important contributions to the global heritage of philosophy. But, except some cursory comments and some insightful observations, the professional philosophers of India have very seldom discussed what we call “moral philosophy” today. It is true that the Dharmasāstra texts were there to supplement the Hindu discussion of ethics; classification of virtues and vices, and enumeration of duties related to the social status of the individual. But morality was never discussed as such in these texts. (Matilal, 1989)

Similar point has been made by P. T. Raju. He writes: “There is a general lack of interest in ethical problems as such in Indian philosophy” (Raju, 1949). To add up with these opinions, Deutsch also makes a critical remark regarding this:

The criticism is often raised against Indian philosophy in general... that it turns its back on all theoretical and practical considerations of morality and, if not unethical, is at least a-ethical in character. If by “ethics” one means a rigorous, independent inquiry into problems of, and questions concerning, the meaning of value, the justification of judgements, and the analysis of moral concepts and concrete existential modes of behaviour, then this criticism is justified... (Deutsch, 1969)

However, these arguments are claimed to be false by scholars like Maitra (1956), Hiriyana (1975), Mahadevan (1967). They have argued that Indian Philosophy is essentially a philosophy of values and a philosophical inquiry into it leads to the apprehension of those values. It centers on the four *puruṣārthas*, namely, *dharma*, *artha*, *Kāma* and *mokṣa*. All of these refer to various kinds of value. *Artha* and *Kāma* are identified of having instrumental and psychological values, *dharma* implicates moral values and *mokṣa* is of spiritual value. *Mokṣa* or liberation has been given the highest importance by most of the Indian philosophical system and has been greatly discussed in various Indian philosophical texts. But this does not imply that other *puruṣārthas* are neglected. Man attains liberation after dealing with the experience of his worldly existence. He has to live first of all before he can live spiritually. His life in the world requires wealth and pleasure, though these do not have an intrinsic value, for bare minimum survival.

Man is distinct from other living beings in the sense that they are not only conscious but also has the special attribute to be self-conscious. Having this unique characteristic, he timely introspects himself and his nature- what he ‘is’ and what he ‘ought to’ become. Within this worldly existence, he tries to demarcate this difference between him and other living beings, between the animal demands of human life and the demands of his higher faculties. This transition from ‘is’ to ‘ought’ is the path of liberation and this is possible by developing a sense of morality that would strengthen the capacity of self-awareness which will help human being to understand the difference and recognize the path to *mokṣa*. Hence, *dharma* or morality, though not given the paramount position, forms the pedestal in the attainment of the spiritual consummation.

Morality in Indian thought as an institution of life is of scriptural or divine origin. The first primeval concept of morality, the cosmic principle – ‘*ṛta*’ is seen in the vedic literature. It can be said to be the foundation of morality in a sense that as everything in this universe follows an order, so does a human being belonging to this universe must adopt that order to maintain harmony or else it will lead to disintegration. Later, the concept of ‘*dharma*’ too is recognized of equal importance in contributing to the origin of the sense of morality in Indian tradition. This also implicates that morality is not necessarily attached with society. The individual has the choice to either adopt an order as the universe does or to move away from it.

In the West, the idea of morality is associated with society. For them, there can be no question of morality without a reference made towards society. It takes into account the judgments of other persons as the action of one initiate the effects on other beings. Hence, morality has to be out and out social. But this is not the case in Indian Philosophy. It is not the society that makes an individual but the vice-versa. It cannot be denied that an individual has certain relation to the society but it is equally true of the relation he has with himself. S. K. Maitra identifies this presence of both social and individual ethics in Indian thought. While social ethics is concerned with the questions of morality in relation to others, individual ethics refers to the questions with respect to the relation with oneself.

According to Maitra (1963), the word ‘*dharma*’ has two senses. One reflects onto the virtues or religious merit and the second reflects onto the duties of an individual; both the senses are of equal moral value. Let us make an analysis into the Indian tradition in both these senses.

- a) The *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads* : The *Vedas* are generally considered as the manual of various rituals. Performing these rituals as prescribed pleases gods and goddesses; hence, such activities are termed good. Any activity that displeases gods is considered a sin. Activities considered good and sin are listed in the *Vedas* in a set of injunctions and prohibitions. Performing actions accordingly is considered moral and any deviation from it is immoral. This is an external and ritualistic view of morality and seems to have nothing to do with an individual’s inner state while performing any of those actions. However, this does not implicate that the notion of internal morality is absent in it. As mentioned earlier, the *Vedas* mention about the moral cosmic order – the *ṛta* as the foundation to Indian conception of morality. There is an order in the universe, so we ought to have order amongst ourselves too. But if we see, this can be interpreted as to follow the duties assigned to oneself according to the nature inhibited in the individual. As water flows according to its nature, similarly an individual ought to perform as per his nature. That is what can be called Truth, staying true to one’s own nature and the duties associated. Besides this many other virtues and duties have been noted in *Vedas* like *tapas*, *dana*, *satya*, *ahimsā*, *asteya*, *brahmacārya*, *śraddhā*, etc. While some of them have social implications, others pertain to individual morality. In *Upaniṣads*, the concept of morality is more internal than in the *Vedas*. Focusing on the attainment of *Jñāna*, an

individual needs to develop oneself to become fit for it. It is only possible by inculcating virtues that will help to remove *avidyā* and lead to dawn of *Jñāna*. Due importance has also been given to social virtues; however, emphasis has been given more on the former. It includes virtues like *yajñā*, *adhyāyana*, self-control, compassion, etc., along with the virtues enlisted in the *Vedas*.

- b) The **Dharmasutras**, the **Dharmaśāstras** and the **Epics**: While on one side we can find that the Dharmasutras and Dharmaśāstras have given an elaboration of Vedic rituals, on the other side we would also find the explanations on various virtues and duties of a human with respect to himself and the society. These virtues and duties are divided into three *dharma*s – *Sādhārana*, *Varna* and *Āśrama* *dharma*. The ten *Sādhārana dharma* as enumerated by Manu is a mixture of social and individual morality. While *ksamā*, *asteya*, *satya* relate more to social virtues, others like *dhṛti*, *dama*, *sauca*, *indriyānigraha*, *dhi*, *vidyā*, *akrodha* emphasize on individual virtues. These duties are general and are to be performed by every individual irrespective of any distinctions. The *Varnāśrama dharma* refers to the duties and obligations of an individual towards society with respect to class and the stage of life. This division too possesses a principle that one should follow only that vocation for which he is inherently capable, thus resulting in the dignity of labour. This shows that there is no conflict between individual and social ethics rather they go together. In the Epics, more emphasis has been given to social good and progress (*lokasthiti*, *lokasamgraha*, *lokakalyāṇa*, etc.) through the development of individual's virtues (*swadharma*). There is an inclusion of *karma-yoga* as a path to liberation.
- c) **The Orthodox Systems**: Six philosophical systems developed on the basis of their acceptance of the *Vedas* as their authority. The crude moral beliefs and ideas in the later were systematized in the former. The *Sāṃkhya-Yoga* system attaches importance to *sāttvika* actions which consists of kindness, detachment, freedom from hatred, etc. and considers it to be moral and leads to liberation, whereas the *rājasika* and *tāmasika* actions are considered immoral. Though it accepts the *Vedic* authority, it denies of the rituals which incur violence. The *yama* and *niyama* of *astāṅga-yoga* holds ethical significance. While *yama* consisting of *ahimsā*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacārya* and *aparigraha*, by large relates to social morality, *niyama* consisting of *sauca*, *santosa*, *tapas*, *svadhyāya* and *iśvara-pranidhāna* can be recognized as individual morality. Hence it can be seen that both morality of being and morality of doing have been given the necessary part in the path leading to *mokṣa*. The *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* attaches importance to the observation of *Sādhārana* and *Varnāśrama* *dharma* for ethical considerations. It encourages actions free from three *doṣas* – *icchā*, *dvesa* and *moha* as the actions attach with them binds. The *Mīmāṃsakas* have given morality an utmost priority in their system. They attach ethical importance to the observation of the Vedic injunctions, rituals and prohibitions. The actions are unconditional in nature

and are to be performed for their own sake. *Samkara Vedānta* prescribes those duties that act as means to the attainment of knowledge. These are essentially related to self-discipline like self-restraint, renunciation, patience, concentration, etc. It also focuses on social good which is based on his metaphysical view that 'All is *Brahman*', hence I treat others as my own not making any sort of distinctions. In *Rāmānuja Vedānta*, ethics seems to take a significant position and an essential means for the attainment of *mokṣa*. For *Rāmānuja*, God is the paradigm of moral virtues and man's duty is to imitate His qualities with *bhakti* in his practical life. Influence of the *Bhagavad Gītā* can be seen in his conception of morality. It can be said that morality is conceived here in a religious sense.

- d) The Heterodox Systems:** Though three systems developed delineating from the Vedic authority, Buddhism and Jainism have some essential moral beliefs and ideas similar to that of orthodox systems, like the *pañcasīla* and the *pañca- mahāvratā*. Along with these moral views, Buddhism proposed the *astāngika-mārga* and *brahmavihāra* which emphasizes both on individual purity along with social good. However, both the systems have criticized the performance of Vedic rituals and the *varna-āśrama* division of the society characterizing it to be immoral, unjust and least ethical. The *Cārvākas* are purely hedonistic view that what is pleasurable is desirable and hence pleasure as the aim of life by any means. Wealth and pleasure are important for practical life but it has never affected the spiritual spirit to become the *summum bonum* of human life.

The conception of morality in Indian thought, thus from the critical analysis made, can be said to be integral, humanistic and based on human nature. While it is true that explicit moral theorizing in the Western academic sense is less prominent, the Indian tradition offers a rich and sophisticated moral vision rooted in both metaphysical and existential concerns. It has given importance to both personal and social values. It has maintained a parallelistic relation between the individual and the society. The charge that Indian philosophy does not have enough space for ethics does not stand acceptable.

Conclusion:

We can see from our analysis that though not as the highest goal of human life, ethics has been given a suitable position. Both the morality of doing and morality of being have been part of Indian conception. The distinction between the morality of being and the morality of doing does not indicate a fragmented view. Instead, it indicates an integrated ethical outlook that connects inner intentions with outward actions. Traditions like Yoga, Vedānta, Buddhism, and Jainism, as well as in the foundational texts- the Vedas and Upaniṣads, emphasize that moral living is essential for attaining *mokṣa*. It is true that the Indian mind has always focused on the attainment of individual liberation rising above any sort of conflicts including the moral ones. The goal of moral life, as mentioned earlier, is perfection – a transition from 'is' to 'ought'. Even in schools dominated with ritual or metaphysical inquiry, ethics remains central. It is reflected in various key concepts like *ṛta*, *dharma*, *svadharma*, *pañca-sīla*, etc.

Individuals with the help of society realizes this end of his life. Indian philosophy does not rigidly separate the self from society, nor ethics from metaphysics. It can be observed that there is a continuum where personal virtue and social responsibility support and enhance one another in the pursuit of the highest good. Hence to criticize Indian philosophy as individualistic and not recognizing the moral stance within it is not tenable. Given this, the notion that Indian philosophy is ethically indifferent or “a-ethical”, too, does not hold up under serious scrutiny.

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