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## ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF INDIA

**Dr. B. H. Gujalar**

Associate Professor, Dept of Philosophy, Karnatak University Dharwad.

### ABSTRACT

**G**.E. Moore gives a simplest definition of ethics as 'Ethics is general inquiry into what is good.' It is 'the science of moral ideas or the principles of harmonious relations. It deals with the study of man's conduct or the systematized principles on which a person should act.' Ethics may be studied in two phases; one is the ethical doctrine concerned with abstract theory and the other one is the ethical discipline which pertains to practice or exercise. Of these two, ethical inquiry recognizes the need of discipline in the formation of character and points to self-discipline as the ideal form.

**KEYWORDS:** Ethical Philosophy, harmonious relations, man's conduct.

### INTRODUCTION :

The essential feature of character formation is over-coming of the evil and acquisition of the good. Then what is 'evil'? Prof.



Hiriyanna notes: 'Evil is the tendency on the one hand to satisfy present needs without any thought of the future; and, on the other, to satisfy one's needs as distinguished from those of environment'. But due to its most ambiguous nature it is not easy to define what 'good' is. Generally it is taken to mean 'moral good.' It presupposes the commonly accepted social standards. By these descriptions, one will be amused to recall the parallel definitions of *Dharma* and *adharma* as given in the *Tarkasastra*. *Dharma* is the result of enjoined duties - *vihitkarmajanyah dharmah* and *adharma*, the counter part of *dharmah*, is the result of prohibited acts - *nisiddhakar majanyastu adharmah*. Thus, ethics, in a way, can be equated with the Indian conception of *dharmah* or *achara*. These deceptively simple definitions contain stratas of questions which again beg answers. For instance what is *vihita* and what is *nisiddha*? Their meanings vary due to their relative nature as they are based on time and space continuum. Once we enter these two aspects we will be at a loss pertaining to their exact connotations and mutual relations. Therefore the *Mahabharata* gives a safest answer to the labyrinth of *dharmah* and *adharma* as *dharmasya tattvam nihitam guhayam mahajano yena gatah sa panthas* (III, 314, st.119)

Now let us take the practical aspect of the need to study ethics. I may be urged that if ethics is a theoretical study of moral problems, if it only speculates and weighs the pros and cons of an act in the balance of reason and ultimately declares it as right or wrong, good or evil, such a declaration might not have any practical value for the man in the street. Many

scholars, literary figures and poets have decried the theoretical study of ethics and even of human nature, because such a study is nothing but 'a mighty bloodless substitute for life'. It is said that experience alone can enrich the ethical aspect of the human mind and that no amount of theoretical knowledge can possibly raise man's ethical stands. Wordsworth has aptly remarked that:

One impulse form a vernal wood,  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

But reflection on this problem would reveal that even the theoretical aspect of ethics is not only necessary for the practical application of morality to life, but it is an unavoidable condition. Socrates declared long ago that 'virtue is a kind of knowledge'. What he was trying to point out was that no one could be moral by accident or without true knowledge of the nature of a moral act. In Jaina ethics, which is known to be the practical application of non-violence as the highest virtue, it has been stated that 'knowledge must precede compassion'. These statements are themselves enough to indicate that knowledge of virtue is the very foundation of the practice of virtue. As a matter of fact man/s uniqueness as an ethical being is entirely due to that erect that man has the knowledge and the power of discrimination between right and wrong, good and evil. Had man been ignorant of the nature of morality and moral distinctions his behavior would have been on the same level as that of animals.

Thus the superiority of man over animal lies in living on a higher plane, where he apprehends truth, realizes good and creates beauty or harmony. A philosophical system that falls short of this threefold realization of human nature cannot be regarded as humanly useful. Since unlike the philosophic development in the West Indian systems took a practical turn, the ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness were regarded as not mere ideals, but actual states of existence to be realized by the aspirant in his practical life. But it should be remembered that, of course, all the theories of Western philosophy, with the possible exception of pragmatism have not been preached and practiced in the manner in which the followers of the Indian schools like Jainism, Buddhism, Samkhya, Yoga and Vedanta have preached and practiced their philosophies. The intuitive experience in this direction had led the Indian philosophers to the conclusion that ultimately the state of existence which is attained by the aspirant after the spiritual discipline is the state of co-existence and merger of these three ideals in a harmonious manners. This is the state called Jivanmukti, or liberation, which is not eschatological, but of this earth earthy. Jivanmukti undoubtedly is the stepping stone to Videha Mukti, or final liberation, which is the state of Ananta Jnana, infinite knowledge, Ananata Virya, infinite power and Ananta Sukha, infinite bliss.

Thus the theoretical discussion of ethical problems is the very foundation of their application in practical life. Such a discussion is not only necessary from the academic point of view in order to decide as to which theory of the moral standard is preferable, but modern conditions of life also warrant that the study of ethics is a most important subject. The modern age is an age of transition and of astonishing contrasts. Man today has reached heights of civilization and culture that he never reached before in the history of human civilization. His scientific progress has given him almost unlimited power to control nature, even to the extent of making successful attempts to cross space and to reach the other planets in the universe. This power and marvelous success have to a great extent led man astray. The result is that he has neglected the ethical aspect of life.

The brief analysis given above makes it clear that ethics is concerned with human life and that it judges human behavior from the normative point of view. That is why various definitions of ethics have been formulated by various thinkers. Mackenzie points out that 'Ethics is a general study of the ideal involved in human life'. According to Rashdall, 'Ethics is that theory of good and evil which has human well

being as its goal'. Dewey says that 'The subject-matter of ethics is to point out what is right and good in conduct'. In like manner, Moore considers supreme good as the subject-matter of ethics.

Of course, it is very difficult to define ethics, for while giving its definition, we have to establish its limitations. No subject or science can be restricted and reduced to a water-tight compartment. All the sciences overlap one another and their frontiers cannot be strictly demarcated. Especially in the case of ethics, which is concerned with the propriety of human conduct, it is most difficult to draw the lines of demarcation, because behavior is so vast that it can be studied by various sciences from various points of view. In spite of this, it can be said that ethics is that study of human behavior which propounds the supreme good or the *summum bonum* of human life, and which formulates the judgments of right and wrong and good and evil. In order to make this definition more explicit, it would be desirable to explain the words 'right', 'good', and 'science' respectively.

This definition of ethics will remain incomplete unless and until we explain the nature of normative science. A science may be conveniently defined as a systematic, methodical and exhaustive knowledge of a subject. It is in this sense that physics, chemistry, biology, and botany are regarded as the sciences of various subjects. Similarly, logic, economics, sociology, and so on are sciences because they are all systematic, methodical and exhaustive studies of various subjects. Sciences, however, have been classified into two main groups, namely (1) naturalistic or positive sciences; and (2) normative sciences. Naturalistic or positive science is that science which explains a subject as it is. It does not concern itself with the propriety or desirability of the subject, and does not have any ideal or norm so as to judge the desirability or undesirability of the facts. For example, botany is a naturalistic or a descriptive science of plants. Its main purpose is to observe various kinds of plants, to describe and classify them, and to propound the laws which are responsible for their birth, growth and decay. Thus botany is a descriptive science of the nature of plants. The judgments passed in naturalistic or positive sciences are always descriptive judgments. On the contrary, normative science is that science which adopts some standard or norm and pronounces the judgments of propriety or appreciation about its subject-matter. Whereas descriptive science tells us how a particular object is, normative science pronounces how something ought to be. In normative science we are always concerned with appreciative judgments, whereas in the natural sciences we are concerned with descriptive judgments. For example, logic is a normative science of thought which tells us what our thought must be valid, true or consistent. Thus when we say that ethics is the normative science of conduct, what we mean is that it is concerned with the appreciative judgments of conduct. When we say that ethics deals with the right and wrong and the good and evil of conduct, what we mean is that it gives appreciative judgments of conduct.

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