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Swami Vivekananda's Thoughts on Ethics

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Abstract

From the very beginning of the human society some ethical, social, and political codes are there to pave the way for the manifestation of humanity for the betterment of the society. Among all these codes, it is accepted that the codes of ethics is the basis of all. Swami Vivekananda thinks that ethics is nothing but a code of conduct that helps a man to be a good citizen of the world. The motto of ethics, according to Swami Vivekananda, is not self, but non-self. A man who wants to behave in accordance with the code of ethics must put himself last, i.e. he must show his attention for the interest of others first. Swamiji says that all codes of ethics are based upon this renunciation; destruction, not construction, of the individual on the material plane. The ethics of Swami Vivekananda leads us to a new concept of holism unlike the traditional concepts. In this small paper I want to jump into the ocean of holism to find out the real meaning and importance of the concept of ethics of Swami Vivekananda.

Key words: *Holistic Ethics, Inner qualities, Socialization, Dissociates, Anthropocentrism, Specicism, Sentientism, Self-abnegation, Spirituality, Phenomena, Noumena*

1. Introduction

Generally the word 'ethics' refers to moral theory that involves systematizing defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. It also tries to resolve the disputes of moral diversity or moral conflict in practical life. It helps a human being to choose right path in moral conflict in particular situations. According to Cambridge Dictionary of philosophy "The word ethics is commonly used interchangeably with 'morality' to mean ... and sometimes it is used more narrowly to mean the moral principles of a particular tradition, group, or individual (Robert, 1999).

According to Rushworth (2003), "Standard definition of ethics has typically included such phrases as the science of the ideal human character or the science of moral duty". This definition states ethics as a science. To have an ideal character of human beings, being rational, have to follow ethics systematically. Ethics is nothing but a system with some abstract forms of shape. To Lobaton, moral beings have some moral duties to perform. These duties should be performed in systematic way so that ethics can be designated as a science.

Richard Willam Paul and Linda Elder says, "Ethics is a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures." (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics>). In this definition the purpose of ethics is clearly stated. It only aims to the sentient beings to be a member of moral community. In this sense it is too narrow to be accepted. Today the concepts of ethics incorporate both sentient and non-sentient beings in its arena. So, we have to think in a different way to present ethics today.

We get a new concept of ethics in the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda. The thoughts on ethics of Swami Vivekananda offer a new dimension to be a good human being on earth. It surely helps us to manifest our divinity that resides in our inner world to achieve the goal of humanity.

2. Types of Ethics

Generally, it is accepted that there are three types of ethics: Meta ethics, Normative ethics and Applied Ethics.

Meta ethics: Meta ethics deals with the theoretical meaning and reference of moral proposition and how their truth values (if any) may be determined.

Normative ethics: Normative ethics deals with the practical means of determining a moral course of action.

Applied ethics: Applied ethics draws upon ethical theories in order to ask what a person is obligated to do some very specific situation, or with some particular domain of action.

Swamiji's Concept of Ethics: Ethics, according to Vivekananda, is nothing but a code of conduct that helps a man to be a good citizen of the world. The world needs good citizens for the betterment of the people. Without good citizens, no system, social or practical can function in right ways. All the systems are developed to offer better conditions for people who want to manifest their inner qualities to get the chance to realize their real nature. According to Swamiji, "The basis of all systems social or political rests upon the goodness of men. No nation is great or good because parliament enacts this or that, but because its men are great and good ... people often work for the same ends but fail to recognize the fact. One must admit that law, government, politics are phases not final in any way. There is a goal beyond them where law is not needed. ... All great Masters teach the same thing Christ saw that the basis is not law, that morality and purity are the only strength. (Vivekananda S. 2009).

From this excerpt, it is followed that ethics or morality has something more than laws of a country that governs the people. We feel the necessity of laws, government, or politics for better governance, for the development of the society. But all these facts have some limitations. They can act only as means, not as ends. End is something more, that lies beyond these facts. They can help us to reach the goal to some extent. Ethics is also a mean to reach the goal, but it lies beyond laws. The strength of morality is greater than those facts.

Laws, politics can force a man to act accordingly. But they have no power to help a human being to manifest his/her perfection that resides in the core of their hearts. There is infinite power in our heart, but we are not aware of it. That is why we are exercising laws to keep the society intact. Laws are nothing but bondage. We have to overcome this bondage. So, we have to follow the codes of ethics. Ethics will help us finally to reach the goal.

The Goal of Human Beings: What is the goal of human beings? There are different attitudes that explain in different ways the goal of human beings. The materialists will say that a prosperous life is our goal and we are trying to apply all out world forces to achieve it. We engage ourselves in doing science to open the door of our goal. What ourselves in doing science to open the door of our goal. What do we get from material prosperity? We collect some elements to make our lives more sophisticated and more powerful. Gradually, to collect all these elements we begin to hate others and trying to cheat others to collect more money, more power, more sophistication. In this way, we are manifesting our animality. We degrade ourselves into the level of animals.

The goal of human beings is to be a human being. A human being is nothing but a combination of both virtue and vices. Animality and humanity both are there in human beings. Manifestation of humanity dissociates a man from an animal. Animal is animal from the very beginning of its life. But a human being should be a man. The manifestation of animality is spontaneous. No education, no procedure is required for the manifestation of animality. But to manifest humanity a human being should have to go

through the process of education, through the process of socialization. Human beings have goals in their lives, i.e. to manifest humanity.

Ethics as a Means: From the very beginning of the human society some ethical, social, and political codes are there to pave the way for the manifestation of humanity for the betterment of the society. Among all these codes, it is accepted that the codes of ethics is the basis of all. So, ethics has a profound role to play for the society.

All the ethical codes are always trying to help a human being to be a human being from its end. But they have some limitations. 'Do not steal', 'Do not tell a lie', - such types of ethical codes are there from the beginning of the society. But they do not tell the cause behind such codes. Not only that, they do not tell the process not to be a thief, not to be a liar. That is why; they are not able to show the right path to be a human being. All the ethical codes remain only as theories. Theory without practice is nothing but a culmination of good words and that is the reality of all the ethical theories preached from time immemorial. According to Swami Vivekananda, the goal of all nature is freedom, and freedom is to be attained only by perfect unselfishness; every thought, word, or deed that is unselfish takes us towards the goal, and, as such, is called moral. (Vivekananda S. 2007).

Motto of ethics: Swami Vivekananda clearly makes distinction between two concepts of moral and immoral. He says, "That which is selfish is immoral, and that which is unselfish is moral."⁶ (Vivekananda S. 2009, P-110) He again says, "All ethics, all human action and all human thought, hang upon this one idea of unselfishness. The whole idea of human life can be put into that one word, unselfishness." (Vivekananda S. 2009)

According to Swami Vivekananda, "The watchword of all well being, of all moral good is not "I" but "thou". (Ibid) . He again says, "Two forces have been working side by side in parallel lines. The one says "I", the other says, "not I". ... throughout creation these two forces are working side by side, where you find the one, you find the other too. The one is selfishness, the other is unselfishness. The one is acquisition, the other is renunciation. The one takes, the other gives. From the lowest to the highest, the whole universe is the playground of these two forces. It does not require any demonstration; it is obvious to all." (Ibid) . The motive power of the whole universe in whatever way it manifests itself, is that one wonderful thing, unselfishness, renunciation, love, the real, the only living force in existence.(Vivekananda S. 2007)

So, it can be said that the motto of ethics, according to Swami Vivekananda, is not self, but non-self. A man who wants to behave in accordance with the code of ethics must put himself last, i.e. he must show his attention for the interest of others first. Swamiji says, "All codes of ethics are based upon this renunciation; destruction, not construction, of the individual on the material plane." (Vivekananda S. 2007). Here Swami Vivekananda concentrates on the recognition of non-individuality. To lead ethical life or to be moral acceptance of oneness and the rejection of individuality is must. The background of ethics of Swami Vivekananda is oneness. He clearly says, "The infinite oneness of the soul is the eternal sanction of all morality, that you and I are not only brothers—every literature voicing man's struggle towards freedom has preached that for you – but - that you and I are really one...". (Ibid). The concept of oneness implies that you are a part of me, and I of you; the recognition, that in hurting you I hurt myself, and in helping you, I help myself. It says to love everyone as your own self because the whole universe is one.

It is said that Swamiji, here, actually explains the idea of morality of Advaita Vedanta. He says that the principle of Advaita morality is self-abnegation on. The Advaita says, this little personalized self is the causes of all my misery. This individualize self, which makes me different from all others beings brings hatred and jealousy and misery, struggle, and all other evils. And when this idea has been got rid-off, all struggle will cases, all misery vanish. So this is to be given up. We must always hold ourselves ready, even to give up our lives for the lowest beings. When a man has become ready even to give up his life for a little insect, he has reached the perfection....⁴ (Vivekananda S. 2009).

From this thinking of Swami Vivekananda it is clear that the boundary of morality is extended to non-human beings also to treat them as ethical beings. The duty of all human beings is not only to help other fellow beings, but also to extend his helping hands to non-human beings. So, it is free from anthropocentrism (in strong sense), specicism and sentientism like others. Swamiji says, "In every nation the thought has been preached from the most ancient times – love your fellow-beings as yourselves – I mean, love human beings as yourselves. In India it has been preached, "love all beings as yourselves;" We make no distinction between men and animals."(Vivekananda S. 2009).

Centre of Morality: According to Swamiji, "...extreme self abnegation is the centre of all morality. And what is perfect self abnegation? It means the abnegation of this apparent self abnegation of all selfishness. This idea of me and mine – Ahankara and Mamata – is the result of past superstition, and the more the present self passes away, the more the real self becomes manifest. This is true self abnegation, the centre, the basis, the gist of all moral teaching."(Vivekananda S.2009), This attitude is different from that of all traditional ethics. The traditional western ethics believes that that rationality is the basis of all morality and ethical actions. There are three main principles of ethics to judge any action of human beings whether it is right or wrong. Rationality, identity, and self-control – are the three basic moral postulates which pave the way of the possibility of ethics. No ethical theory is ready to go beyond rationality. Rather they use to think that rationality is the back-bone of all ethical theories. One the other hand, Swamiji's ethics goes beyond the rationality. It wants to go to the deepest area of the heart. It presupposes the oneness of the soul and asserts that this very concept offers the basis of all ethics or morality.

There is another point that makes difference between the concept of morality of Swami Vivekananda and the concept of morality of traditional western ethics. The traditional western ethics deals with the concept of individuality and never thinks about their unity. All the ethical principles preached by them must be followed by every individual to act morally. There is no inner connection among the inhabitance of the moral world. They are simply members of that world. That is why the diversity exists till the end. There is no scope to overcome the diversity.

On the other hand, the concept of ethics of Swamiji always tries to destroy the so called separation between man and man. To Vivekananda, the extreme self-abnegation is the centre of all morality. "I am the universe; this universe is one is the main theme of Swamiji's ethical thought. Swamiji says, "Why should I do good to others? What compels me? It is sympathy the feeling of sameness everywhere." (Vivekananda S. 2007).

So, there is an interaction among all the people of the earth, i.e. the feeling oneness. Again Swamiji says, "Ethics is unity its basic is love. It will not look at variation. The one aim of ethics is this unity, this sameness. The highest ethical codes that mankind has discovered up to the present time know no variation; they have no time to stop to look into it; there are end is to make for that sameness..." (Vivekananda S. 2007).

Here one can say that the world is full of variation. It is impossible to reject variations among people. So, the claim made by our great Swamiji is hard to accept. In this context Swamiji says, " [But] this is a fact that variation exists, and so it must, if life is to be A state of things, where all variation has died down, giving place to a uniform, dead homogeneity, is impossible so long as life lasts. Nor is it desirable. At the same time, there is the other side of the fact, viz. that this unity already exists. That is the peculiar claim – not that this unity has to be made, but that it already exists, and that you could not perceive the variety at all, without it. (Vivekananda S. 2007).

What will be the role of ethics in this context? To answer this question Swamiji says, "The work of ethics has been, and will be in the future not to destruction of variation and the establishment of sameness in the external world – which is impossible, for it would bring death and annihilation – but to recognize the unity inspite of all these variations..."(Vivekananda S. 2007).

Utilitarianism and Swamiji: At the time of explaining ethics Swamiji shows the limitations of utilitarian theory. Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that argues the proper cause of action is one that maximizes a positive effect, such as happiness, welfare or the ability to live according to personal

preferences. It is said that this theory is the paradigmatic example of a consequentialist moral theory, the principle of greatest happiness for greatest number. Swamiji says that the utilitarian theory has some limitations. He says, "The basis of utility is too narrow. All the current social forms and methods are derived from society as it exists, but what right has the utilitarian to assume the society as eternal? Society did not exist ages ago, possibly will not exist ages hence. Most probably it is of the passing stages through which we are going towards a higher evolution, and any law that is derived from society alone cannot be eternal, cannot cover the whole ground of man's nature. At best, therefore, utilitarian theories can only work under present social conditions. Beyond that they have no value. But a morality, an ethical code, derived from religion and spirituality, has the whole of infinite man for its scope. It takes up the individuals but its relations are to the infinite, and it takes up society also – become society is nothing but members of these individuals grouped together; and as it applies to the individual and his eternal relations, it must necessarily apply to the whole of society, in whatever condition it maybe at given time. (Vivekananda S. 2009).

According to Swamiji the utilitarian wants us to give up the struggle after the Infinite, the reaching out of the super-sensuous, as it is impractical and absurd. That is why they cannot explain the ethical relation of men. It should be kept in mind that ethical laws cannot be derived from the considerations of utility. Without anticipation of super-sensuous ethics is not possible. He says, "Any system that wants to bind men down to the limits of their own societies is not able to find an explanation for the ethical laws of mankind." (Vivekananda S. 2007).

Again Swamiji says that doing good to others is a good thing but that is not the primary aim of ethics. To him, "Doing good is a secondary consideration. We must have an ideal. Ethics itself is not the end, but the means to the end. If the end is not there, why should we be ethical? Why should I do good to other men, and not injure them? If happiness is the good of mankind, why should I not make myself happy and other unhappy? What prevents me?" (Vivekananda S. 2007). Of course there are some external conditions laid down by the utilitarian but they are not sufficient. No external conditions can help a man to realize his oneness. So, it can be said that utilitarian theory has some limitations.

Swamiji and Kant on Ethics: We can make a difference between ethical concepts of Swamiji and Kant. 'Duty for Duties sake' - is the main principle of Kantian ethics. On the other hand Swamiji says that love for love sake is the aim of ethics. "Duty for duties sake" – this concept incorporates the sense of ego. And also it leads to the material world, not to the spiritual world. Scope of duty comes not only from the heart, but also from the situation of the world. Worldly situation demands a duty to be performed by a certain person and he has to do this duty without any return.

The attitude is good but it has some limitations. It has no power to break the circle made by the worldly situations. On the other hand, love for love sake is a higher concept as love comes from the core of heart of a man spontaneously. According to Swamiji he is a moral being a moral being who has love only for love. Power of love is higher than the power of duty.

Duty is situational. It comes only when situation demands. Otherwise it will remain behind the certain, whereas love has no worldly boundary. It flows like a stream making invalid the demands of situation. Sense of duty is guided by the intellectual power, but love is guided by heart controlling the power of intellect.

Again, sense of duty has its negative aspects. One may take away his attention from thing thinking in this way that it is not his or her duty. If you think that it is your duty, only then you will do it, otherwise not. On the other hand, love has no negative aspects. It always shows the affirmative paths. It is love that drives away all the negative elements.

'Duty for duty's sake' helps a man to be a moral being only. On the other hand, love for love's sake helps a man to be a moral being and at the same time leads him to God by freeing from bondage.

We can make the difference of conception of morality between Swami Vivekananda and Kant. According to Kant a will is determined either by reason or by inclination, but not by both. If a will is determined by reason or practical reason, then it is called 'moral', and the action is called "morally

good” even if it does not produce happiness. According to Kant the categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of morality and it is the manifestation of reason in morals. (Dr. Show J.L., 2004).

According to Kant if a will is determined by the [motive of] categorical Imperative then it is a free will or a moral will. So, it can be said that moral will cannot be determined by inclination.

According to the observation of J.L.Shaw the view of Kant implies a dualism between phenomena and noumena in moral context. If the moral will belongs to the realm of noumena, then it becomes unknown and unknowable. On the other hand, if it belongs to the phenomenal world, then, it also, like any other entity, is determined by causal law and thereby cannot be said to be free. (Dr. Show J.L., 2004).

Again, J.L.Shaw said that Kant’s claim regarding moral principles is not tenable. Kant claims that the moral principle is synthetic a priori proposition. Hence the duty of an individual or the moral ought does not follow from the nature of human beings. (Dr. Show J.L., 2004).

Unlike Kant Swamiji incorporates the idea of duty in a more comprehensive way as it says that our duties are not confined to human beings only, rather it encompasses the whole universe. In Kant’s conception moral principles are not followed from the very nature of human beings as they all the synthetic apriori propositions. On the other hand Vivekananda claims that morality follows from the very nature of human beings as they are potentially divine. So, Swamiji does not want to treat the principle of morality as synthetic a-priori.

Again, it can be said that Swamiji’s conception of morality the free from any kind of dualism like Kant. The dualism between phenomena and noumena forces the philosophy of Kant to suffer affecting by the gulf. Side by side, if we go through the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, we will see that it is free from the said suffering as it is based on unity the gulf between phenomena and noumena will not arise.

Again, the correlation between morality and happiness is out of imagination in the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji believes that the moral actions dissolves the I, hence the question of my happiness does not arise.

Traditional western Ethics and Swamiji: The ethical concept of Swami Vivekananda also differs from the traditional western ethics in respect of treating human beings. All the ethical concepts, except Vivekananda’s concept, treat human beings as good or bad beings. Those who follow the ethical conducts are good or just persons and others are not. There is respect for the good, and hatred for the bad.

On the other hand, there is respect for everyone in Swamiji’s concept of ethics. To Swamiji, there is nothing to be a proud being who are just and an unjust person has nothing to be ashamed. He treats both of them as Christ. The salutation of Swamiji goes to everyone.

Basis of Swamiji’s Ethics: He asserted the oneness among individual by postulating equal potentiality and divinity in each individual. To support his view I can quote from complete works of Vivekananda where he says, “...potentiality, each one of us has that infinite ocean of Existence, Knowledge and Bliss as our birthright. Our real nature; and the difference between us is caused by the greater or lesser power to manifest that divine. Therefore the Vedanta lies down that each man should be treated not as what he manifests, but as what he stands for. Each human being stands for the divine, and, therefore, every teacher should be helpful, not by condemning man but by helping him to call forth the divinity that is within him.” (Vivekananda S. 2009).

From this passage it follows that each and every person, irrespective of his behavior, deserves equal respect. The differences between man and man are nothing but the differences of the manifestation of the same potentiality or divinity that resides in the core of heart of everyone.

This unity, explained by Swamiji, lies not only among all human beings but also all the beings of this universe. It is all pervasive and all encompassing in nature. He says, “The whole of this universe is one Unity, one Existence, physically, mentally, morally and spiritually. We are looking upon this one Existence in different forms...” (Vivekananda S. 2009).

Again Swamiji says that the task of ethics is not only to judge the actions of human beings, but also to help him to get out of the automatic nature, to control the vast mans of sunken evil thought. The great

task is to revive the man, as it were, in order to make him the complete master of himself. (Vivekananda S. 2009).

The basis of the concept of Swamiji's ethics is the Vedanta philosophy. Swamiji says, "The Vedanta claims that there has not been one religious inspiration, one manifestation of the divine man, however great, but it has been the expression of that infinite oneness in human nature, and all that we call ethics and morality and doing good to others is also but the manifestation of this oneness. (Vivekananda S. 2007).

Again he says that this expression of oneness is what we call love and sympathy, and it is the basis of all our ethics and morality. This is assumed up in the Vedanta philosophy by the celebrated aphorism- Tat-Tvam- Asi ,Thou art that.(Vivekananda S. 2007)

That is the relation that binds all beings with each other and that relation is the basis of all moral conducts. To express the nature of this relation Swamiji says, "To every man, this is thought: Thou art one with this Universal Being, and, as such, every soul that exists is your soul; and everybody that exists is your body; and in hurting anyone, you hurt yourself, in loving anyone, you love yourself. As soon as a current of hatred is thrown outside, whomsoever else it hurts, it also hurts yourself; and if love comes out from you, it is bound to come back to you. For I am the Universe; this Universe is my body. I am the infinite, only I am not Conscious of the infinite, in perfection will be reached when full consciousness of this infinite comes". (Vivekananda S. 2009).

3. Concluding observations

Swami Vivekananda's thoughts on ethics can be regarded as practical ethics based on normative ethics. It is practical as it throws lights on the practical life of a man. It addresses both the aspects of ethics containing two vital parts how and why a man will lead an ethical life. We are familiar with such propositions of ethics, don't hurt others, don't lie etc. from the very beginning of our lives, but why one should not behave like this was not there. It is not Meta ethics as it does not deals only with the theoretical meaning and reference of moral proposition and how their truth values (if any) may be determined. It cannot be designated as normative ethics as it does not deals only with the practical means of determining a moral course of action. Some may want to place it in the field of applied ethics as it tends to offer a guiding principle for practical life. But I think that the concept of ethics of Swami Vivekananda can't be designated as applied ethics also. Applied ethics draws upon ethical theories in order to ask what a person is obligated to do some very specific situation, or with some particular domain of action. Swamiji's ethics goes beyond the stipulated area of applied ethics as it encompasses the whole universe in the arena of ethics. So we have to find out a new horizon which is the proper subject matter of the ethics of Swami Vivekananda. According to my view the concept of ethics of Swami Vivekananda may be designated as holistic ethics, as it tends to address the whole world. It is the duty of human beings not to show ethical behavior only to other fellow beings, but also to the whole universe. The whole universe is the subject matter of Swamij's ethics.

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