

NORMATIVITY AS THE ONTOLOGICAL BASIS FOR HUMAN CONTINGENCIES

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ABSTRACT

Human predicament, pain and suffering are some of the existential problems we face in our life. These problems are studied not only at the existential discourse but often such engagements are also rooted in the metaphysical realm of conceptualizing the problems itself. In our ordinary life, we constantly grapple these problems at various dimensions in order to find meaningful answers that human beings are confronted from within and without. The essay attempts to respond these concerns with some philosophical reflection taking into account normatively as the ontological basis to understand human contingencies. This essay also suggests a possibility of engaging the hard questions for a meaningful dialogue in life.

KEYWORDS: *Dharma, Human Rights, Universal, Duty, Ontology and Normatively*

INTRODUCTION

The universal moral law provides a guiding principle for human beings. The idea of what is “good,” “bad,” “right,” “wrong” etc. are often catalogued in the universal moral discourse. In a sense, the universal moral law is considered as the ideal for understanding justice, rights, equality and these concepts are indispensable elements in forging symbiotic relationships of harmonious existence for human being. To live a good life is always a desirable goal. And to be at peace with oneself, neighbour, environment and surrounding demand knowledge of oneself, self restraint, responsibility and acceptance. The path to follow the ideal goal(s) is not simple for an ordinary person whose “being” is limited with many shortcomings and hindrances in the process of achieving the end. The basic questions require a deeper search to seek a meaningful life in cherishing the universal moral law. How human beings can uphold the universal moral principle for the good of all beings? Can the contingent being follow the universal moral law in all actions? What are the possible ways and means of achieving the goal(s)? These concerns necessitate our attention in understanding normativity as the ontological basis for human contingencies.

THE IDEA OF UNIVERSALITY

In every society, there exist, moral principle, code of conduct, set of rules to regulate the activities of individuals as members of society. Either in traditional society or in the modern State, morally accepted code of conduct guides the individual and social behavior. In a modern State, there are constitutions and laws governing the citizens – law to punish the offenders, law to execute justice, law to adjudicate disputes and settlements. There are arrays of laws – legal laws, civil law, criminal law, and immigration law etc, which are considered important to uphold the “web of social relationships” for citizens in the country. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, covenants, conventions and charters are general instruments to establish a common ideal or a global standard to guide a just and decent conduct of individuals, nations and international relations. These catalogues of rights invoke public issues and mitigate cruel, degrading and oppressive

practices which violate human rights (Sumner, 1987: 4-5). Apparently, the values which are thought as cultural specific began to take international cognizance and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on 10 December 1948 is a manifestation of universal inherent concerns for human being. For example, UDHR Article 3 states, “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person.” Article 6 states, “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” This exemplifies the legitimate concerns for all human being transcending cultural barriers, caste, race, sex, language, beliefs etc. Bearing the universal character, countries in the world have adopted these values as important in building good human families.

The universality of moral laws found in the Vedic philosophy, encompasses a holistic approach to life in relations to other inorganic beings. The *dharma* denotes a mode of life or a code of conduct. It protects, guide and preserve the whole world. The entire discipline of Hindu ethics is built on the concepts of dharma which is the bedrock of the Vedic ethos that takes into account every aspect of life. *Dharma* as a universal moral principle/law sustains and guides human beings to live in harmonious relationships with the world and god. The practice of upholding the dharma has been a tradition for thousands of years with the people. The ancient sages and *rishis* had always meditated to have a “darshan,” – a glimpse of the “Real,” the “Eternal” and the “Truth.” As knowledge is disseminated orally, the search for knowledge is intensely spiritual and has always emphasized the need for practical realization of the Truth. In this search for realization of the “Truth” or supreme happiness, *shravana* (hearing the truth,) *manana* (intellectual conviction after critical analysis) and *nididhyasana* (practical realization) are the means. And the methodology, the ways and means are explicitly described for the seeker after truth (Sharma, 2000: 13.) Certainly the quest is a journey to the inner self of a highly skilled spiritual person dwelling deep into meditation and contemplation.

The goals set forth by ancient sages hold highest moral values, applicable for all human beings on earth. The universal moral laws are the gems which characterize an individual living a life worthy of what a person should be, and therefore, a life lived with *dharma* would imply a well lived life. Examination of one’s life should be seen from the perspective of “how well one lived with the universal moral laws,” and one’s relations with fellow human beings. When we allow our minds to move a little over the edge of the moral discourse, the *dharma* and universality also constitutes not only the ways and means to live on earth but an epistemic enterprise as well. How should one follow the universal moral law? What is the possibility of achieving the ends? Perhaps, answers to the questions are not simple as one would assume them to be, because the pursuit to obey universal moral laws demands social commitment.

MORAL OUGHT

“Dharma occupies a unique place in the scheme of the Hindu value system” (Satyanarayana, 2010: 14.) It is a dynamic concept and it includes all aspects of human life such as law, justice, conduct, morality, property, truthfulness, goodness, gratitude, wisdom, self control, abstention from anger and pride, needs and aspiration of the people, time and place etc. it covers every aspects of our being – our existence, mental disposition, one’s relations to fellow human beings, environment and all other inanimate objects, the question of sustainable growth and development becomes a matter of ethical concerns. How do we sustain *Dharma* and universality in our practical life-world, where we can continue to have a meaningful life? For the mortal being, cloth with various forms of predicaments and limitation, we cannot wishfully escape from the existential crisis that surrounds us. To extend the discussion a little wider, the metaphysical notions of “original sin,” “samsara,” “birth and re-birth,” and “reincarnation” at times trouble one’s pursuit to live in *dharma*. Therefore, to live with

dharma demands a conscious will power and effort on individual and social moral actions. In order to have a meaningful discourse of universal moral laws, normativity can be seen as the ontological basis for human conduct. The normative statement refers to ethical norms and standards. Accordingly every normative statement implies that something is good or bad, or “ought to be” or “ought not to be.” For example, “You should not tell a lie to your friend” is a normative statement and its norm is the moral standard.

Dharma in a way prescribes what people ought to do (vidhi) and ought not to do (nishidh) to lead a righteous life. The aim of dharma is to bring about gradual development of the individual and enable him to attain the ultimate goal of life – purusrtha, *dharma* (righteousness) *artha*, (wealth) *kama* (pleasure), *moksa* (liberation), (Satyanarayana, 2010: 14-15.) Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative commands our will in pursuit of a particular end. Unconditionally, the imperative demands performance of an action for its own sake. It is a command of “Do Y,” an “ought” which applies to the will of all rational individuals to do one’s duty for the sake of duty (Kant, 1948: 19.) The classical example is the conversation of Arjun and Krishnan in the epic Mahabhart. Arjun follows his dharma and the dharma itself is a moral obligation, to do his duty as a commander of the army.

MORAL REASONING

Moral reasoning is a process of deriving moral truth that is not given to us directly. (not to cut trees). It involves offering reasons for, or against moral beliefs in an attempt to show those beliefs are correct or mistaken. As such reasoning occupies a major role in our decision-making process. The purpose of moral reasoning is not to win arguments against the opponents or reject their views, but to see whether there are adequate reasons to agree with one, or the other view. This would imply in our everyday living situations. In moral reasoning, we are not only concerned with choices and actions of the individuals and institutions, but also interested to know whether those choices and actions are morally right or wrong. Moral reasoning helps to formulate moral principles. In a way, moral reason indicates practical life situations. Therefore, to practice dharma is also a virtue.

“Do not steal” “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

Kant believes that for an action to be good the motive should be right, and guided by the universal moral law. When the motives to perform actions are good, actions that are performed freely out of rational will become a universal law. As such human worth and dignity are honoured and respected by all rational beings because by nature “the will of every rational being is a universally legislative will” (Rawls, 1971: 51).

It is a matter of moral urgency that as a rational agent, one cannot remain indifferent to all social impediments that happen in and around us. We have moral responsibility towards the well-being of the “human family.” As much as other people owe to us, we are indebted to them for their contribution towards our lives. Perhaps what is important in an ideal free society is that everyone can strive better for change in actions and in conduct for a better future, live in free spirit for a better development of well-being for all.

To live in society each individual recognizes the inter-dependence within the community for their growth and development. The need for interdependence requires each person to recognize and accept the legitimate claim of other’s rights. To recognize and accept the other’s claim of rights is essential for a harmonious existence. The propensity to satisfy the needs of others, like the tendency to satisfy one’s own needs can motivate a person to act in a rational manner through

the norms and accepted social values. To act reasonably, moral obligation is an integral part of social life which has a binding force on all human beings.

A.J.M has rightly stated that “human rights are necessarily abstract. They are universal moral rights and must be stated in universal terms: that is, in terms which make no reference to the particular values and institutions of any community but which are applicable to all communities” (Milne,1968: 31.) Moral responsibility is above social conventions, customary laws, and legal practices. In this sense, one ought to be responsible towards oneself and the society. And this claim has rational grounds for doing so, because the principle of universal morality is that all human beings are fellow human beings with equal respect to dignity and life.

CONCLUSIONS

The possibility of engaging with the concepts, ideals and contingencies of human beings permits us to look deeper on how one’s moral outlook is related to duty and responsibility. We know that if right exists, freedom remains as a pre-requisite condition in performing human actions. Subsequently, it implies duty and responsibility on the part of the individuals. The individual rights and duty are meaningful only when other persons are respected and honored. In performing one’s duty the moral “ought ” endures that everyone should be treated always as an end and never as a means. This can help us to live a life of a just and equal society in harmony with all other animate and inanimate things in this universe.

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