



## DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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### Introduction:

Deontological ethical theory of normative ethics which maintains that an action is right or wrong is independent of whether its consequences are good or bad. Deontological ethics takes its name from the Greek *to deon*, meaning duty, or 'that which must be done'. From the deontological point of view for example not to kill or harm the innocent, not to lie, to keep promises etc- the observance or violation of which is intrinsically right or wrong in itself regardless of the consequences.

Indian philosophy like Kant or J.S. Mill never concentrates on the discussion of categorizing Indian philosophy either deontological or teleological. At the first sight it appears that Indian ethics is characterized as teleological because almost all schools except *Cārvāka* philosophy, admit *mokṣa* or liberation as the as the ultimate goal of human life. But, it will be incorrect to characterize Indian philosophy as teleological in this account. As we note that in the philosophy of Kant, an action is characterized as moral not because it leads to attaining happiness or pleasure but because it acts according to the law of reason. Similarly in Indian philosophy, morality or *dharma* leads to *mokṣa*. In another sense, *mokṣa* is the criterion of virtuous moral or right action. This paper tries to focus on the deontological ethics as discussed in the Indian philosophical schools specially the orthodox schools.

### Methodology

This study is completely based on secondary data of journals and books. The entire study is carried out through analytic and descriptive methods.

### Statement of the problem:

The entire Indian ethical framework is deontological. Something is *dharma* (duty, obligation or virtue) simply because it is Vedic law or prescribed by *Dharma Sūtra* and *Śāstras*. This appears to be the general disposition of the Indian system. . More often than not, the Vedas and *Dharma Śāstras* have been used to define morality. It is rarely stated that morality is the path to *mokṣa*, although it is frequently stated that morality is what the Vedas prescribe, what God desires, or what indicates the imitation of the values that God has instilled. The *Mimāṃsa* clearly says there is no duty other than prescribed by the Vedas. So something is duty it is prescribed by the Vedas as duty.

The deontological approach of Indian philosophy very clearly reflected in the thoughts of *Mahābhārata*. *Mahābhārata* clearly states the relation between virtue and happiness. If virtue doesn't lead to happiness, morality would become a meaningless action. In *Mahābhārata Yudhiṣṭhira* clearly states to the *Drupadī* deontological view, 'I never act solicitous of the fruits of my actions, O princess. I give away because it is my duty to give, I sacrifice because it is my duty to scarifies. O Krishna, I accomplish to the best of my power whatever a person living in the domestic life should do, regardless of the fact whether those acts have fruits or not. I act virtuously, not from the desire I reaping fruits of virtue, but of not transgressing the ordinances of the Vedas, beholding the conduct of the good and the wise. My heart is naturally attracted towards virtue, O Krishna. The man who wished to reap the fruits of virtue is a trader in the virtue. His nature is mean and he should never be counted among the virtuous.'<sup>1</sup> Here virtue has practiced in action not because it leads to achieving any goal but because it is virtue itself. Here we can compare this view with Kant's maxim 'duty for duty's sake'. The deontological aspect is clearly sketched with *Niskāma karma*. In this regard, the very famous saying of the *Gītā* is as follows-



‘karmaṇyaevādhikāraṣṭa mā phaleṣu kadācana

mā karmaphalaheturbhūrmā te aṃgo’stvākamaṇi.

(To attain alone hast thou a right and never all to its fruits: let not the fruits of actions be thy motive, neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction.)<sup>2</sup> *Gitā* says without any attachment to fruit one should perform his duty only for the sake of duty because fruits of action is beyond the control of doer. This is the *dharma* of human beings. Besides *dharma*, duties related to one’s *Varna* and *āśrama*. However, *Gitā* puts greater value to *svadharma* rather than *sādhāranadharmā*. Sometimes there is a conflict arise between *sādhāranadharmā* and *varṇāśrama* - perhaps, *Gitā* emphasizes on *varṇāśrama dharma*. Lord Kṛṣṇa’s advice to Arjuna in the battlefield is a clear example of this. Though *Ahiṃsā* being a *sadharana dharma*: Lord Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to perform the duty of *kṣatriya*, this is his *svadharma*. It is his *svadharma* to fight against *Pāṇḍavas* for the establishment of *dharma*. Here the deontological aspect is clearly sketched in *Gitā*. Along with *Bhagvatgitā* and *Mahābhārata*, let us have an analysis of deontological ethics followed by other Indian philosophical systems.

As we know that *Sāṃkhya* system believes man as a psychological being as an evolutes of *Prakṛti*. Among the three *guṇas* of *Prakṛti*, *Sattva* is most acceptable and commendable *guṇa*, because it helps to cultivate the good qualities of human beings. One special point of *Sāṃkhya* philosophy is that, though *Sāṃkhya* school belongs to *Āstika*, yet *Sāṃkhya* criticizes in the name of ‘works’ the Vedic rituals and practices. For *Sāṃkhya* these actions do not belong to the virtuous actions, but what *Sāṃkhya* philosophy realizes that by practicing the *Sāttva* nature of man, man can pave to some extent one’s path for *Mokṣa*.

In the *Mīmāṃsā* philosophy the deontological aspect of ethics is based on the imperativeness or obligatoriness. According to *Mīmāṃsā* philosophy, the obligatoriness of an action is independent of the *phala* or consequence. Regarding this Prof. Maitra said, “According to Kumārila, the end, the consequence determines only the motive or the choice, but not the obligatoriness of the imperative.....The *phala* or consequence is only *pravarttaka*, i.e. a psychological motive but is not *vidheya*, i.e. the object of moral imperative. It is a psychological implicate of the moral action, an end as motive being necessary for moral as for all actions, but it is not moral implicate of the imperative which is obligatory independently of the end or consequence.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, in Kumārila’s philosophy, consequence or *phala* forms only motive to move the doer for action. But action to moral or immoral is related to moral obligatoriness or lack of it. The moral obligatoriness of an action follows from Vedic source independent of consequences.

Generally it is believed that in case of *kāmya karma*, the authoritativeness or obligatoriness arises from the end or consequence because of the agent’s desire or *kāmana* for the fruits of actions. But Kumārila points out that even in the *kāmya karma*, the authoritativeness or obligatoriness is independent from the *phala* or consequence because obligatoriness of an action lies in *Vidhi* itself. Kumārila points out that in the *Nityanaimittika karma* undoubtedly there is a consequence or end but the authoritativeness or obligatoriness for the duty is found here. It is noteworthy that both *kāmya* and *nityanaimittika karma*, there are ends or consequences, these consequences form only the motive of actions but not the obligatoriness or authority. According to Kumārila, the doer performs the duties only for the duty’s sake. So, in Kumārila’s philosophy, unlike *Nyāya*, we find a transition from the teleological ethics to deontological ethics.

In Prabhākara’s *Mīmāṃsā* philosophy there is no extraneous end in the *Vidhi* as imperative morally, psychologically or metaphysically. The imperative in its own end and constitutes the sanction....authority of the *Vidhi*.<sup>4</sup> Thus, *Vidhi* or moral law has intrinsic value i.e. value-in-itself and does not imply any instrumental value. What is difference between Kumārila and Prabhākara’s view is that regarding the *Kāmya* karmas and *nityanaimittika* karmas, according to Prabhākara, the former karmas are not to be called moral karmas in proper. In such actions the imperatives become *udāsina* or morally neutral. The role of imperative or moral obligatoriness is only to establish relation between ends and means. Only *nityanaimittika karmas* or unconditional duties are to be regarded as moral duties in proper. The nature of imperative



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in the *nityanaimittika karma* is intrinsic, self-authoritativeness and self validate. Therefore we can say that in Mimāṃsā philosophy there is deontological tone is found in its ethics.

The deontological ethics is clearly found in Vedānta philosophy. Unlike *Sāṃkhya* philosophy, Samkara gives importance in the performance of the Vedic actions, which includes *āsrma dharma*, *varna dharma* etc. to make the path of liberation smoother. But for Samkara these actions do not have authoritativeness lie in their being conducive to *mokṣa*. What Samkara gives importance to human virtues like love kindness etc which are the metaphysical nature of man. Samkara believed that man is identical with *Brahmana*, the ultimate reality. So, in essential nature all human beings are one, and the differences among men are only apparent and external. So, whatever men do ethically as per the metaphysical nature of men per excellence.

Like Samkara, if we go through the philosophy of Rāmānuja's *Viśiṣṭadvaitavada*, the characterization of deontological ethics is found in his philosophy. In Rāmānuja's philosophy the ultimate end of human life is the attainment of Mokṣa by virtue of believing 'samuccayavāda'. It refers to the doctrine that knowledge (*jñāna*) and action (*karma*) alongside devotion (*bhakti*) to achieve liberation. Regarding the obligatoriness of moral action Rāmānuja believes that moral qualities with their absolute and ultimate perfection constitute the essential nature of God, it is the duty of man to follow and practice these moral qualities. Thus men's moral virtues and duties are derived from the God's moral qualities. "God possesses the moral quality of compassion, so we should be compassionate towards others; God possesses the quality of forgiveness, so we should forgive those who do wrong to us, and so on. In Rāmānuja's system God is regarded as Moral Ideal with reference to which man's duties are to be deduced....So, Rāmānuja's system also is a deontological system and not a teleological one."<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

On the basis of above discussion it comes clear that deontological ethics is one of the mainstays of Indian philosophy. Most of the orthodox schools of Indian philosophy offer arguments to support the deontological ethics from their own standpoint. As we all know that Indian philosophy is rooted on the concepts of *Rta* and *dharma*. These concepts emphasize on fulfilling one's own duty irrespective of its consequences. In Indian philosophy following deontological ethics actions are judged as right or wrong not as good or bad. Because, good or bad, these ideas are related with the evaluation of consequence of action. Though Indian philosophy believes that the ultimate end of human life is the attainment of Mokṣa or liberation but by a large Indian philosophy is deontological in nature because it puts emphasis on *dharma* as it is conjoined with authority.

## Reference:

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2. BG II. 47
3. S. K. Maitra, The Ethics of Hindu, Calcutta University: Kolkata, p-126-127
4. Tiwari, Kedar Nath (1998) Classical Indian Ethical Thought, Motilal Banarsidass: Delhi, p-80.
5. Tiwari, Kedar Nath (1998) Classical Indian Ethical Thought, Motilal Banarsidass: Delhi, p-81.