

Ethics of Advaita Vedānta : an analysis

Bidyut Mondal

**Assistant Professor in Philosophy
Presidency University, Kolkata**

Abstract: Today, Advaita Vedānta occupied a great area in Indian Philosophy. The fundamental notion of Advaita influences the thought of western thinkers. Even it has a significant impact on the theory of consciousness and the theory of Philosophical Psychology. Nevertheless, it has been a trend to treat Advaita Philosophy just as a spiritualistic one. It seems that there is no moral and virtual impact of Advaita Philosophy. This paper attempts to bring out the excellence and relevance of Advaita Philosophy in providing ground for treating it as one of the best ethical theories. This paper will also focus on those Vedāntic codes, which seem very spiritualistic and will establish that they are not only spiritual but also moral. Most of the time, contemporary Indian Philosophy claims that the way how Materialistic Cāravāka Philosophy is inappropriate; Advaita Philosophy is, in the same way, incomplete to provide a solid ground for moral discourse. Whether Advaita Philosophy does not influence making a man ethical, or does this philosophy fail to bring out of the moral codes and guide a man to be an ethical one? Is there, state forwardly, no scope of morality? This paper is nothing but an analysis to unravel all these difficulties.

Key Words: Tat tvam asi, Sarvaṁ khalu idaṁ Brahman, Aham brahāsmi, So aham ātmā, Nityānityavastuvivek, Ihāmutraphalabhogavirāga, Mumukṣutva

Morality is hardly possible to define easily. Western Scholar Frankena, in this connection, acknowledges the question of morality as "vague" and "ambiguous"ⁱ. In Indian Philosophy, nature, definition, and meaning of morality are seen differently because of their connectedness. In the Indian context, morality is a general awareness or belief or faith of a man, which tells to cultivate certain principles of conduct and character. Ṛta is considered as the foundation of morality, the Vedic Cosmic code. Ṛta entails the first indication to man to adopt a moral point of view. It was considered that devatās are even controlled and guided by this cosmic moral principle.

However, our general contention is that there is no moral import of Advaita Philosophy as it conceives Brahman as one and ultimate reality. This school takes the world as an illusion or false; thus, it might seem that there is no scope for morality, virtue, etc. Sometimes it has been considered that Śaṅkara's Advaita philosophy is a merely monistic spiritualistic metaphysical theory or simply a metaphor. It has become a philosophical fashion

to treat Śaṅkara's Advaita philosophy as non-ethical. But, careful observation will clarify how this philosophy is instinct with ethical values. Max Muller believes there is a substantial ground of morality in the Advaitic tradition. He says, "The Vedānta philosophy has not neglected the important sphere of ethics; but, on the contrary, we find ethics in the beginning, ethics in the middle, ethics in the end, to say nothing of the fact that minds, so engrossed with divine things as the Vedānta philosophers, are not likely to fall victims to the ordinary temptations of the world, the faith, and other powers."ⁱⁱⁱ It has been said that once, Max Muller was asked to characterize Vedānta Philosophy. He thought for a long and replied, "Kakenotheism" or "Henotheism".ⁱⁱⁱ This theory is not vain; they are still cultured and defined by recent professors, teachers, and scholars.^{iv} It is also true that Śaṅkara's Advaita philosophy does not explicitly contain the genuine problem of modern ethics. So, it would be challenging to compile all the moral principles ethical inclinations as they are in the system in a very scattered form.

This paper will be nothing but an analysis of the inquiry about the nature of the moral, ethical perspectives in the writings of the Advaita Vedānta. Does this system fail to provide a moral, ethical attitude that could make a man *man* ? Do the Advaitins talk about virtue? Is there no influence of social responsibility in the Vedānta School of thought? Or is it merely asceticism? What moral principles or inclinations may we find in the Vedānta teachings? If we find any ethical implication in this system, what is its nature? Can we place Vedānta ethics in a new sect? We would try to emphasize all these queries and analyze them with a very analytical perspective.

Śaṅkara's Advaita theory is the advocacy of self-realization as being the highest ethical idea of human life. According to him, the Self is to be realized as our own Self. The significance of the moral life consists in the constant endeavor to make this principle more and more explicit, to bring out more and more completely our rational, Self-consciousness, and spiritual nature. This ethics through Self-realisation can be considered the motto of Śaṅkara's philosophy. It implies the refusal of the private will; it is a process of converting the ego-centric life of the moral agent into a completely different one (Spiritual). The personal will or individual will is divisive, where its denial is the manifestation of such will, which produces harmony and unity. This movement towards personal will to the divine one solves the moral problem. The Vedānta ethics helps the individual rise to a state of monistic realization by teaching universal kinship and unity of spirit. In the Vedantic discipline, the human being is treated as an evolving spiritual unit, realizing his ultimate Self through countless pseudo Self.

However, the ethics of Vedānta is mainly grounded on metaphysical exposition. Upanisadic Mahāvākyas like "Tat tvam asi"^v, "Sarvaṁ khalu idaṁ Brahman"^{vi}, "Aham brahāsmi"^{vii} "so aham ātmā"^{viii}, "Ekameva

advitīyam^{ix} are the pillars of Vedānta School. These are also the foundation of Vedānta Ethics. The excellence of these Mahāvākyas is sharing a kind of selfless attitude. Let us analyze these and find how these Vedic pillars imply the notion of morality. The first one, "Tat tvam asi," i.e., "You are that", means there is no difference between you and that Supreme who is there in all. In this sense, you are identical to me, which is more explicit in the second one. Everywhere is Brahman, from animate to inanimate. The third sentence, *Aham brahāsmi*, indicates, "I am Brahman." The fourth mahāvākya implies the atmān is Brahmān only or it is not different from Brahmān. The inner meaning of this sentence states that inherently we are not supposed to engage with evils as we are pure consciousness; we are Brahmān. The fifth vākyas carries the meaning that Brahmān is one and the only one without a second. All these great utterances postulate the absolute oneness of all things. It has also been depicted, though uniquely, in the Bhagavadgita, "In a Brahmana endowed with wisdom and humility, in a cow, in an elephant, as also in a dog and a dog-eater, the wise see the same."^x

According to Śaṅkara, there are two *mārgas* or *paths* of spiritual life. One is *pravṛtti mārga*, and the other one is *nivṛtti*. *Pravṛtti mārga* is the path intended for the person who participates in empirical life and who is governed by the feeling of attraction and aversion. Duty, here, is what promotes desire or *kāmanā*. Hence, duty is a means to the satisfaction of desire. i.e., the ends or consequences. These ends may be empirical (*dṛṣṭa*) or non-empirical (*adṛṣṭa*). The non-empirical duties are laid down in *Vaidika-karma-kāṇḍa* (in the). The empirical duties are known from *vyāvahāra*, i.e., from the custom and practices of men. These empirical and non-empirical duties together constitute a moral code for the way of desire. They, however, do not constitute the highest morality.

By attaining these duties, men enter into the trap of the empirical life of saṁsāra, where relative satisfaction is only ensured. But the real value lies in preparing the individual for the higher morality of cessation (*nivṛtti*). The second path, or *mārga*, is *nivṛtti*, thus, for the highest ethics. It is the life of absolute termination from desire and passion which generates virtue. The four-fold practice of the four disciplines (*sādhana-catuṣṭhaya*) helps a person purify their inner Self from evil. That is to say, by cultivating *sādhana-catuṣṭhaya*, one could acquire virtues and make himself virtuous. These practices are as follows:

a) *Nityānityavastuvivek*, i.e., a person must have to acquire the difference between what is permanent and what is impermanent,

b) *Ihāmūtraphalabhogavirāga*, i.e., renunciation of the enjoyment here and hereafter,

c) Cultivation of the six qualities or virtues- 1) *śama* or tranquillity, which means triumph over the mind won through *vairāgya*, 2) *dama* or means to control over the sense organs (*bāhyakaraṇānāmupaśamaḥ^{xi}*), 3) *uparati*, i.e., the formal renunciation of the acts enjoined by the Vedas, 4) *titikṣā* or the stoic endurance of dualities, 5) *samādhi* or intellectual alertness and 6) *śraddhā* which is receptiveness concerning knowledge from the teachers and scriptures. These six virtues are the fruits of intense moral training, and they are based on the upaniṣadic dictum, "therefore, having become calm, subdued, quiet, patiently enduring and collected one sees the Self just in the Self^{xii}, " and

d) *Mumukṣutva* or eagerness to be free from bondage.

These practices are purely ethical, which leads at least to Self-knowledge or *Ātmajñāna* and through *Ātmajñāna* to that freedom in a lifetime, i.e., *Jivanmukti*. The highest-end is, therefore, the realization of Self-knowledge. This kind of realization reaches its limitations and bonds of finitude and discovers its true essence. If we try to find out the virtuous person forcefully, we have to say that the person who has just realized self-knowledge must be moral. So, being virtuous may mean having the realization of Self-knowledge. We can understand this case by citing an example. The way a clean and transparent mirror can reflect objects vividly, similarly, a pure and disciplined man can apprehend the highest good. This purity does not merely refer here to the purity of the body. It implies the freedom from natural impulses like attachments, aversion, and delusion (*rāgadveṣamohā*). Such purity of mind and unbroken preoccupation with the supreme Self are embodied in the Upaniṣadic prayer, "Lead me from the unreal to the real, lead me from darkness to light and lead me from death to immortality.^{xiii}"

Advaita Vedānta advances the more monistic claim that human nature is fundamentally unqualified and faultless. Advaita describes and provides a sense of the conditions of being and guides the unenlightened individual to spiritual awareness. It should keep in mind that the selfless practices of religious duties promote purity of mind, without which there can be neither *ihāmutraphalabhogavirāga* nor mokṣa.

Vidyāranyasvāmi, in his work "Jivanmuktiviveka", classifies the spring of action based on certain spontaneous and instinctive tendencies. Motives like the causes of anger etc., are certain tendencies of the mind that are called *vāsanās*, be the causes of the emotions and passions considered unreflective and spontaneous tendencies. These *vāsanās* are sometimes called subjective predispositions. Subjective predispositions may be good or *śubhā* or evil or *aśubhā*. The good subjective predisposition has transcendental sukha or bliss for their object as distinguished from empirical pleasure. These are the pure impulses that remove the evil ones and thus

bridge the gulf between the transcendental and empirical worlds. The evil tendencies are the causes of the birth circle and samsāra circle. These are – the desire for popularity (lokavāsanā), desire for learning and reputation for holiness (śāstravāsanā), desire for sensual pleasure (deha-vāsanā), certain mental traits (mānasa-vāsanā) such as boastfulness (dambha), pride (darpa), etc. Vedānta Philosophy has considered a distinction between mānasa-vāsanā and viṣaya-vāsanā. They also talk about the purer inclinations, which we may call śuddhavāsanā, which have a significant role in our actions. However, they are not spontaneous but involved in the activity. These are as follows:

- a) Maitrī or sympathy with the happiness of others,
- b) Kāruṇya, i.e., compassion towards the suffering,
- c) Muditā, i.e., rejoicing good of sentient creatures,
- d) Upekṣā, i.e., indifference or neutrality,
- e) Śama or tranquillity of the mind,
- f) Dama or repression of the external senses,
- g) Titīkṣā or stoic endurance of dualities,
- h) Sannyāsa or renunciation.

We can see that these *vāsanās* have a significant impact on purifying blacks from mind or *citta*.

Don't you think all these have a significant role in building a man moral or ethical? Don't they make a person a moral agent? Don't they have any psychological role in building a man virtuous? If we carefully think about it, we might be convinced that the concept of goodwill in Christianity is similar to the idea of Maitrī. Muditā can be taken as the harmony of the individual with the rest of creation, where śama is a state of internal equilibrium. The principles and duties which make a person virtuous are all prescribed by the teaching of Advaita Philosophy.

Moreover, the highest duty is that which conduces to this knowledge. Thus duties of the empirical life have moral values only as preparatory training for the attainment of Self-knowledge. According to Saṅkara, the practical life responsibilities have no significance except as an initial for the higher duties of contemplation on the ultimate essence of the Transcendental Reality. To make it clear, we need to understand two kinds of Ethics – Lower Ethics and Higher Ethics. These can be understood with Saṅkara's path of *pravṛtti-nivṛtti* where the lower ethics can be related to *pravṛtti*, and higher ethics can be to *nivṛtti*. The plane of the morality of worldly men has only

an empirical significance or, at best, a mediate or indirect relevance to the true ideal of the spirit, which is a transcendent, i.e., Lower ethics.

On the other hand, the plane of the higher morality of the dianoetic virtues conduces directly to the realization of knowledge and freedom in knowledge. This kind of ethics can be considered Higher Ethics. Manu and Gita recognize the third path, i.e., *nivṛttakarmamārga* or path of disinterested duties.^{xiv} We can say that this is nothing but the synthesis of Sāṅkara's two paths of desire and cessation, i.e., *pravṛtti-nivṛtti mārga*. In this state, there will arise a spiritual void without content. It may seem that this particular state noway is responsible for building a character. Let's carefully investigate whether this kind of state has any significance. We may find that when anyone can see both negative and positive aspects as the same, he or she will no longer be guided by any wrong action. Here's the importance and relevance of Vedānta Philosophy.

We can now conclude some characteristics of the ethical attitude of Vedānta. The concept of *abheda* or non-difference, which is the key motto of Advaita, naturally leads toward a kind of ethics that only talks about love, friendship, and brotherhood. Every individual is to be treated as an end, not as a means. Similar backdrops of Kantian ethics, i.e., categorical imperative, are found in the thought of Vedānta. Kantian Categorical Imperative and Vedāntian Categorical Imperative are slightly different, though. Anyway, Vedānta requires us to respect human dignity and demands the recognition of man as man. An individual's life is not a means to satisfy her/his personal desires but is a trust for humanity. This Vedantic idea of love, friendship, and selfless action is not vain, not a Utopian concept. All of these have a significant influence and logical outcome of a rational reflection upon human's status in the universe. Even the teaching or preaching of Vedānta shares a thought where every individual should act unto others. It is not for the betterment of others but for their own sake, own happiness. These sacrificial tendencies of man prescribed by Vedānta demolish the boundary that we wrongly erect between "I" and "You"; between individuals and others.

ⁱ W. K. Frnkena, 'The Concept of Morality' included in Pahel and Schiller's (ed.) *Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory*, p391.

ⁱⁱ The ethics of the Vednta, S. Radhakrishnan, *International Journal of ethics*, () 108.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sītānāth Goswāmī, *Advaitavedānter Sārkathā*, () 21.

^{iv} Bankimgranthavalī, *vividha*, () 245.

^v Chandogya Upaniṣad- 6.8.7

- ^{vi} Chandogya Upaniṣad- 3.14.1
^{vii} Brihadaranyak Upaniṣad- 1.4.10
^{viii} Mandukya Upaniṣad- 1.2
^{ix} Chandogya Upaniṣad- 6.2.1
^x Bhagavadgita V Chap, 18
^{xi} Vivekacūdamaṇi 5.24
^{xii} Brahmasūtras 3.4.27
^{xiii} Brihadaranyak Upaniṣad- 1.3.8
^{xiv} The Ethics of the Hindus, S. Kumar Maitra, University of Caccutta, (1963) 103-104.

