

ETHICS AND FREEDOM

(Recontextualising our Core Values)

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INTRODUCTION

A discussion on a topic like this is fraught with difficulties that are illustrated by a blog and an anecdote. Ron Brown's (retired Professor of Physics, UC) blog says: "When my son was about five, we were walking along the cliffs overlooking the ocean. Dad, can you tell me what makes the waves? he asked. I told him I didn't know if I could explain it to him - that it was quite complicated. 'But will you try?' he responded as if the limitation were mine and not his!"

Niels Bohr gave a popular lecture in Copenhagen on the uncertainty principle soon after it was formulated. After the talk, a reporter asked him, "what is complementary to truth?" Bohr's reply was spontaneous "Clarity"! Words are intrinsically limited in their ability to articulate the truth accurately with clarity.

Schrodinger[1] points out that throughout history the teaching of ethics has always assumed the form 'thou shalt'. "The young argue that God is Nature, and Nature may be credited with having formed them as She wants them to be and all ethical teaching is priests' fraud"! Then they grow up and hear the same arguments from their children! Jacob Bronowsky [2] observes that while all animals are either social or solitary, man alone aspires to be both. "Ethics follows from our biological transformation from solitary to social animals ... attempting to resolve the apparent conflict between the desire to fulfill our wishes and the need to discharge our social responsibilities"

ETHICS AND FREEDOM

Our spiritual forefathers had given the topic a great deal of thought [3]. Vedanta tells us that human beings are not pre-programmed, have the choice of both means and ends and are self-conscious. They live in social groups with mutual expectations. Ethics is simply the set of values that control individual choices in the interest of social good. Legal and societal ethics form the basis of our laws. While laws can be transgressed without 'being caught', religious ethics reminds us that there is an ever-present Witness and that the consequences of one's *karma* are inevitable.

Our scriptures tell us that the uncertainty of death makes human beings instinctively insecure. They seek security in wealth, power, influence & fame (artha) or attempt to find diversion in the fulfillment of their desires (kama). Neither artha or kama can however give any real security. Their pursuit without conforming to dharma only leads to greater insecurity and feelings of guilt. It is not enough to merely know dharma, it is necessary that one's actions be in conformity with dharma all the time. One is reminded of the German philosopher Goethe's oft quoted remark that "he alone deserves freedom, who earns it every day anew".

Action governed by dharma can lead to partial (local) freedom (from guilt). Ultimate freedom is Moksha or Self-realisation. Once the Self is known, all else is known. In the Upanishadic story, sage Uddalaka tells his son, Svetaketu, 'Tat tvam Asi' (that thou art). At this level, there is no 'action' involved, just knowing is enough and the freedom is unconstrained! Indeed the oracle of the Upanishads is, 'Atmanam vidhi' (Know thy Self & be free).

ETHICS AND EDUCATION

Education has three components: knowledge, know-how and character. Knowledge relates what we know to what we learn. Know-how is the purposeful organisation of knowledge to produce a good or provide a service to meet a social need. Character is perhaps the most important component; yet character-building processes in education are the least well-defined and most difficult to implement

The paradigm of education has undergone a sea-change especially in our country. Knowledge has always been recognized as a source of power, what has changed is the question about the people in whose hands it should be placed. The gurukula (literally education in the house of the Guru) and monastic education (upto ~16th century) maintained that knowledge should only be in the hands of those with character. The Industrial revolution brought in its wake the economic need for mass production. There was a shift in the paradigm and it became pragmatic to place knowledge in the hands of all those employed in mass production (post 17th century). The age of the world-wide-web has taken us from gurukula to sishyakula (education in the house of the student) with subject experts distributed throughout the cyber world and available as e-gurus! A paradigm change followed: knowledge should be in the hands of all!

In India, character has been built on the basis of ethical and cultural values about right and wrong, largely inspired by religion and taught through informal structures, like the extended family, religious discourses and the transparent

justice of the panchayats. The colonial rule formally introduced the law as the arbiter of right and wrong. The first three appear to be breaking down & the law is no substitute for education in values [4].

Religion no longer has the influence it had until a few decades ago. The quality of life in any society is determined by the character of the middle class. It is necessary to articulate universal values, transposed into a new idiom for the middle class. Repetition plays an important role, especially in imparting education in values.

In a lecture in IIT Madras, Swami Dayananda Saraswati talked about teaching 'the value of values' very lucidly. Non-violence, he explained, is the only universal value. Teach students, he said, that the value of non-violence is far greater than the value of money or power or the fulfillment of one's desires. Acquire these non-violently and you are welcome to them! Lord Krishna tells us in the Bhagavad gita, "If you walk the path of dharma, I will walk with you, otherwise you walk alone".

ETHICS AND GRAMMAR

Ethics plays a role in society that is analogous to that of grammar in language. Grammar makes language understandable; ethical rules make social living possible. Rules of grammar impose discipline yet enable creative freedom and richness of artistic expression, ethical rules constrain us yet enrich our conduct in civilized society and free us from feelings of guilt. Redundancy in grammatical rules holds information in a balance between constraint & freedom, redundancy in rules of ethics makes occasional lapses in behaviour manageable.

Schrodinger [2] also emphasises the importance of discipline. "Great art and science have always come out of the most enormous discipline", great civilisations have been likewise characterised by enormous ethical self-discipline.

ETHICS AND SCIENCE

The University of Göttingen, between 1920 and 1930, embodied the free spirit of science: the 'helpless search for true understanding mindless of the consequences'. Hitler & World War II shattered the 'beautiful world' of Göttingen. In the words of General Bradley Hiroshima exposed us as "a world of nuclear giants & ethical infants". Scientists can ill afford to ignore the unintended consequences of their research: it is their responsibility to keep the public well-informed about the possible consequences of their research. A well-informed

public in a democracy is the best protection against misuse of the results of science.

ETHICS AND LEARNING

Roger Sperry, a 1981 Nobel Laureate, and coworkers showed through their now-famous split-brain experiments that the two sides of the brain think in fundamentally different ways. The left brain is logical, thinks in words and uses step-by-step sequences while the right brain uses visual images and intuition to draw conclusions. The synergistic relationship between the two halves of the brain is the real basis of creativity [5].

The right is effective in generating ideas because of its freedom from logic and structure. Since most of the ideas so generated fail, when tested logically, the left-brain is equally important in the creative process. Right and Left brains can however be those of two different persons as was often the case in both the Hindu and Greek traditions!

As social animals we are accountable for our actions. The left brain is logical and actions dictated by it can be accounted for. The right brain is intuitive - we don't 'always understand what we know' - and thrives only in an atmosphere of trust. In our culture it is a widely held belief that humility and faith are pre-requisites for intuitive insight and hence for creativity!

SOME INDIA-SPECIFIC CONCERNS

The school should foster open and honest exchanges among all in an atmosphere of trust. Indeed our Upanishadic prayer emphasizes this cooperative feature of education:

Sahana Vavatu; Sahanau Bhunaktu

Sahaveeryam karavavahai

Tejas Vinavati tamastu; ma vidvishavahai

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti

Are we paying attention to our own prayers?

We believe that teachers should expose young minds, that are so absorbent, only to 'data' that their own mature minds deem appropriate and emphasize humility and faith as desirable character traits. Parents should inculcate values in children before logic (ego) places hurdles in their path! Are we escaping from our responsibilities under the pretence of being 'modern and rational' ?

I will conclude with Swami Vivekananda's observation about four desirable attitudes: the first, Vasudeva kutumbakam wishing the whole world well; the

second, happiness for that of others; the third, sympathy for the misery of others and the fourth, indifference to unethical persons. The last one is worth emphasizing: focus on the good and their tribe will increase; focus on the wicked and their tribe will increase. Aren't we focusing unduly on 'unethical' people?

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