

ETHICS AND FREEDOM

(Recontextualising our core values)

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1. 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. On the topic of ethics their use often raises more questions than they answer!

Schrodinger [1], in his book "What is life" remarks 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! Schrodinger 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.

2. THE NEED FOR ETHICS

While all animals are either social or solitary, man alone aspires to be both. Jacob Brownowsky [2] asserts that “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”.

E.O. Wilson [3] observes that the most complex societies have arisen through eusociality, through individual sacrifices for the greater reproductive success of groups. Survival among the eusocial members requires the capacity to visualise and internally rehearse competing scenarios of future interactions and live by a commonly accepted code of ethics.

Ethics plays a role in society that is analogous to that of grammar in language [4]. 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 a civilized society and free us from feelings of guilt. Redundancy in rules of grammar holds information in a balance between constraint and freedom, redundancy in rules of ethics makes occasional lapses in behaviour manageable.

3. HOW ARE VALUES TAUGHT?

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 and the law is no substitute for education in values [5].

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. In this context repetition plays an important role, especially in imparting education in values. We have however become so scared of being described as bores or of alienating ourselves from the young that we have stopped repeatedly reminding our youth about the values that have sustained civilized life on this planet.

In a lecture in IIT Madras, Swami Dayananda Saraswati suggested that teaching 'the value of values' makes more sense than teaching values per se. 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 artha or kama. Acquire these non-violently and you are welcome to them! In the Bhagavad gita, Lord Krishna says, "If you walk the path of dharma, I will walk with you, otherwise you walk alone".

4. THE ETHICAL CRISIS IN SCIENCE

Knowledge has always been recognized as a source of power, the paradigm shift in education has been about the people in whose hands it should be placed. The gurukula and monastic systems of education emphasized the importance of character. They insisted that knowledge should only be in the hands of those with character. The Industrial revolution brought in its wake a shift in the paradigm – knowledge it said should be in the hands of all those employed in mass production. The world-wide-web democratized education – it asserts that knowledge should be in the hands of all! The resulting ethical crisis in the global society is best illustrated by the story of the atom bomb [6].

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 and World War II shattered the 'beautiful world' of

Göttingen. General Bradley remarked that Hiroshima exposed us as “a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants”. Scientists can no longer 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.

5. ETHICS IN THE UNIVERSITY

Ethical issues in the university are basically about trying not to appear better than reality warrants. Ethics in this context includes honesty, integrity, transparency, accountability, truthfulness, objectivity and respect. Knowledge is valuable only if it is untainted.

Research as the search for truth is an exercise in ethics and a test of character. Most common breach of ethics in the academia is plagiarism – the theft of ideas, concepts and the associated credit. ‘Cut-and-paste’ makes it easy but like all unethical practices, it only leads to insecurity. It undermines the essence of scholarship in a competitive intellectual marketplace

The University is meant to foster creativity through open and honest exchanges in an atmosphere of trust. The left brain is logical and actions dictated by it can be accounted for. The right brain is intuitive and its freedom from logic is the source of its idea-generation. Most ideas so generated usually fail when tested logically. Creativity is the result of synergy between the two halves of the brain. Bureaucracy, when not constrained by ethics, tends to destroy the line between trust and accountability. Lack of trust inhibits intuition and hence the creativity of the brain.

6. ETHICS AND FREEDOM

Vedantha distinguishes between legal and religious ethics [7]. Human beings are not pre-programmed, they are self-conscious and have the choice of means.

They live in social groups with mutual expectations. Societal ethics is simply the set of values that control individual choices in the interest of social good. They form the basis of our laws. While laws can be transgressed without 'being caught', religious ethics asserts that there is an ever-present Witness and that the consequences of one's *karma* are inevitable.

The uncertainty of death makes human beings instinctively insecure. They seek security in wealth, power, influence and fame (*artha*) or fulfillment of their desires (*kama*). However, neither *artha* nor *kama* can 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 local freedom from guilt. Ultimate freedom is *Moksha* or Self-realisation. Indeed the oracle of the Upanishads is, 'Atmanam vidhi' (Know thy Self & be free). 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!

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