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## Ethics and virtue in classical Indian thinking

Purushottama Bilimoria

### INDIAN ETHICS

Indian thinkers, like their counterparts elsewhere, recognized morality's pervasiveness throughout human life and culture, and did not shy away from enquiry into the nature of morality, right and wrong, and good and bad. On the side of "good" they placed such values as happiness, health, survival, progeny, pleasure, calmness, friendship, knowledge and truth. The "bad" were, more or less, opposites or disvalues: misery, suffering, sickness, injury, death, barrenness, pain, anger, enmity, ignorance, error and untruth. These positive and negative qualities are universalized, in principle at least, for all sentient beings, for it was felt that the highest good (*summum bonum*) is possible when the whole world can enjoy the good things that the cosmos has to offer.

Reflecting upon the meaning or applications of these judgements has been the way of bringing theory to bear upon the time-worn practices intended to yield the highest good. These may extend from ritual performances and collective desires to affective responses to challenging situations from their surroundings. In much of Indian philosophy, the beginning point is not discursive theorizing on first principles, axiomatic propositions, rational intuitions and so on. Rather, the starting point is the practices that are embedded or grounded in all human cognitive, affective, social-political and even aesthetic efforts. Over time these practices come to be embodied in a *tradition* and only then in comprehensive doctrines, or articulated first in oral and later in written texts foreshadowed by, and prefiguring, other scriptural texts. Questions about their own beginnings – historical or conceptual – seem prosaic and unwarranted (Mohanty 1995: 8). The subsequent hermeneutic and critical exegesis of these practices via the texts encapsulating their intentionalities (*bhāvanas*) lend themselves to interpretations, protocols or laws in the sense of practical wisdom (akin to Aristotle's *phronesis*), but not rigidly in the sense of *theoria* or purely discursive judgement as, for example, in Kant.

Detached thinking about morality – as on science and logic – seems to us to be more important than living precariously by the normative repertoire of the community into which an individual has been born, raised and – if fortunate enough – educated. But a person does not live by theory alone – if one lives by theory at all. Spinoza reminded the West of its first “calling” to ethics in this regard, and his method was not one dictated by science but by the human imaginary of natural reason and the full range of human interests, desires, feelings and passions.

### DHARMA'S VIRTUE

One term in classical Indian ethical discourse is perhaps the crucial one, and the closest Indian equivalent to the notion of ethics: “*dharma*”. This notion embodies the traditional pursuit of moral values and constitutes a distinctively essential aspect of Indian ethical culture, nearer to (if not a direct influence on) Hegel’s concept of *Sittlichkeit* (the actual ethical order that regulates the conduct of the individual, family, civil life and state) than it is to Kant’s ideal conception of the moral law (Tripathi 2004: 122). It has both a theoretical and a practical aspect. “*Dharma*” is semantically connected with the idea of *rta*, the underlying natural order in the Hindu belief system that connects individuals, society and the universe as a whole. This constitutes an overarching social, moral and natural order that must be maintained, and that relies on human compliance with respect to renouncing selfish desires and accepting individual responsibility. In this regard the self that is anchored in *dharma* is inexorably a “relational social self” (N. Gier, cited in Puri 2013: n. 4).

This highest good is the *telos*, the creative purpose and motivation that underpins human behaviour. The *summum bonum*, however, expresses itself in the total harmony or homology of the cosmic and natural order thus characterized. *Rta*, then, conveys the struggle for balance in the world and for the welfare of all beings, including gods, humans and animals. The interconnectedness of humanity and nature is a recurring idea and the foundation of the traditional ethical system. The belief is that the all-encompassing cosmic order must be upheld by *dharma*, the embodiment of rights, duties, laws, justice, virtue and truth. *Dharma* is the fixed position of duty and of right, in the sense of what is proper and normative. It is by no means restricted to the realm of personal ethics, but also designates religious observance and secular law, prescribing the individual’s social and legal standing within the wider domains of community, caste and station. Expanding its range even further, *dharma* connotes a general principle or law of nature to which the individual is bound in a two-fold sense, both in terms of supporting the cosmic, social and personal orders, and deriving from them a corresponding obligation. Thus, as universal order, it assigns to each entity, personal or impersonal, its specific place within the wider community.<sup>1</sup>

In its cosmic, and not simply personal, range, and because of its dual meaning of ethical duty and right, *dharma* cannot be identified straightforwardly with any of the Western conceptions of duty, much less with the Kantian maxim of the necessity to perform an action (or refrain from acting in certain situations) “out of respect for law” (and not from any consideration for the intrinsic moral worth, purpose, end served or the fruits resulting from the action *qua action*: Hutchings & Bilimoria 1988). While the imperative of *dharma*

imposes upon human beings obligations towards both fellow humans and non-human beings, it is by no means akin to the Christian idea of obedience and humility towards God or, in its secular version, obedience towards a supreme lawgiver, even if, as in Kant, that lawgiver may be oneself. It is not categorical in an absolute sense – that is, for each and every conceivable action – but is rather the paradigm that circumscribes and lays out the general framework for all possible virtues (and conversely the “vices” as well). In that sense, one could say that *dharma* stands for the paradigmatic Law, not the Holy Law.

Here is how it pans out, for example, in respect of obligations or performing one’s duty as an act of virtue. *Dharma* prescribes the acknowledgment of obligations not only towards a higher or supreme being, but also towards other, lesser beings and, again, not as a creaturely duty but as a cosmic responsibility. *Dharma* is not only a negative obligation in the shape of the restraints of duty, but it is equally the sustaining power of *right* in the sense of righteousness. Self-preservation and the preservation of all things, animate and inanimate, are equally sacred aspects of this mutual cosmic contract. That is to say, there is a system of reciprocal duties and rights geared to maintaining the cosmic, social and structural orders of the universe. Virtue requires that one performs one’s duty and lives within its limits rather than by the excesses of rights claims. The unity of duties (obligations or “rites”) and rights (“right”) is captured succinctly in the age-old concept of *adhikāra* (Bilimoria 1993). The discursive trope of *dharma*, then, serves to foreground all reflections on virtues under the reciprocal binary of obligations and rights, as will be shown in the course of the discussion that follows.

Human beings are not merely the Aristotelian *zoon politikon* or political animal, but *zoon kosmikon* as well, and thus the range of *dharma* is wider and deeper than any of its Western equivalents. *Dharma* is the idea of universal justice involving responsibility in its widest sense, a responsibility for the whole cosmos, not in the form of any external compulsion, but as immanent necessity, so that all that has ever come into existence produces its specific reaction or effect—the law of action and reaction as laid down by the principle of *karma*, which is more a metaphysical than an ethical doctrine in the usual Western interpretation.

### APPLICATIONS OF DHARMA

Since the discussion of Buddhist thinking on virtues is covered elsewhere in this volume, the focus here will specifically be on Hindu treatments of virtue ethics, with some reference to Jaina ethics that dialectically influenced the direction taken in Indian ethics right down to Gandhi. Nevertheless, it is important to mention the Yoga-*Śramaṇa* (ascetic) tradition as the common fount from which much of the Buddhist and Jaina (and to an extent, responses within classical Hindu) moral thought has arisen. It was from their critiques of various outmoded Brahmanic-Hindu practices that certain transformational shifts precipitated from the highly ritualistic ethos of the Vedic corpus to the more morally problematized normativity of the *Smṛti* (“as if recollected”) corpus that came to be comprised by the *Arthaśāstra*, epics (especially the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata* and its philosophical book, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*), emerging with a stronger social and self-reflexive conscience (Bilimoria 2007). The Vedic norms came increasingly into question, undermining the erstwhile normative structuration, confidence, violence and power that this kind of formative

moral plank – supposed to embody the originary and founding insights of Indian ethics and law – made possible or sanctioned. The legacy of this period and the texts/textuality arising therefrom have left a large gap in the more *logocentrically* grounded Indian ethics: a gap with which philosophers, jurists, ethicists and political thinkers are still grappling.

Yoga-*Śramaṇa* morality had focused on smaller social units like the family as the focus of economic and moral uplift. In general terms, the emphasis was not always on “what should I do?”, but rather “what sort of *person* ought I be?” Individuals who develop the right kind of character would respond through discerning thinking and affective will (*vyavasāyātmikābuddhiḥ*) to particular situations in the most natural way, by taking the context into account: a process also captured in Aristotle’s ideas of *phronēsis* and *orthos-logos*. Moral freedom here involves a more reflective turn of mind than the mere ability or dexterous “skill” (*technai*) towards negotiating varying choices; the latter may well result in excellent “product” while a virtuous act may yield no product as such, for it may suffice as a mere appropriate gesture (e.g. showing *pathos* or empathy in another’s grievous suffering).<sup>2</sup>

Both in the area of interpersonal relations among humans, as well as our attitudes to the non-human world, Yoga-*Śramaṇa* does not use a kind of interpersonal measuring technique but responds in terms of the more emotionally binding pathways of compassion and kindness. Sharper distinctions in the moral sphere like those between benevolence and kindness, kindness and compassion, compassion and sympathetic joy are hard to catch through an impersonal calculus. Utilitarian philosophy, especially as represented in the work of Bentham and the Mills, emerged in a certain historical context and, to be fair to that philosophy, it has to function within that framework. The Yoga-*Śramaṇa* framework is somewhat different, in spite of the formal resemblances to utilitarianism in upholding a moral theory with a teleological-consequentialist axis.

The Buddha himself, following the cue from the Yoga-*Śramaṇa* and Jaina critiques of Brahmanic-Hindu ritualism, couched the discussion of virtues in terms of the rightful performance of social duties and moral obligations rather than the ascription of virtues – much less virtues localized to individual egos – as we have had in Western moral philosophy, since Aristotle and the Thomists (or Alasdair MacIntyre more recently). The former is perhaps not unlike the Stoics’ virtue performatives.<sup>3</sup> This in turn had an impact on the *Smṛti*-derived *śāstric* moral (or *dharma*) rethinking.

Virtue informs the reciprocal relations between friends and companions: a person should display towards a friend generosity, courtesy and benevolence, treat him or her well, and keep promises. The friend thus ministered to reciprocates such conduct by protecting his or her companion when they are careless and off their guard, looking after their property, offering a refuge in danger, not letting them drown in their troubles, and showing consideration for their family. In similarly reciprocal fashion, the householder is expected to be friendly to ascetics and brahmanas in act, speech and thought, to keep his house open to them and to supply their temporal needs. The ascetics and brahmanas should counsel householders to refrain from doing evil, direct their mind towards the good, show compassion towards them, teach them what they have not heard, correct any wrong conceptions they have received, and reveal the path towards transcendence.

The Jainas have historical links with Greek gymnosophists – “naked philosophers” – and Stoics, and of course Buddhists, with whom they share the non-brahmanical yoga-ascetic heterodoxy. The cultivation of virtue, particularly through the practice of nonviolence, demonstrates a close link between the metaphysical and the ethical in Jaina ethics.

The Jainas posit a living universe that must be protected. This respect for life developed into a series of comprehensive treatises on the nature of karma. The later philosophical tradition, as articulated in Umāsvāti's *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (ca. 100 CE), states that the universe is brimming with souls weighted by karmic material (*dravya*), many of which hold the potential for freeing themselves from all karmic residue and attaining spiritual liberation (*kevala*). These souls constantly change and take new shape due to the fettering presence of karma, which is described as sticky and colourful. By first accepting this view of reality and then carefully abiding by the five major vows (nonviolence, truthfulness, not stealing, sexual restraint and non-possessiveness), the Jaina aspirant moves towards the ultimate goal of untrammelled spirituality. At the pinnacle of this achievement, all karmas disperse and the perfected one (*siddha*) dwells eternally in omniscient (*sarvajña*) solitude (*kevala*). By carefully observing harmlessness to the greatest degree possible, one purges oneself of the negative karmas that cause repeated rebirth within the lower realms of the cosmos.

### EMOTION AND VIRTUE

In the broader Indian theorizing on ethics there is a strong connection made between emotion and virtue. A brief discussion of the battlefield dialogue between Krishna and the distraught warrior Arjuna in the epic *The Mahābhārata* (1985), narrated in the book famously known as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which we shall render as the “Great Song”, will help bring out some salient features of this connection and highlight three basic insights that arise from it.

Moments before a major assault is launched, the warrior Arjuna shows signs of fatigue and loss of strength, letting the powerful bow *Gāṇḍīa* slip from his hands. His half-muted request to slow the chariot to a stop takes Krishna, his charioteer-friend, by surprise. Arjuna is palpably troubled by something and his judgement appears to be hazing over: there are more components to it than his regular cognitive percepts would indicate. It is a matter of (his) *mood*. His “inner sense” is thrown into a state of confusion, panic and deep pity (*kṛpa*), his limbs have become weak, mouth dry, body trembling, hair standing on end, and skin erupting in a burning sensation. He confesses that the once-cherished desire (*kaṅkṣe*) for conquest and his aligned convictions appear shaky; he wonders aloud whether there is any joy at the end of this bloody journey – or even in living? (I.32). Expressing a deeper fear for the death of his kinsfolk at his own hands, he says to Krishna: “Therefore there is no justification in killing our own kinsfolk” (I.37).

Arjuna continues his disquisition, underscoring utilitarian appeals to the evils of warfare and a plea towards altruistic compassion: “the rescinding of family laws, ancestral rites, and timeless traditions, with the ultimate consequence of the collapse of society and descent into hellish chaos” (I. 40–44). He can no longer stand by his earlier resolve to fight, now that the “moral emotion” that he is struggling to articulate appears to be inconsistent with the “moral duty” he was brought up to believe in.

Fallen into self-pity, the despondent warrior pleads to Krishna to make sense of his woeful plight. Is Arjuna appealing to the pristine virtue of reason over emotions, or is he instead asking Krishna to tell him if his emotions are serving him well? Can emotions prefigure morally appropriate, “objective” and reasonable responses, even if they appear to elude his cognitive or rational discernment? He has not yet discerned clearly whether

he feels shamed, guilty, regretful, remorseful, or a combination of these; or none of these but something else. Krishna, for his part, proceeds cautiously in helping Arjuna unearth his deep perturbation.

Krishna plays the dual role of a guru and an analyst rolled into one. The guru can, with measured smirk and laughter (*hasya*), rebuke his honoured friend for losing heart at a critical moment. As an analyst though, he implores Arjuna to search out reasons for the fragility of his judgement. Arjuna's objections to engaging in war appear to be based on well-thought-out and firm ethical grounds, but when he sets out to articulate the "inspired thought" intelligently, his arguments emerge as being scarcely coherent, and the appeal to his own conscience is minimally illuminating. But he is concerned that he is not able to see justice in this situation. In other words, he gives vent to a moral sentiment that he has arrived at as though intuitively (as Hume might also put it); his arguments, it will be noticed, are tangled up in his intense emotional reaction, the source of which he is not able to discern clearly. We can wonder why Arjuna remains perturbed by his emotional condition despite Krishna's irenic response. Why would Krishna want to seemingly dismiss his friend's condition? Is it a socially improper or morally unworthy state to be in? Perhaps it is psychologically or psychosomatically painful and therefore bereft of utility? Or is such an emotional state simply irrational because it fogs well-intended judgement and vitiates the Rawlsian equation of "rational frustration" and "appropriate moral response" that Matilal (2007) sanguinely argued for elsewhere? But what if emotions have other values and efficiencies (*bhāvaka*)? For example, a "moral emotion" may go against the grain of cherished religious mores that might, in themselves, be irrational. Have not his emotions made Arjuna a little more reflective, muddled though he is now, than he might otherwise have been about his proper duties? Is he not, as a result, at least "talking it out" with his friend? Indeed, might there not be an obligation to have such emotions, just as there is a duty on Arjuna's part to engage in an action? Might it not also be a person's inalienable right, on a par with aesthetic or dramatized emotions, whose value no one really questions in the comforts of a theatre seat or the civic sponsored museum and art gallery?

This dialogue brings out some salient features of the relation between emotion and virtue and highlights three basic insights. The first insight is that a deeply subjective dimension with a strong *evaluative* sensibility is implicit in emotion, from which certain judgements about good and bad, desirability or undesirability, approval and disapproval are projected onto the object, the act, the "other", the event or the situation in the relevant field of awareness. One might call this evaluative aspect a *belief*; that is, the subject believes some state of affairs to obtain. This might arise as a second-order judgement when passion has delivered its own verdict to reason, as when one rhetorically introspects: "I am an idiot; why did I react in anger? But I did feel right about it at the time." This evaluative stance is considered to be a significant ingredient of emotion as it is an important (though not the only) way by which a culture grounds its citizens' responsive sensibility towards personal and social values, ethical imperatives, shared experiences and moral recollections of the tradition (or transcendental valuing). It is for this reason that moral dilemmas and conflict of values are able to evoke such strong emotions; and conversely, emotions articulate these moral perturbations – this is the theme of the next insight.

The second insight is that emotion reflects the moral repertoire of the community or culture of which the person is a significant member, in that conflicts may begin to surface when there is a clash between an emotional response or sentiment (*bhava*) in the subject

and certain moral principles enshrined in the culture (the “horizon” or “background moral knowledge” of the tradition). Thus, suppose that after the Buddha and the Jaina, and by the time of the great Epic tradition (or even as late as Gandhi facing the colonialist General Dwyer), the principle of *ahimsa* or non-injury becomes constitutive of the cultural self-understanding and the moral order of a people, but that the calling to war is considered to be a great virtue and the need of the day: *duty as virtue*. As a result, a citizen may feel immense tension welling inside her, because her emotional response suggests a negative moral evaluation of the consequences of war, the value of which she thought her community had valorized, and which she had indeed internalized. The absent loci of a strong corresponding *bhāva* (sentiment) for the virtue *ahimsa* and its surrogate sentiment of non-aggression is being usurped by the more threatening virtue of *himsā* (violence) with its surrogate *bhāva* of aggressiveness; this inversion may now stand poised as the “intimate enemy”, the scourge of the “bounds of righteous duty”.

The third insight is that there is a show of altruistic compassion (*daya, lokakṛpā*) reinforced by what seems to be a dispassionate but patently consequentialist appeal to adverse outcomes if some other sentiment or “calling” is heeded rather than the one “appropriate” to the occasion. Thus the warrior-citizen Arjuna might be led to construe his existential state as being one of intense depression; and is thereby provoked into fearing the consequences of the pending encounter. The dispassion may be expressed through a story about the disastrous state of affairs the society will be plunged into in the aftermath of the battle. In other words, utilitarian and consequentialist considerations are searched out and appealed to in order to reinforce the fledgling moral judgement, but more importantly to determine the correct emotional response to the case in hand: how should one act under the circumstances? Compassion might be the first step in the procedural directive being worked out by allowing greater scope to “intelligent sentiment” than mere reliance on the cool, detached, *dis*-passionate aloofness of reason. The “rational”, or what would be considered reasonable in real-life responsiveness, is not a prerogative of reason alone (as in most theories of rationality, or economic rationalism) (Posner 1981: 1).

### ANTI-VIRTUES

Counterfactually, the theory that underscores the role of emotions in virtues finds it expedient to elucidate certain “anti-virtues”, the overcoming of which might give one a better understanding of what the true virtues are.<sup>4</sup> According to *The Mahābhārata* (1985: bk 4/5, 289) there are twelve negative emotions that make for the polar opposite or divergences, namely, “anti-virtues” (a term I prefer to Aristotelian “vices”) in that these emotions stand in the way of self-control and so are to be avoided. These are: anger, desire, greed, delusion, possessiveness, non-compassion, discontent, pride, grief, lust, jealousy and abhorrence. It is interesting to note that anger and desire head the list. The classical Indian Yoga system has a term stronger than emotion (as *bhāva*) for these modes; they are called *kleśas*. The Abhidharma Buddhist school has a similar theory about *kleśas* functioning as emotional predispositions or tendencies (*anusaya*), which lie “dormant” or latent at the unconscious level. The *kleśas* are regarded as forms of psychic sedimentation which give rise to mental disturbances or excitations, and, like cognitive responses, these are deeper or more robust responses than bodily “feelings” (*pathē*) or mere *habitual* dispositions (*hexis*).

Desire as lack, then, is a prime suspect heading or enveloping all *kleśas*: it colours all our emotions from beneath as it were, and its frustration translates more readily into obstructive anger than into pleasure (though perhaps both). However, that morbid pleasure (desire as plenum) might be seen as more obstructive than “righteously felt indignation” would in some contexts. Thus, while Arjuna could be said to have harboured a *desire* for the kingdom in dispute (at least until the moment of his emotional collapse), he appears not to have expressed any anger. This is rather puzzling, given that he seems to have been overwhelmed by just about every other major negative affect, and took some pleasure in the positive affect of generalized compassion (*kṛpā*). I want to dwell on this issue awhile.

It appears that the *Mahābhārata*’s Great Song is open to alternative perspectives to the stark ascetic or stoical tendencies of the ancients. As we saw earlier, Krishna, although apparently denigrating them, did not deny or show disrespect for Arjuna’s revaluations of his calling to war, his duty, and so on. In point of fact, Krishna listened intently and recognized a touching concern. He only rebuked Arjuna, or rather questioned him regarding the *grounds* on which he was making his revaluations, just as Arjuna could expect to be questioned were he making them in a perfectly regular (or “normal”) rational state. Is he sure that he is not simply projecting his own self-pity as generalized sympathy or altruistic compassion onto others?

Nevertheless, Arjuna proved right in the long run in his prophylactic emotional response. Everything the beleaguered warrior suspected in his apparently confused, fearful, semi-morbid and besotted state – the destruction of the kingdom, the burning down of the Khāṇḍava forest with all the animals therein, the carnage of the elders, the collapse of family and tradition, the ruin of his bow, *Gāṇḍīva*, the demise of his invincible golden chariot, and so on – did eventuate and was recognized to be so during the tragic course and untriumphant inconclusive ending of the war. The evil that Arjuna had portended in his seemingly bizarre emotional turpitude, and the reasons he proffered for his fears in that most despondent and emotionally charged condition (I.31/36–40), played themselves out in the real world. Although, to be sure, the moral *judgement* he ventured in his perturbed state was not what the society, consistent with the norms of the time, was prepared to countenance, as we can observe in hindsight (Matilal 1989). It is clear that any consequentialist appeal, whether by the agent or by the theoretician two millennia on, will not suffice to justify a particular emotional response.

The second point here pertains to the relation between desire and karma or action. Karma is necessarily conditioned by an antecedent *kāma* (desire) and ineluctably followed by a corresponding *phala* (fruit), either in this or in a subsequent life-world (*punarjanma*) (de Smet 1977: 59). All actions are binding and also delimited by their outcome: good ones to (and by) a pleasant fruit; bad ones to (and by) a painful one.

### EMOTION WITHOUT VIRTUE IS BLIND; VIRTUE WITHOUT EMOTIONS REMAINS EMPTY

As should be apparent, the discourse of desire receives a great deal more attention than, say, anger in the Great Song. Krishna has not denied Arjuna’s inherent capacity to make fair judgement of the situation, he has simply cast doubt on Arjuna’s ability to reason and correctly evaluate his situation while being in the grips of desire. This is indeed a paradox:

Arjuna believed that he had come to the point of relinquishing all desires – the desire that attaches itself to glory, fame, booty from war, a share in the disputed kingdom, the fulfilment of caste-duty, and so on. His desire has been perturbed by his emotional response in the situation. Krishna, on the other hand, in his presumably higher wisdom or culturally privileged position, tells Arjuna that he is afflicted with desire, and attachment to desire causes other kinds of perturbations; not least, frustration, anger, a sense of unsatisfactoriness (*duḥkha*), and an undignified death at journey's cruel end. Only if a person will rid himself of all desires and remain content within himself, will he be called (*ceteris paribus* in the larger hermeneutic reading) “a person of balanced reason” (*sthītaprajñāna*, II 55). Time and again Krishna's sermon underscores the negative aspects of emotions such as anger (II 56), fear (V 28), passion (V 26) and egotism (II 54), unless moderated by the cool judgement and dispassion of *buddhi*, a resolute will steeped in wisdom (*jñāna*) and ethically fine-tuned action (*niṣkāma-karma yoga*).

In practical terms what is expected of Arjuna or any adept is not the willingness to forfeit or relinquish these emotions in their entirety – and desire is no exception here – but rather to exercise in incremental measure the virtues of (a) equanimity or a mean sense of balance, an equilibrium, and (b) dispassion or disinterested passion (*niṣkāma*) towards and between the extremes, so that work (*karma*) goes on. Krishna preaches even-mindedness (*samata*) towards pleasure and pain – in general, indifference towards pairs of opposites (I 57, II 38, II 45) – as well as not being too excited when experiencing joy, nor feeling ruffled when facing sorrow (V 20). In this light Aristotle would be mistaken in holding that anger is essential to a good human life (see Stocker with Hegeman 1996: 253). However, the kind of dispassion that Krishna is preaching here is appropriate only in relation to insufferable personal affront rather than a slight to one's group, clan or communal identity – for which the reaction is more structured and where the respondent at large is the tradition. “Balanced reason” was the virtue most exalted above self-pity and self-concern, and even over the virtues of compassion, dispassion, altruism, and self-enlargement or self-realization, for the objective is to let *truth* (not self or one's god or aura of a beloved) shine through emotions (*bhāva*, *rasa* and *bhakti*) as much as in cognitions and hermeneutical acts. The kingpin is reason. The seat of reason is *buddhi* (or *bodhi* in Buddhist rendition) – the intelligent will – and it is towards the stabilization and refinement of the latter that the qualities and virtues being inculcated here are *out-tended*. While one can use yogic methods to withdraw from the objects of sense in order to prevent further sensations from arising – as the oft-used metaphor of the tortoise withdrawing its head suggests – it is not so easy to curb inner and unconscious perturbations born of *kleśas* (“psychic black mirror”) and other sedimented (inverted memory) traces. Tranquillity (*śhāntarasa*), achieved through prolonged practice of concentration of the mind, or meditation, may be necessary for the “cessation of all sorrows” (II 65). Disposition towards nonviolence, veracity, absence of anger, compassion for all beings, and freedom from the thirst of either extreme are among the highest virtues inculcated through the pragmatics of yoga; but virtues can never take the place of experienced or felt affectivities themselves. The ideal is a mere surrogate for the real thing.

## VIRTUE IN BIOMEDICAL PRACTICES

The combined Śramaṇic or Jaina-Yoga-Buddhist ethics of virtues has had tremendous impact in another area or branch of ethics as well, namely, biomedical/bioethical practices. Many scholars have argued that the beginning point of Indian bio[medical] ethics ought to be the *saṃhitās* of Caraka and Śuśruta, dating back to antiquity (ca. 1000 BCE). However, these are mostly recordings of normative prescriptions and desirable practices by the prevailing norms of the society in the particular era these authors lived through. Principles can only be drawn by extensional parity from such nuanced pronouncements, rules, norms and practices; admittedly, it takes a lot more to work up a principle, as distinct from rules and normative observations. Perhaps in hindsight that is the calling of the philosopher of the tradition. Nevertheless here, in these textual forays, we find explicit prescriptions concerning the duty of virtuous physicians, which is to attend to, heal, and return to good health the ailing and the afflicted, regardless of their race, caste, social status and standing. There are explicit prohibitions against fatal harm (*ahimsā*) to oneself as upon others inscribed in *Āpastambasūtra* I 9.25, I 3, 6; *Īśavasya Upaniṣad* 3; Kautlyā's *Arthaśātra* IV 7; *Parasara* IV 1–2: *Yama* 20–21; *Manusmṛti* II 90–91, V 89; *Yajñavalkyasmṛti* III 253; *Gotamasmṛti* 23.1; *Vaśiṣṭa-dharmasmṛti* 13.14, 20.20, 23.14–18. In all these treatises, the bottom line appears to be reverence for all forms of life, from micro-organisms and plants to animals and human beings (Coward *et al.* 1989: 71–103). But it proscribes treating those who are extremely abnormal, wicked, or of miserable character and conduct, as well as “those who are at the point of death” (Menon & Haberman 1970). Hindu medical ethics would appear to stress the importance of the proscription against killing. Buddhist medical ethics, consistent with its general moral sensibilities, emphasized the virtues of non-injury, compassion, and an ethic of care towards all creatures, great and small. Jaina ethics echoes both the Hindu and Buddhist medical ethics, with an unusually positive disposition towards “voluntary fasting to death” under certain circumstances. Some forms of spiritualized “good death” could be a virtue in itself, clocking up more merits; and such extraordinary good deeds even in Aristotle's account assures one a transition into the after-world.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The overall teaching on virtues in the Indian ethical tradition comes down to this (as a conditional counterfactual): If one could cultivate the alternative emotion of detachment (*asakti*) as a virtue in its own right (*Bhagavadgītā* III 25), freeing oneself from the temptations of *kāma* (desire) and also anger, then one would achieve a state of reasonable intelligence (*vyavasāyātmikā buddhir ekeha, ibid.* II 41) and in this resolute state determine the best course of practical action. Such actions would be *niṣkāma*; that is, empty of desire and *sthita-prajña*, and “of steadfast constitution”. This is a normative heuristic, not a categorical imperative, for virtues can no more be prescribed than emotions. They can only be cultivated, prophylactically and pedagogically, in a cultural setting. Actions carried out in this state do not bind one; that is to say, karma no longer accrues, for one no longer expects rewards from one's action (II 39/VI 14). Desire and self-interest bracketed, one is left in a state of freedom to perform actions from a sense of duty (rather than feel compelled by duty or the “force of law” as commandment).

Curiously, this locution about duty without regard to the fruits begins to sound like the Kantian maxim of duty over passion. We have argued, however, that this is not an appeal to a deontological imperative with a strong “ought” component. Rather, it involves a significant apprehension of a situation, with a strong “is” component. It is one thing to say categorically, “Do X, according to your duty, without regard to desire”; but quite another to say, appealing to prudence, “Do X, according to your duty, when you are at peace with desire in that intention.” The former can lead to suppression of desire and pathological inclinations, for it ignores the impact on the subject’s well-being as well as the subject’s connection to a cultural system of values. The latter, on the other hand, clearly draws attention to, and challenges one to come to terms with, desire, recognizing that unless one is at peace, the mental life, which in turn affects the moral constitution, may not be firm (*dhr̥ti*) so as to guarantee a balanced harmonious judgement, nor also, therefore, the goodness of the fruits or results of the ensuing action.

The moral import of emotions is not, then, undermined in the interest of emphasizing the obligations in respect of duty. Indeed, duty is understood, appreciated and re-appraised through insightful emotional response, as Aristotle in book II of *Ethics* also stipulates (II 5). This response is modulated, on the one hand, by self-love and, on the other, by regard to the wider horizon of cultural sensitivities. Towards the very end of their enchanting though exhaustive colloquy, Krishna does not issue an unmitigated command to Arjuna; rather, he leaves it to his own better judgement, with these telling words: “Having reflected on this [my words] in all its ramifications, *do as you desire*” (XVIII 63, emphasis added). In short, Krishna did not implore Arjuna to eliminate all desires, perform his duty regardless of desire, or to simply do his bidding “because I am your god”.

Echoing Nussbaum’s insight that late modernity is turning its ethical gaze towards the ways of the ancients (1992: 9), the major differentiations between Indian ethics and modern Anglo-American efforts to ground moral philosophy are found in tradition and concrete particularity gaining emphasis over abstract, ahistorical universality, and its respect for deeply rooted practices, customs, mores, laws, values and lived wisdom, which are seen as more important than purely theoretical concerns. One has to learn to imagine what it is to think ethics *with* the tradition, rather than *for* it. Reflection and rational justification embraces alternative possibilities and critiques (Śramāṇic-yoga or Jaina-Buddhist versus Brahmanic categories), and prioritizes the wider community or social whole over the unmitigated interests of the individual as the basis for ethical virtues of moral care until, perhaps, later in the lifecycle (for example, the added value of *mokṣa* or spiritual liberation). The eminent centrality, especially, of virtues, emotions and aesthetics – and their inexorable interrelation, as shown in the argument of the Great Song – is also fixed within the Indian ethical framework and so is never far from its thinking on normative principles and their applicability.

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## NOTES

1. A final consequence of this conception of *dharma* is found in Buddhist logic, where all phenomena in their fixity and quiddity are called *dharmas*.
2. See Aristotle's distinction between *aretai* and *techai* in his *Ethics*, book 2 (II, 4. 110a17–b5).
3. See Sharpe, this volume, Chapter 3.
4. The bulk of the discussion in this section occurs in a chapter treating more fully of emotions (but not virtues as such) in Bilimoria (2004).