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Morality: Gandhiji's View and Its Relevance in the Modern Times

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Abstract:

One of the fundamental concerns of M.K. Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) was that of the question of morality. Gandhiji understood man as basically spiritual being, and so a moral being. As such he was mostly concerned with the moral development of each and every individual. In fact, each and every aspect of his philosophical ideas like, Satyagraha, religion, prohibition, human nature, khadi, Swadeshi, constructive programmes, etc. in one way or the other shows his endeavour to give a moral basis for human existence and promotes morality of man. The present paper is an attempt to throw some light of his ideas or understanding of morality, and how it is related to his philosophical ideas and moreover examines their relevance in the modern time.

Key words: *Morality, society, human nature, moral laws, moral actions, politics, religions*

1. Introduction

Morality (Latin mentor plural-moralia) is a multifaceted term. It is commonly used in describing the teaching and practical lessons of literary and artistic works. As a descriptive term about the cultural and social realm, morality signifies the habits and norms of behaviour that established right and wrong conduct for individuals in particular societies. Normatively, morality is the systematic and principled reflection concerned with determining what ought to be the standard of conducts and duties for particular agents and communities and how these standards are reproduced in members of society. In this sense, morality thus specifies the proper practice of individual and communal life and prescribe what constitute the "good life", and how it is to be attained. In doing so, moral reflection draws upon the cultural, religious and theoretical world views and values of particular societies in determining the proper standard of behaviour.¹

Morality is also a term of social theory used to describe the range of acceptable human behaviours, that is, the norms that structure and guide proper, intentional behaviour for a particular community. In this sense morality determines the customs and principles that particular societies used to determine what is wrong or right for behaviour in that social order. At the external level, morality can merely signify the customs and common practices that tell a member of society how to act within interpersonal relationship and social circumstances.²

Morality also describes the process of judgement whereby people determine what actions to undertake. As opposed to anthropological descriptions of social and individual behaviour or judgement that are narrowly customary, aesthetic, or political, moral judgement specially inquire into what behaviour or action one ought to undertake. This view of morality, most commonly studied in moral philosophy and moral theology, denotes a set of inquiries that purport to describe and analyze human behaviour through determining. "What ought to be the case" from some 'objective' perspective that goes beyond descriptive accounts of actual behaviour or mere instrumental achievement of prudential goals.³

2. Morality and Society

The word "morality" comes from the Latin word "moralitas" meaning "manner, character and proper behaviour". Morality generally refers to a code of conduct, that an individual, group of society holds as authoritative in distinguishing right from wrong, such an ideal code of conduct is often espoused in preference. For an individual as well as a society, morality is one of the fundamental sources of strength, just as immorality is one of the main causes of decline. Thus, everything that led to the welfare of the individual and the society is morally good and whatever is harmful is morally bad.

Also, the source of all morals is within the nature of a human being – his disposition and his various natural states explain it. If human faculties are the source of morals, and sometimes we see immoral actions emanating from human beings, are we to understand that some of these emotions and faculties are evil in themselves? Here, the Holy Quran has answered this question in the negative, telling us that the headwaters of human birth are not muddled, nor is sin and immoral behaviour an intrinsic part of his nature. The human being is simple and pure by nature. Its true nature is endowed with guidance and Divine inspiration, he has been created in the finest make and endowed with righteousness. In short, forbearance, honesty, truthfulness, steadfastness, contentment, self-control, bravery, chastity are all moral qualities of high values. Yet these become a part of the list of good moral qualities only if they are free of all ill-intentions. Without good intentions the very same deeds can become damaging to one's morals. A person showing forbearance and humanity in order to deceive people, or offering prayers to show of piety, would be

better off if he did not have these quantities of forbearance, humanity and Divine worship. He is in fact insulting the real rectitude and goodness and practicing deception. In short the moral culpability has been naturally provided within us, and none of our powers and emotions are evil in itself, rather, these take on an evil hue if used inappropriately or wrongly.

3. Moral Concept of Gandhiji

John Locke declared “Morality is the proper science and business of mankind in general”. Gandhiji firmly believed in this dictum. He preached and practiced the same with his characteristic stark honesty and sincerity. And in doing so he, consciously or unconsciously, took into consideration so many topics that fall within the purview of moral science. On several occasions at the demand of circumstances he gave his opinion on ethical problems that might sound naïve to a well – disciplined ear. But Gandhiji’s primary concern was humanity. His mode of thinking did not follow the hard and fast rule of scholarly discourse. He wove the moral world around humanism, the nucleus of his thought.⁴

Historically, a moral judgement passed from settled habits, customs, traditions, and more ceremonial and civil laws to reflective principles that form the plinth of a scientific ethical system, applicable to all times and people. Gandhiji felt the necessity of “conventional behaviour” in a society.⁵ He also condemns mere conventional actions as immoral, and intended to eliminate them from ethical consideration on the ground that we do not act in these cases voluntarily. Conventional actions are often instinctive, and hence non-voluntary. Thus, to Gandhi a moral action is not a blind or an instinctive exercise of our minds. It is a reflective one, an outcome of our free will.⁶

Also, morality as understood by Gandhi, does not mean adhering to a particular code of behaviour as prescribed by one particular religion. For him, morality consists in knowing the truth, assenting to it and voluntarily organizing one’s life in conformity with it. He also stated that if no such rules are observed, anarchy will be there and society – social intercourse – would come to an end. Mere observance of customs and usage cannot properly be called an act of morality. Because, for the most part, men are mere creatures of conventions and habits and mere adherence to a habit cannot be equated with a moral action as morality consists in knowing the truth and holding to it steadfast. That is why Gandhiji said that true morality consists not in following the beaten tract, but in finding the true path for ourselves and fearlessly following it.

A critical analysis of Gandhian ethics reveals the following criteria of moral actions in Gandhian ethics.

- Firstly, volition is the nucleus of moral action, and voluntary actions are performed knowingly and intelligently by self-conscious free agents, with desire, prevision, and choice of ends and means. Unless we have control over our actions, we cannot be held responsible for them. Thus a moral action must be the product of voluntary will.⁷
- Secondly, according to Gandhi, moral intent is another criterion of moral action. There is no conflict in between preaching an ideal and practicing it. There is an organic relation between thought, speech and action in Gandhian thought. He practiced whatever he preached. If an action is not prompted by moral intent, it loses moral worth. An action is moral when done because it is morally right without any reference to any personal benefit that may accrue from it. Thus, an action in order to have moral worth must be prompted by good intentions.⁸
- Thirdly, an action is morally good if it is done in the spirit of Kantian dictum : “Duty for duty’s sake” irrespective of its consequence, happiness or misery.⁹
- Fourthly, the moral action must be free from compulsion, fear and coercion which obstruct the growth of human personality, the way to truth, and hence is not moral. Gandhiji says “ an act to be moral has to be free from fear and compulsion”.¹⁰
- Fifthly, universality is a criterion of moral action in Gandhian ethics. Moral actions are universal in the sense that they would be performed by all men under similar circumstances, irrespective of place and time. If an action is motivated by selfish ends it becomes subjective, and lacks universality which is a prime requisite of moral science. Thus, to Gandhi, an action can have moral worth only when it serves a universal end, i.e. a moral action must be universalized.¹¹
- Lastly, practicability is another feature, if not a criterion of a moral action in Gandhian ethics. His pragmatic outlook urged him to introduce moral values into practical life. The moral ideals, so to speak, had value only if they could control the practical ordering of our lives.

According to Gandhi, morality also consists in doing what we ought to do. In other words, it has to do with the right or good behaviour of man. And what we ought to do or what the right behaviour is, is to do good to mankind. He used to say that to do good to mankind is the highest morality. For him, the highest moral law is that which we should unremittently work for the good of mankind. Thus doing good to one’s fellow being is an integral part of his concept of morality.

Gandhiji also insisted that morality should never be in contradiction to reason. In fact, he rejected any moral principles which does not appeal to reason. Regarding the source of moral laws, he said that it lies not in act of legislation or in the will of a political sovereign. It lies in the spiritual and conscious nature of the human self. He also considered morality as binding upon man, because man’s conscious self won’t allow him to lose sight of it. Besides, the very fact that a wrong can never become right also means that moral laws are immutable. He also asserted that morality should be the authority in the conduct of human affairs, in the sphere of economics, politics, social relations, peace, etc. His morality also consists in purity of soul and motive, nobleness of character, selfish service and goodness of means.

4. Elements of Morality

A hollow preaching, an empty ethical law cannot be of any use to humanity. It must contain some elements that will render immense benefit to mankind in general. This motto urges Gandhi to fulfill the moral law with the following data.

- Firstly, a peaceful disposition of the whole personality is indispensable for moral life, because tranquility, calmness and mildness of temperament is conducive towards moral development.¹²
- Secondly, “freedom from bad habits forms another element of morality”. By the term “habit” we mean the capacity and tendency resulting from frequent repetition of the same act. The habits, good or bad, exert immense influence on the character or moral development of the agent. Also, Gandhi warn us against the danger of bad habits.¹³
- Thirdly, “another element of morality is chastity”. Gandhi says, “races without morality have completely disappeared”. It is universally accepted that regulated sex and disciplined ways of life have a far-reaching influence upon the moral character of a race or nation. Indeed, chastity or honesty in speech, thought or deed promotes not only our moral uplifts but also our longevities, our span of lives.¹⁴
- Fourthly, altruism is another element of morality. Altruism roughly expresses the view that there is something intrinsically good in self-sacrifice or doing good to others. It is true that without altruistic instinct, human beings would not have survived. Altruism is the basis of subtle human instinct like love, affection, self-sacrifice etc. in the absence of which life would have become a dry and barren desert.¹⁵
- Lastly, righteousness is another element of morality in Gandhian ethics. An action is appreciated as righteous if it is in conformity with the moral law or laws, at the zenith of which is according to Gandhi, truth.¹⁶

To sum up : The cultivation of calmness, mildness, and tranquility of personality ; fostering of good habits ; observance of chastity, altruism and righteousness etc ., are the elements of moral life in Gandhian ethics.

5. Morality in political life : The Gandhian Perspective

Gandhiji was not a political thinker or an academic philosopher in a literal sense. He was a practical idealist. The practical idealism of Gandhi consists in translating ideas into actualities.

Politics as conceived by Gandhi is closely connected with ethics and religion. It is nothing but a corollary of them. Gandhi's very entry into active politics was to spiritualize it. He is of the view that the spirit of true religion should pervade politics through and through. It was Gandhi's firm religious faith and conviction that drew him into the field of politics. Gandhi wished to establish the “Kingdom of Heaven” in the world of politics. According to him, every human activity must be derived from religion and politics is no exception.¹⁷

Gandhi actually made a revolution in the field of politics by introducing into it both religion and ethics. He considers politics as an “unavoidable evil”. So, it is religion that compels him to take part in politics.¹⁸

Politics is the rule of all. But the rule of all without rule of oneself is proved to be deceptive and fatal. That is why Gandhi insists that the state and its institutions must first of all be based on the twin pillar of truth and non-violence. Ramarajya stood for the sovereignty of the people based on the plural moral will. In both society and the state, the moral will or authority of the individual must reign supreme. The individual, he considers, is essentially moral and spiritual. An individual must be self-disciplined, self-supporting, truthful, non-violent and pure hearted.¹⁹

Further Gandhiji does not regard political power as an end in itself. It is only a means to better the condition of people in every department of life by regulating natural life.²⁰

Gandhiji considers government as a necessary evil. That government alone can be considered best which makes the largest number of people happy and virtuous individuals. Democracy, in the Gandhian sense, is both disciplined and enlightened. What is actually needed for the effective functioning of non-violent democracy is not factual knowledge but right education.²¹

Gandhi also stood for the decentralization of both political and economic power. He favours the establishment of self-sufficient and self-supporting village communities which are models of non-violent organizations, where due importance is given to cooperation, mutual trust, village sanitation and hygiene, and cottage industry such as spinning and weaving. And due importance is placed on the moral development of individuals so as to attain self-rule.²²

6. Relation between Morality and Religion

According to Gandhi, true religion and true morality are inseparably bound to one another. It is his firm belief that religion provides a moral basis to all the activities of man which they would otherwise lack. They are related, as firstly, “without morality, religion cannot subsist” and secondly, “true morality covers religion for the most part”. In other words, morality is both the necessary basis and the greater part of religion. According to him, religion consists in the faith or belief in the moral governance of the universe. Anyone who has faith in the idea that the entire universe is being governed by certain universal moral principles is a believer in religion or a religious person. Also, in religion as understood by Gandhi, faith in God is at the center. But then understood truth as God. Therefore, when he believes in religion, he believes in God, which also means he believes in truth. And as there can be no morality without truth, there can also be no morality without religion. For doing away with religion would mean doing away with God or truth. In fact, for him, morality should be practiced as a religion and anyone who is moral is a religious person.

7. Critical Appraisal

For Gandhi, a man is concerned with morality because he has consciousness. It also accepted man as having a higher purpose of existence, i.e. self realization or becoming a truly moral being. This self-realization can be achieved by insisting on moral deeds. His views on morality also emphasize man's inherent potential to change himself for the better through conscious effort. Such a concept of morality as propounded by Gandhi has great relevance in modern times. On an individual level, it emphasizes the idea that man must be self disciplined, self-supporting, truthful, non-violent and pure at heart. His belief that the individual can change himself for the better through conscious effort goes a long way in re-assuring the people of their own worth and dignity.

Acceptance of Gandhian morality is also bound to give a great impetus to one's efforts to serve and uplift the weaker and downtrodden section of the society. Also, acceptance of his emphasis on selfless and disinterested service to one's fellow beings is also the only means with which the society can do away with maladies like that of politics without principles, wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity and worship without faith. Today, people all over the world are being increasingly divided on the ground of so many considerations like that of one's race, color, creed, language, ethnicity, etc. In such a situation, the Gandhian concept of morality has a great relevance. For it is firmly grounded on the idea of universal brotherhood. Gandhiji always laid emphasis on self-realization through service to mankind at large such an acceptance the spiritual unity of mankind and emphasis on the service to one's fellow beings is bound to promote love and fraternity among people and also communal harmony. He also emphasizes on being truthful, on shunning violence and on practicing non-violence in term of one's thought, speech and action. Finally, his concept of morality implies emphasis on personal integrity in public life, viewing life as an integrated whole, service to mankind as the vehicle for self emancipation, on being truthful and fearless in one's pursuit for the truth, etc. All these are extremely relevant at present. Nowadays, societies are being stalked by self serving politicians and social workers who are always preaching without ever practicing what they preach. What is needed now is that the minds of the leaders of the people, not only in politics, but in all spheres of life, are converted to moral ways. Only then peace, progress and prosperity shall be possible in life. Three of the most important concerns of modern times are (1) the concern for a peaceful world order, characterized by inter-dependence and voluntary co-operation and based on universal disarmament and non-violence; (2) concern for a non-violent socio-economic order within nations based on constructive work, self-help and decentralization, and (3) the concern for a democracy which is really one for the people. The relevance of indulging in moral actions as conceived by Gandhi for realizing these can never be overemphasized.

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