

Chapter One

General Introduction

The main contention of this thesis is to outline the paradigm of moral action with special reference to Immanuel Kant and Bhagavadgītā. Thus in a sense, the theme of this research work is deeply involved in a general comparative study of moral actions between East and West. Before delving into the main contention of this thesis, let me specify the paradigm of moral action as proposed in the title of this thesis. What is the action? What is a moral action? What is the nature of moral action? In what sense a moral action differs from nonmoral action? Why people do engage or involve moral action? These and many more relevant questions need to be addressed step by step.

1.1: The Concept of Moral Action in Western Ethics

Generally, an action is something that is done by a self-conscious person. In western philosophy, ethics is known as the normative science of conduct. A collective name for voluntary actions is called conduct. It should be noted that conduct includes all voluntary actions, but it does not include those activities, like the blood circulation, over which most common persons have no control. “A voluntary action is an action a man could have done differently if he had so chosen.”¹ Voluntary action includes all volitional actions. There is a conscious process of willing involuntary actions. Generally, ethics deals with human actions. Voluntary action is the object of moral judgment. Habitual action is also the object of moral judgment. “Moral judgment is a judgment of value as distinguished from a judgment of fact.”² A judgment of value is a kind of judgment of what *ought to be*, where a judgment of fact is a kind of judgment of what is. A

¹ Lillie, William, *An Introduction to Ethics*, Allied Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1975, P.3.

² Sinha, Jadunath, *A Manual of Ethics*, New Central Book Agency (P) Ltd, Kolkata, 2009, P. 42.

judgment of fact is a descriptive judgment, while the judgment of value is appreciative. Moral judgment is a judgment upon actions regarding moral ideals. Moral judgment judges what human's actions ought to be. Thus when we understand voluntary actions then we compare them with moral standards. By doing this we can judge whether the actions conform with the moral standards or not. It means that it considers actions' moral values, rightness, or wrongness. It is said that the moral quality of action is recognized in this way. Thus there is nothing wrong to say that moral judgment is objectively valid. A person as a rational being judges an action to be right or wrong from an ideal standpoint. Thus conduct is a collective name of actions (voluntary). The business of ethics is to judge conduct either by justifying it or by condemning it. According to William Lillie, four antecedent mental processes cause of one's action and determine one's conduct in one's mind. These are:

- i) The ideo-motor tendency: For William Lillie, there is a tendency in a few ideas, probably in all ideas, to move automatically or directly. This is called the ideo-motor tendency. When we do our actions automatically without any conscious desire in our minds to do so then they are called the ideomotor actions. They are automatic actions. That is why they tend to be involuntary. Lillie remarks, "In the case of the ideo-motor tendency, it is the possibility of desire intervening that alone makes the actions possible objects of moral judgments."³ For this reason, the ideo-motor actions can become voluntary actions and belong within the sphere of morality.
- ii) Desire: The doer acts most commonly because of his desires. For example, when someone is hungry and desires food then he takes food. It is said that desire is itself a development mental process.

³ Lillie, William, *An Introduction to Ethics*, op. cit., P.22.

- iii) Unconscious mental tendencies: One might act because of one's unconscious mental tendencies. Sometimes these tendencies are considered as unconscious desires. One has difficulty in observing unconscious desires in one's mind. However such type of desire fully differs from completely conscious desire. It is generally less controlled by the doer. It may be treated as half-conscious urges. Thus if action is produced by unconscious mental tendency then it is involuntary.
- iv) The sense of duty: One as doer might act from a 'sense of duty'.⁴ Many psychologists assert that the sense of duty is merely one of our many desires. Other psychologists hold that in the case of the sense of duty, one has a new determining tendency, which is often entitled 'conscience'.

Therefore, voluntary action is a kind of action that is performed by an agent intentionally to attain some foreseen ends. It is an action that is performed by the agent with conscious desire. That is why in western ethics only voluntary action is treated as moral action. Moral action is a kind of action in which moral quality, rightness or wrongness, is presented. That is why it is within the sphere of morality and it is the object of moral judgment. It is distinguished from non-moral action. Non-moral action is a kind of action in which moral qualities are not presented. It means non-moral action is devoided of moral qualities. That is why it is excluded from the sphere of moral judgment. Thus we can say that all actions are not treated as moral actions rather it should be right in saying that only voluntary action is moral action and it is an object of moral judgment. It is said that any action of an animal is not a moral action. The reason for that it is devoided of reason and it cannot discriminate between right and wrong. In animals, actions spring out of an actual present feeling of uneasiness, as thirst and hunger. That is why the

⁴ *Ibid.*, P. 22.

animal's actions are called non- moral actions. In this regard, it can be said that the actions of insane persons and idiots, children are devoided of moral quality. It is so because they are devoided of reason. That is why they are not able to determine between rights and wrongs. Their actions are called non- voluntary actions. Non- voluntary actions are called non- moral actions. There is nothing wrong to say that action under the pressure of irrespctive 'complexes' is non-moral. The reflex actions, instinctive actions, random actions, and accidental actions are also known as non- voluntary actions in western ethics. That is why they are treated as non-moral actions. It leads us to suppose that they are devoided of moral qualities. The term 'moral' is used in western ethics in two senses- i) wider sense and ii) narrower sense.

a) Moral action in a wider sense

In a wider sense, the term 'moral' means in which moral qualities (goodness or badness, rightness, or wrongness) are presented.⁵ It means that moral actions may be right or wrong. All voluntary actions of rational beings are moral actions in the sense of a wider sense. They are opposed to 'non-moral' actions. Non- moral actions are devoided of moral qualities. That is why they do not come within the sphere of morality, e.g., an animal's action is known as non-moral action.

b) Moral action in a narrower sense

In a narrower sense, moral means what is morally good or what is morally right.⁶ It is opposed to 'immoral action'. Immoral action means what is morally wrong or bad. It should be noted that immoral action is moral action in a wider sense. The reason for that immoral action expresses the moral qualities of badness or wrongness. In this regard, it should also be noted that only human actions can be treated as moral or

⁵ Chatterji, Phanibhushan, *Principles of Ethics*, New Bharatiya a Book Corporation, Delhi, 2001, P. 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, P. 38.

immoral, but an animal's or an idiot's action should be treated as non-moral action. There is nothing wrong to say that almost all the western philosophers use the term moral action in the narrower sense, not in the wider sense. It is all about what is moral action in western ethics. Now let me explain the concept of moral action in Indian ethics.

1.2: The Concept of Moral Action in Indian Ethics

Action is known as *karma* in Indian ethics. *Karma* is an important concept in Western as well as in Indian ethics. *Karma* is an ambiguous concept in Indian ethics. It is used in many ways in the different Indian schools of thought. '*Karma*' is a sanskr̥t word. It is derived from the sanskr̥t root *kr̥*. It means 'to do'.⁷ Thus *karma* means 'a work' or 'an action'. In this sense, in Buddhism, *karma* is classified into three sections. These are i) *manokarma* (an act of mind), ii) *vācīkarma* (an act of speech), and iii) *kāyākarma* (an act of body). Thinking, imagination, clinging, etc., are called *manokarmas*. Abusing, talking, telling truth, etc., are called *vācīkarma*. Breathing, eating, seeing, etc. are called *kāyākarma*. According to Buddhism, *karmas* produce results. Sometimes the term *karma* is used as moral, non-moral, spiritual, voluntary, non- voluntary, *vedic*, good *karma*. When we say about the term '*karma*', it incorporates all the above types of actions. For example, in the Dharma-Śāstras, *karma* means ceremonies; in the Vedic literature it means sacrifice; in Bhagavadgītā it means *dharma* (duty); in Mīmāṃsā Philosophy, it means *vedic* injunctions. In the sense of *vedic* injunction *karma* is classified into three categories: i) obligatory actions, ii) *kāmya karma*, and iii) prohibited actions.⁸ According to Mīmāṃsā Philosophy, obligatory action is a kind of action that must be performed by an agent. If obligatory actions are

⁷ Pal, Jagat, *Karma, Dharma and Moksha Conceptual Essays on Indian Ethics*, Abhijeet Publications, Delhi, 2004, P.2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, P. 2.

not performed by an agent then the agent must be incurred in sin. On the other hand, *kāmya karma* is a kind of action that may or may not be done by the agent. If *kāmya karma* is done by an agent then his performance leads him to merit. However, it should be remembered that if *kāmya karma* is not performed by an agent then he would not be incurred in sin. Prohibited action, unlike *kāmya karma*, is a kind of action that must not be performed. It is said that if such type of action is done then the doer must be incurred sin. In Mīmāṃsā philosophy, obligatory actions are also classified into two categories, these are *nitya* and *naimittika karma*. Besides these karmas, Mīmāṃsā also said about *prāyashchitta karma*. In Vaiśeṣika philosophy, *karma* is a kind of substance. It is classified into five categories: *utkṣepaṇa* (upward movement), *avakṣepaṇa* (downward movement), *ākuñcana* (contraction), *prasāraṇa*, and *gamana* (locomotion). *Karma* is used in the sense of *pudgala* (material particle) in Jainism. According to Sāṅkhya philosophy, karmas are divided into three categories based on *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas guṇas*. These are *sāttvika*, *rājasika*, and *tāmasika karma*. *Prakṛti* is the source of such *karmas*. Therefore, from the above remarks, we can use, like Western ethics, the above -mentioned actions either in a wider sense or in a narrower sense in Indian ethics. In a wider sense, the term *karma* may be used to signify all kinds of voluntary *karmas*, irrespective of their distinctive features. In a narrower sense, it may be used to signify only some specified types of voluntary *karmas*, namely, *dharma*, sacrifice, *śrādhā*, *yagya*, etc. However, in either case, the term *karma* is used in the sense of action.

The term '*karma*' is also used in the sense of *karmaphala* (the result of an action). It is mentioned that *karmaphala* is an integral part of the meaning of the word '*karma*'. The *karmaphala* determines the life of the agent. It can be called *karmic samskāras*. It is known as *apūrvā* (unseen potency) in Mīmāṃsā philosophy. It is called *adṛṣṭa* (unseen power) in the

Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophy and it is called *vāsanā* in Buddhism. Buddhism classifies *karma* into four categories based on *phala*. These are: dark, bright, dark, and bright, and neither dark not bright. Based on the maturation of *karmaphala*, *karma* is classified into three categories in Hinduism. These are accumulated impressions (*sañcita karma*), fructifying impressions (*prārabdha karma*), and current impressions (*kriyamāna karma*).⁹ *Karmas* which are performed in the past life and whose *saṃsakāras* have not yet matured for bearing fruits are known as *sañcita karmas*. *Karmas* which are performed previously but whose *saṃsakāras* have matured to bear fruits are known as *prārabdha karmas*. *Kriyamāna karma* is a kind of karma that is being done for future life. It is also known as *sañcīyamāna karma*. It is also mentioned that *prārabdha karmas* are ripe *karmas*. They are bound to produce their fruits. However, according to Hinduism, if one makes genuine efforts by way of doing the *nityanaimittika karmas* or by *satya jñāna*, he may check *sañcita* and *kriyamāna karmas* from bearing fruits. Here the term *karma* is essentially bound up with the concept of rebirth in the above sense.

Thus from the above remark, we can say that the term '*karma*' is used in different senses. Sometimes it is used in the sense of 'an action' or 'a work'. Sometimes it is used in the sense of some special types of action. Sometimes it is meant both action and its result (*karma-phala*). Sometimes it is meant *dharma* or duty or material substance or non-material substance. Thus we can say that the sense in which Jainas used the term '*karma*' differs from the sense in which Hindus used the same. Thus we can say that the term *karma* does not bear the same meaning even within a particular situation. Its meaning changes from context to context. Thus we can say that it is not a clean concept rather it is an ambiguous concept. However, the term action is used as 'a deed' or 'a work' in Western ethics.

⁹ Ibid., P. 05.

According to some Indian thinkers, *karma* owes its origin either to *rāga* or to *dveṣa*.¹⁰ Generally, *rāga* means desire. It is a desire for conscious selection of the pleasurable objects. *Dveṣa* is a kind of desire of abandoning or avoiding objects, which are regarded to cause of pain (*duḥkha*) and suffering. In other words, *rāga* is known as attraction or attachment. It is an attachment of pleasurable objects which are regarded to cause of pleasure or happiness. *Dveṣa* is known as aversion or detachment. It is a detachment of painful objects. In Indian Philosophy, actions which are done from *rāga* or *dveṣa* are known as *aicchika karmas*. *Aicchika* karmas are called voluntary actions in Western ethics. There is a difference between voluntary action and non- voluntary action in Western ethics as well as in Indian ethics. Generally, voluntary action is determined by self- conscious agent's thoughts to realize a goal. On the contrary, non- voluntary action is not determined by an agent's thought. Voluntary actions constitute the proper subject-matters of ethics.

The distinction between voluntary action and non- voluntary action was recognized by Praśastapāda in Indian thought. He is an ancient Indian philosopher. He in his commentary *Guṇagrantha* on the Vaiśeṣika sūtras brought about a clear distinction between voluntary actions and non- voluntary actions. However, this distinction is not recognized only by Praśastapāda, but also by the Neo- Naiyāyikas. Here we consider the distinction between them from the standpoint of Praśastapāda first. In Praśastapāda's philosophy activity or afford is called *prayatna*. According to Praśastapāda, *prayatna* or activity is divided into two categories. These are *Jīvanapūrvaka* and *Icchādveṣapūrvaka prayatna*. *Jīvanapūrvaka prayatna* means "having the life of the organism as its cause or antecedent condition"¹¹ and the *Icchādveṣapūrvaka*

¹⁰ Tiwari, Kedar Nath, *Classical Indian Ethical Thought, A Philosophical Study of Hindu, Jaina and Bauddha Morals*, Matilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, 2004, P. 188.

¹¹ Maitra, Susil Kumar, *The Ethics of the Hindus*, University Calcutta, P. 27.

prayatna means having *icchā* and aversion as the causes.¹² *Jīvanapūrvaka prayatna* is treated as an automatic or a reflex activity of the organism. It is called *anaicchika karma* or non-voluntary action. *Icchādvēṣapūrvaka prayatna* is a kind of effort which represents action with conscious foresight or choice. It is called *aicchika karma* or voluntary action. Voluntary action is done with a conscious will for the fulfillment of some specific goals, i.e., selection of the good and rejection of the evil. In other words, it serves a definite purpose that is nothing but the attainment of pleasure and avoidance of pain. On the contrary, *anaicchika karma* or non-voluntary action, unlike *aicchika karma*, follows spontaneously from the agent's biological nature. For Praśastapāda, the non-voluntary actions "Serve certain specific ends (*kām arthakriyām karoti*), i.e., the ends of the organism."¹³ It means that there is a purpose behind the non-voluntary action, but that purpose is not consciously aimed at. On the contrary, voluntary action like non-voluntary action is also purposive. However, the purpose of voluntary action is consciously aimed at. It would be noted, according to Praśastapāda, that each of these types of action has its specific purpose. Thus the unavoidable character of *aicchika karma*, like voluntary action of western philosophy, is considered as being consciously aimed at and chosen. Following Praśastapāda we can say that *aicchika karma* is moral action and *anaicchika karma* is non-moral action. *Aicchika karma* may be good or bad.

The Neo-Naiyāyikas also said about the distinction between voluntary action and non-voluntary actions. According to them, *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* are voluntary actions. The reason for that *pravṛtti* is the volition of the conscious selection of the pleasurable things. *Nivṛtti*, unlike *pravṛtti*, is the volition of conscious rejection of the painful things. Besides these, there is another type of action which is known as *jīvanayoniprayatna* in the Neo-Naiyāyikas philosophy. *Jīvanayoniprayatna*

¹² Ibid., P. 27.

¹³ Ibid., P. 27.

means action arising from the life or *jivana* of the organism. It is also called an automatic or reflex action of the organism. There is no volition behind such action. It seems that such kind of action is not determined by one's free will. The Neo- Naiyāyikas make a distinction between voluntary and non- voluntary action more explicitly by adding *svecchādhīnatva*. It is a necessary condition of *aicchika karma*. For the Neo-Naiyāyikas, *aicchika karma* is "the results of one's own free will."¹⁴ Based on *svecchādhīnatva*, it differs not only from the automatic action of the organism but also from all *karmas* which are done by blind impulses.

According to some Indian thinkers, voluntary action or *aicchika karma* produces good or bad results for the doer by following his good or bad *karma*. They also hold that *aicchika karma* produces *saṃskāra* or potency. It is never destroyed and when it is ripened it produces appropriate effects for the agent of the action to experience. This belief is brightly engrained in Hinduism, in the Jaina traditions, and the Buddha traditions. The famous law of karma owes its origin to this belief. The law of *karma* is nothing but one of the fundamental postulations of the Indian theory of morality. It is said that the law of *karma* is an extension of the law of causation. According to this doctrine, whatever sorrow or happiness one undergoes in this present life are the necessary effects of actions in one's past life. It means that one's present life is determined by one's past voluntary actions and future life will be determined by the voluntary actions of one's present life. For the law of karma, *aicchika karmas* produce good or bad effects for a doer. However, such effects may be produced either in the existing life or after a long time. In this regard, the law of karma is associated with the doctrine of rebirth. Thus the law of *karma*, like the physical law of the conservation of energy, might be taken as the law of the conservation of moral law. According to the law of the conservation of energy, no energy is ever lost in the

¹⁴ Tiwari, Kedar Nath, *Classical Indian Ethical Thought*, op. cit., P.228.

world rather it is merely transformed in some other form. Similarly, the law of karma holds that no *aicchika karma* is ever lost in vain. Every voluntary action is bound to produce its natural consequence and the doer of the voluntary action is bound to bear its burden. What is done by the doer is never lost in vain. The doer experiences effects only because he deserves them through his voluntary actions. Thus there is nothing wrong to say that in which the connection between *karmas* and fruits is governed by the law of karma is called the moral world. It is the world of full justice concerning happiness and suffering. It is the world of complete justice. The doer of good *aicchika karma* experiences happiness and the doer of bad *aicchika karmas* experiences pain and suffering. Hence, there is nothing wrong to say that there is no deviation from the law of karma under any condition. In this connection, Kedar Nath Tiwary says, “The most important presupposition of morality on which the entire Indian ethical system is based is called the law of *karma*.”¹⁵

Thus in Indian ethics, the law of karma is essentially bound up with the concept of rebirth. We have seen that one is bound to undergo the effects, because of one’s *karma*. It means that if one does not exhaust the *karmaphalas* of one’s *karma* in one’s present life, one has to be reborn for enjoying *karmaphalas*. It is also mentioned that rebirth is nothing but the circle of bondage. Thus voluntary action causes rebirth. Voluntary actions of a doer causally determine what he would be in future life. It does not mean that the law of *karmas* is mechanical in Indian ethics. The reason for that we have seen that there are mainly three types of *karmas* based on *karmaphalas* in Indian ethics. These are *sañcita karma*, *prārabdha karma*, and *kriyamāna karma*. *Sañcita karma* and *prārabdha karma* belong to the past life and *kriyamāna karma* belongs to the present life of the doer. According to the law of karma, we are bound to reap the consequences of

¹⁵ Ibid., P. 66-67.

our past *karmas*. However, one can check *kriyamāna karma* from producing results by the way of doing true *karmas* or by the way of attaining true knowledge or by the way of true devotion of the Supreme Being. Therefore, one may refrain oneself from the circle of rebirth with the help of actions that are performed in the spirit of *niṣkāma* manner or with the help of true knowledge or with the help of true devotion of the Supreme Being.