

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

“What is action ? What is inaction ? - as to this even the wise are bewildered. I will declare to the what action is, knowing which thou shalt be delivered from evil.”

(Bhagavadgita : IV.16)

1. Background :

The central problem of moral life is embodied in the question - “What I ought to do ?” To answer this question adequately is the principal task of Moral Philosophy. This question, however, is not as simple as it appears to be, since to answer it, we have also to answer another equally important question, “Why should I do what I ought to do?” To make this implied question explicit, we may put the question thus-“What I ought to do and why ?”

Now, even a casual glance at the History of Moral Philosophy is sufficient to show that this question has been answered in a variety of ways by different eminent thinkers. The variety of answers is so enormous that it completely precludes the possibility of a single unanimous answer altogether. The main moral concepts in terms of which these answers have been given are 'good', right and 'ought' or 'obligation'. The answers or views are broadly divided into two groups which are generally described as 'teleological' and 'deontological', and which are supposed to be opposed to each other. While thinking of these theories and their diversity one becomes deeply aware of the great complexity of man's moral life that is revealed by the elements of truth contained in them. At the same time, one also becomes painfully aware of the 'exclusive' nature of these theories which prevents each one of them from recognizing the elements of truth in all others. It is this 'exclusiveness' which needs reconsideration because it is at the root of the diversity of moral theories proposing different answers to the central moral question stated above.

The present study is a modest attempt at such a reconsideration with special reference to the concept of moral obligation. It is promoted by a firm belief in the possibility of an all-comprehensive, unified view of moral life that would include the elements of truth embodied in the various moral theories and present it, consistently, in the wider context of life and reality. This belief, however, is not without foundation; it is based on the fact that the moral life is one though its interpretations are many, that it has unity of purpose though diversity of expressions. It is, therefore, possible to harmonize the many into the one, the diversity into the unity, at the same time doing justice to the many or the diversity. In my case, this belief was strengthened by my study of Indian Philosophy, especially, the Advaita Vedanta System and the Bhagavadgita. It will be seen from the conclusions of the present study that this belief is justified.

I would like to emphasize, in this connection, that while constructing a moral theory we must take into account the fact that the hidden significance of moral life is revealed only when we view it in the wider context of life and reality, since moral life of man is not a rivulet flowing apart from the main stream of his life, but forms its under-current. On the other hand, this fact also brings out the importance of a 'value approach to Reality'. Reality is not merely a metaphysical entity that is devoid of any connection with life, it in fact, lives and manifests itself in and through the various aspects of man's life. From this point of view, it becomes not only important, but also necessary, to take a value-approach to Reality in order to bring out its essential nature, as also its vital connection with human life. It is not necessary to develop this point. I have referred to it here only to bring out the possibility of an important bearing of a moral theory on a theory of Reality. It is because of this fact that the theory which our study has resulted in, has certain important implications for Metaphysics as stated in the concluding chapter. All this goes to show that 'analysis' alone is not enough; a synthetic and constructive approach, is, perhaps, even more essential for arriving at a final view of man's complex moral life.

2. Necessity of the Study

As regards the specific nature of the present study, it may be said that it attempts to investigate the essential nature of the concept of moral obligation

in as detailed a manner as possible. As for the selectio of 'Moral Obligation' as the problem of this study, the chief consideration governing it has been that, the concept of moral obligatin, at least in my view, occupies, a key-position in the whole universe of moral discourse because of its distinctively peculiar nature. There are, no doubt, other important moral concepts like 'good' and 'right' in terms of which moral life can be explained. But the peculiarity of the concept of moral obligation is that its study involved such a picturusque variety of considerations as is not generally involved in the study of other concepts. It is because of this complexity that it touches all the significant aspects of moral life and, in fact, involves a necessary reference to the concepts of 'good' and 'right' themselves. The central importance of the concept of moral obligation is clearly brought out by the following considerations :

Firstly, it has practical as well as theoretical significance. No other concept is so directly practical. We saw above that the central moral question is — “What I ought to do ? and why ?” It is obvious that this question is directly about 'moral obligation' and its 'ground'. Thus, it forms the link between 'theory' and 'practice'. Secondly, it involves both deontological and teleological considerations. The concept of 'obligation' as such is deontological in nature while its 'ground' brings in teleology. In the same way, thirdly, it brings together 'reason' and 'desire' in the form of 'objective binding' and 'satisfaction', or 'right' and 'good'. Again, it is through the concept of moral obligation that the 'ideal' governs the 'actual', the 'value' the 'fact', and the 'higher self' the 'lower self', if we may say so. The 'sense of moral obligation has very important bearing on other related studies of human life, such as social and political philosophy, philosophy of religion etc. Lastly, it is through the concept of moral obligation that we clearly know the social nature of morality and its function of social control. Thus, it may be said that the concept of moral obligation is central to all moral though as it is the meeting point of such dualities as — deontology and teleology, right and good, reason and desire, ideal and actual — and has, further, practical as well as theoretical significance, An inquiry, therefore, into the essential nature of this concept is a necessity.

3. Statement of the Problem :

As said above, the central purpose of this study is to make an investigation

into the essential nature of the Concept of Moral Obligation. To this end, it is helpful, and in fact necessary, to analyse the language in which the judgements of moral obligation are expressed, especially the ought-language. Further, the essential nature and meaning of moral obligation can not be known completely unless we also know its ground. Hence the necessity of inquiring into the nature of the ultimate ground of moral obligation. This study, therefore, attempts to answer the following important questions regarding the concept of moral obligation :

- (a) What is the essential nature of the concept of moral obligation ? and
- (b) What is the essential nature and function of the language of moral obligation?

In connection with the question (a), it also attempts to know -

(a-1) the 'morality' of moral obligation distinguishing it from non-moral obligations;

(a-2) the structure of the concept of moral obligation. In fine, an attempt is also made to bring out the implications of this study for the related disciplines like Social and Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, Axiology and Metaphysics.

4. Method

I have referred above to the fact that the general approach as well as method of recent moral thought is analytical in nature. Analytical Philosophy seems to be the dominant trend of to-day. There is no doubt as to the importance, and necessity, of this approach to a philosophical problem for its clearer understanding. But, I am convinced, after careful consideration, that 'analysis' alone is, at best, insufficient to yield a complete and satisfactory solution of a problem; in certain cases, it is even inadequate. Along with 'analysis', one must also use such other methods as are necessary for arriving at a systematic, complete and comprehensive solution of the problem under consideration. From this point of view, the synthetic, the critical and the constructive methods are as important and necessary as the method of analysis.

In the present study, therefore, I have employed all these methods depending on the requirements of treatment of various topics. For example, while discussing the nature of the concept, the language and the structure or moral obligation, I have used the analytical method resulting in the conceptual, the linguistic and the structural analysis respectively. Again, while considering the various theories, other than the proposed one, I have used the critical method. And, while formulating my own views and constructing them into the theory of moral obligation proposed here, I have used the constructive method and have tried to effect a creative synthesis of the elements of truth, contained in other theories, into a single comprehensive theory. Thus, the 'method' followed in this study may be described as analytic, synthetic, critical and constructive. Technically, it is both normative and meta-ethical.

5. Approach

I may admit frankly that my approach to the problem of this study is influenced by what may be called the Hindu outlook on life as revealed through such concepts as Dharma, Purusartha, Niskama Karma, Samatva, Moksa and so on. Moral life in general, and moral obligation in particular, is not looked upon, here as an isolated and independent phenomenon to be studied merely for the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity. It is a part, and in a sense and aspect, of human life as a whole, and, as such, is to be studied in its wider context; only then can moral philosophy have any significance and meaning for life. This means that the individual (personal) and social aspects of man's life, though distinguishable, cannot be separated. Both are the expressions of the same life-urge and are equally natural to man. Accordingly, man is viewed here, not as a merely psychological or a merely social being, but is a psycho-social being.

On the whole, I tend to think that morality is neither a capricious or arbitrary binding forcing individuals to live an 'unauthentic existence' as the existentialists would say, nor a mere organized institution serving as an instrument in the hands of society of control them, keep them under subjection and use them for its own end. It is the general tone or quality of human behaviour resulting inevitably from man's pursuit of the 'Ideal of Life', or his request after perfection. It at once answers man's both individual and social aspirations which, perhaps, are not different. This means that morality is not an externally imposed binding,

but is grounded in man's nature itself. Further, morality is not an end in itself 'out the minimum of man's higher spiritual life which forms its culmination. For the final explanation, therefore, of man's complex moral life, one has to turn to the spiritual nature of man. The present study, thus, tries to explain the essential nature of the concept of moral obligation in the light of the spiritual outlook on life.

I may, in fine, point out certain features of this study that may prove to be of some significance for Moral Philosophy. Firstly, the 'emphasis analysis, used in this study while analysing the ought-sentences gives a new dimension to the method of linguistic analysis itself. Secondly, the 'obligative theory' of the language of moral obligation and the 'demand theory' of its nature and meaning, try give a fresh interpretation of the concept of moral obligation. Thirdly, the structural analysis, as attempted here, is intended to bring out and explain the complex nature of moral obligation.

It is indeed very difficult, as the quotation from the Gita given in the beginning states, to know' what is action and what is inaction. Yes, one must make an attempt to attain this knowledge as, without it, there is no 'deliverence from evil'. The present study ventures to make such an attempt in its own modest way.