

WHY SHOULD WE ACT MORALLY?

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Professor Raghunath Ghosh is a well-known *darshanik* with a spirit of a philosopher. What I mean is that in spite of his command over all the schools of Indian thought, *mokṣa* seems to be his less concern than knowledge itself. And this makes him to ask questions continually, a seeker at heart. He is my teacher, colleague, elder brother and above all, one of my dearest friends. It will be my great honour if my quest for a moral standard in the form of this present article pleases him.

We love ourselves and we cannot avoid loving our own-selves - we are so constituted by nature. Some philosophers hold that we seek our own pleasure by nature, and therefore we ought to act for our own pleasure. We are not on the same boat with those hedonists, rather we say that we act for our own protections and our instinct of survival moves us in that way. Should we say then ‘We ought to act for our own survival?’ Many will raise their eyebrows if self-love is proposed as a moral standard. They need not to, because no one is going to set self-love or self-protection as the end of morality. But there is nothing wrong in loving one’s own self. There is a prejudice among some moralists that self-love is condemnable and only love for others is worthy of praise. But is not self-love is the foundation of love for others? “And you must love your neighbour just as much as you love yourself.”¹ The Gospel does not condemn self-love but you have to love others as much as you do to you. However, Self-love cannot be a moral standard because of two things:

1. It does not carry any sense to say that we ought to do something which we do by nature.
2. And, morality is a social institution. A Robinson Crusoe need not to be moral, although he may need to protect himself. It is natural that an individual would strive for his own survival or protection but morality is not self-love. But morality starts with self-love; it is the self that initiates the institution of morality.

Let me cite an example to make my stand clear. This is the famous story of Captain Scott which I quote from an article by Mr. ValsonThampu, published in “The Statesman”, 19th May, 1999:

¹ *The Gospel according to Luke, (The Bible, New Testament)* verse No. p. 816

On 18 January 1912, Captain Scott and his four Companions reached the South Pole. On their return journey, Petty Officer Evan fell ill. Captain Scott now faced a painful dilemma. Either he could carry the sick man along and risk the lives of the rest of the party, or he could let Evans die alone and ensure a better chance of survival for the rest. Scott took the first course; they carried Evans along until he died. The delay proved fatal to the rest of the group, too. The blizzards overtook them. Their frozen bodies were found six months later only 10 miles from the next depot which they had been unable to reach.²

Now, for our purpose, it is interesting to note Mr. Thampu's interpretation of the above story. His view represents the view of many of the intellectuals of our society. Mr. Thampu of the Department of English, St. Stephen's College, Delhi, writes - "Captain Scott, in the agonising dilemma he faced, rejected a way of life based on the instinct of self-preservation. Exclusive pursuit of self-interest creates a culture that undermines social cohesion and imperils human security and well-being. Captain Scott rejected expediency as a paradigm of human conduct." But in the previous paragraph, he states "... Captain Scott's choice seems quixotic only as long as the situation is not viewed from the perspective of Evans. All the more so because Captain Scott, or anyone else, could also be in Evans's predicament. As a rule, those who would vote in favour of abandoning Evans would vehemently condemn this decision if they were to be the victims of such a choice". I have every respect for the spirit Mr. Thampu expresses. The title of the article is "Morality must be the basis of politics". But I must say that he expresses a typical moral reasoning like most of the educated intellectuals. His observation that expediency should be rejected in morality is Kantian. But the later part of his comments contains the elements of hypothetical reasoning. In fact, it needs courage to acknowledge the hypothetical nature of morality. We think it bad to act in terms of self-expediency although we act consciously or unconsciously in terms of it. It was because of expediency that society came into existence. It is not that one fine morning a "social contract" was signed, but the difficult and intolerable situations paved the way to the forming of a society for the survival of greatest number of people. Extremely cohesive and close-knit life of the primitive people can be explained in this light. Is morality then to be built upon biology? Yes it is to be. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) felt that a moral code which could not meet the tests of 'natural selection and the struggle for existence' is from

² "The Statesman", 19th May, 1999.

the beginning doomed to lip service and futility. Spencer claims that the principles of ethics have a 'natural basis' for, moral conclusions follow the general law of evolution".³ All of us, as did Captain Scott, carry the experience of evolution or the history of formation of society. Selfishness is a tendency within human nature. Morality supervenes on the myriad roles and relations in which man finds himself in society. In fact, the life of a human being from childhood to adulthood is the history of development of morality. "As a matter of fact, a young child has practically no consciousness of morality at all. The sense of morality grows with the development of men in association with society. The young child lives in a universe mostly of appetites. The development of its personality goes on in proportion as his association with other fellow-beings continually grows."⁴ Thus Captain Scott did not reject "a way of life based on instinct of self- preservation" as Mr. Thampu says. Scott did not reject expediency. But, that he should carry Evans along, rather than abandoning him is a moral conduct learnt from the social environment. For me, I am important. But for the society, it is not the individual but the greatest possible number (it may mean the hundred per cent) that is important. The emergence of the spirit of self-sacrifice is not smooth one; it has its ups and downs. Every one of our actions implies struggle between self-interest and other-regarding interests. Each time the outcome means victory for one or the other.

What has been discussed above can also be discussed from the point of view of moral sanctions. The rational or the teleological view of morality allows one to ask "why should I be moral?" The question has actually two parts:

- What could I gain by being moral? For what consequence should I be moral?
- What could happen if I don't?

As to the former of the two, answers are many: that you may get salvation or happiness or pleasure, or that you will be secured etc. In answer to the second, concept of moral sanction comes. Bradley, the deontologist would say that these sorts

³ *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Western philosophy and philosophers* (ed. Urmson and Ree), London, Unwin Hymann Ltd., 1989, page 302.

⁴S.N. Dasgupta, *Philosophical Essays*, ("International morality"), Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1990, p. 31.

of question are illegitimate in morality,⁷ but Mill rightly says that all standards in morality must have to answer such questions.⁸

Sanction is a penal term with a controlling character implying the penalty that will be imposed by a public authority on a convicted wrong doer in respect of his breach of the law. Sanctions are either external or internal, says Mill. He accepts external sanctions offered by Bentham. Bentham, in his *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapter 3, distinguished four types of sanction:

1. 'Physical Sanction', which is in Bentham's terminology, the natural imprudence, as when a man's house is set on fire because he failed to put out his candle.
2. If God set the man's house on fire because of a sin he had committed, this would be the imposition of a 'religious sanction'.
3. If the house was burnt down as a legal penalty for a crime, this is the imposition of a 'political sanction'.
4. And if the house burns down because the owner's neighbours will not help him to put it out on account of some dislike to his moral character, this is a punishment of 'moral sanction' or 'popular sanction'.⁹ In Mill's language, "They are the hope of favour and the fear of displeasure, from our fellow creatures or from the Ruler of the Universe ..."¹⁰ And "The whole force therefore of external reward and punishment, whether physical or moral, and whether proceeding from God on from our fellow men ..."¹¹

The internal sanction or the conscience, which Mill describes as a feeling in our own mind, is a very complex phenomenon. It is an acquired faulty - a feeling of pain which we suffer when we fail to do our duty.¹² According to my opinion, this feeling is the essence of conscience. James Mill, John Mill's father, argued that a conscience gets built up in the individual by means of the association of ideas through

⁷ Mary Warnock, *Ethics since 1900*, London: Oxford University Press, 1976, page 2.

⁸ J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Considerations on Representative Governments*, London: Everyman's Library, 1992, page 27.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 452.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 28.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 29.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 29.

parental punishment and approval.¹³ This internal sanction, I think, cannot be looked at as being totally separated from the external ones. In fact, it is the effect of the external sanctions on the mind for many years. The complexity of the internal sanction cannot be described in an easy way but the undated past of its origin gives morality a mystical sort of character. Mill too has no doubt in his mind that moral feelings are acquired and in no way innate.¹⁴ Mill is not interested to pursue the theory of the nature, or origin of conscience. For him conscience as the ultimate sanction is a subjective feeling in our mind. Thus, all our common principles of morality like ‘telling the truth’, ‘keeping promises’ etc., are based on the shared experience of human beings over untold thousands of years.

If sanctions are answers to the question ‘what if I don’t be moral?’, our rational activity tries to answer the quest ‘how to be moral?’. Reason can clearly see that a moral man is a social man. Reason or our rationality, ultimately serves the purpose of our self-preservation. As to the rational activity, Karl Popper mentions two: (i) Utopian engineering and, (ii) Piecemeal Engineering. According to Utopian engineering any rational action must have certain aim and it determines its means according to this end. Choice of the end is the first step to act rationally. There are some intermediate or partial ends which are actually likely to promote the ultimate end. We must be able to see in this manner otherwise we will fail to act rationally. There is another kind of rational activity, namely, piecemeal engineering. According to it, it is very “...difficult to reason about an ideal society. Social life is so complicated that few men or none at all would judge a blue print for social engineering on the grand scale...” And further, perceptions differ from person to person. Thus instead of searching for greatest good, the piecemeal engineer will adopt the method of locating for the greatest and most urgent evils of society. Thus, we should go for better health care or educational reform etc. Popper opts for this piecemeal engineering and declares this as the only “rational one”. Popper thinks that blueprints for single institutions are less risky because if they go wrong, the damage is not great and a readjustment can be made easily. Popper, thus, rejects holism. “Popper, though maintaining that scientific method is applicable to the study of

¹³*Ibid*, p. 453.

¹⁴*Ibid*, p. 31.

individual aspects of social systems, has rejected holistic attempts to formulate laws holding for social wholes ...”¹⁵

But I wish to differ from Popper on the type of social engineering to be adopted. The philosophy behind piecemeal engineering is not acceptable at all. True, that perceptions vary, but there are common interests in society e.g., health or education. And if there is no ultimate practical end, or at least an idea of that, how could one recognise ‘evils of society’ as evils? Why is health-care good? Without knowing or answering this, how and why should one fight against “the greatest and most urgent evils of society”? An unprejudiced probing will show that health or educations etc. are good, for they serve the ultimate purpose of human survival. Thus, a social engineer must adopt to accomplish the ultimate purpose of security and survival of members of the society. But the question “why survival is good” cannot be asked because it is the inherent disposition or property of life itself.

In *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, McDougall defines instinct as innate or inherited tendencies “which are the essential springs or motive powers of all thought and action ...”¹⁶ In this book, McDougall criticizes all other theories like hedonism (page 314), ideao-motor theory of action (page 323) and intuitionist theory (328) etc., and defends only ‘instinct as end of our actions’ - theory. “We may say ... directly or indirectly the instincts are the prime movers of all human activity ...”¹⁷ An instinct moves our actions towards its satisfaction. McDougall does not mention any instinct like ‘instinct of survival’. But there are instincts of food seeking, instinct of escape, instinct of pugnacity, reproductive and parental instincts, sex instinct, instinct of acquisition and construction, gregarious instinct etc., etc. Instinct of survival may be said to be common to all these instincts or serves as the real purpose underlying their operations. McDougall disfavours any mechanistic model of psychology and defend a purposive psychology. The word ‘instinct’ indicates an urge to action, an impulsion to strive towards a goal which is *suigeneris* in nature, says McDougall.¹⁸

¹⁵ Popper “Aestheticism, perfectionism, utopianism” in *The Philosophy of Society*, page 212 ff.

¹⁶ William Mc Dougall, *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, London: Mathuen Co. Ltd., 1950, p. 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 407.

This purpose or goal is certainly self-preservation or survival. Thus, McDougall is an exponent of Hormic psychology.

The Hormic Psychology of McDougall: McDougall is an exponent of the teleological theory of action. We have already seen the inadequacy and fallacies of hedonistic theory - a variety of teleological theory. There is the other alternative, - the hormic theory of action, which McDougall says is “the only alternative teleological theory of action”.¹⁹ The essence of the theory may be stated very simply as the following: “To the question - why does a certain animal or men seek this or that goal? - it (the hormic theory) replies: Because it is his nature to do so.”²⁰

But what does ‘hormic’ mean? McDougall quotes from Sir P. T. Nunn’s book *Education, its data and First Principles* : The “... element of drive or urge, whether it occurs in the conscious life of man and the higher animals, or in the unconscious activities of their bodies and the (presumably) unconscious behaviour of lower animals, we propose to give a single name - *horme*. In accordance with this proposal, all the purposive process of the organism are hormicprocesses ...”²¹ But one must not confuse it with conative process for “... conative process being the subclass whose members have the special mark of being conscious”.²² Again, this “Horme ... is the basis of activities that differentiate the living animal from dead matter, and therefore, of what we have described as the animal’s characteristic attitude of independence towards its world.”²³ I must mention here, that in addition to Dr. Nunn’s view, McDougall regards the subconscious hormic process not as entirely blind but rather as involving something of that foresight (however vague) which is the essence of our most clearly purposive activities.

This is a standpoint which is clearly not Darwinian but speaks out for a Lamarckian flavour. The real issue is not then between rational and voluntarism. The issue is, or the antagonism is between mechanism and teleology. Thinkers like Democritus, Galileo, Spinoza, Darwin etc. argue for a mechanistic model and

¹⁹*Ibid*, p.458.

²⁰*Ibid*, p. 458.

²¹*Ibid*, p.491.

²²*Ibid*, p. 491.

²³*Ibid*, p.491.

thinkers like Anaxagoras, Aristotle, Leibnitz and Lamarck etc. argue for a teleological theory of actions. McDougall takes Lamarck's side. But, I want to mention one name here, who, even before McDougall had argued for a Lamarckian teleology and that is the forgotten name of Edward Von Hartmann (1842–1906). William McDougall writes "... Von Hartmann ... may be said to have first written psychology on purely hormic basis ...".²⁴ According to Hartmann "All thought begins with instinct, which is nothing else than purposive action without consciousness of purpose or even conscious willing of means to an unconsciously willed end."²⁵ Von Hartmann struggled against Darwinism in his attempt to establish a vitalistic interpretation of the phenomena of life. He opposes the purely mechanistic interpretation of the phenomenon of life, as the Darwinian-Spencerian formula of the struggle for existence and all that it involves seem to represent. Hartmann draws the conclusion that the theory of Darwin has nothing positive to offer us.²⁶ The problem is - is it really a mere 'chance', as with Darwin or an evolutionary tendency guided by a plan through inner causes that determines the evolution. I still believe with Hugo de Vries that new species can but not must arise through minimal variations. What Darwin's formula would and should do, namely, explain purposive results from mechanical causes, seems to be incapable of being done. At least in the micro level, Darwinian formula has already been proved to be unsatisfactory. However, Hartmann was closer to reality by introducing purpose into the theory of instinctive actions, but he is unintelligible when he stresses on the "unconscious". Hartmann's theory, as McDougall writes is "...marred by the extravagance of his speculations on the unconscious."²⁷ The hormic theory of McDougall also rejects the Darwinian assumption that mechanistic categories are sufficient in biology. By stressing on the intelligent striving of the organism as the creative activity to which evolution is due, hormic theory points to the reality of the Lamarckian transmission.²⁸

²⁴*Ibid*, p. 490.

²⁵ Ludwig Stein, *Philosophical Currents*, Calcutta University Publications, 1919: page 243 - 244.

²⁶*Ibid*, p. 255.

²⁷*An Introduction to Social Psychology*, p. 490.

²⁸*Ibid*, p. 481.

Let us now turn to the hormic theory of McDougall to find a scale of values in moral philosophy. We are in need of a 'value' which is in consonant with human nature. One virtue of the hormic theory is that it outlines an intelligible, consistent, and tenable story of continuous organic evolution, evolution of bodily forms and mental functions in intelligible relation to one another. "Of all forms of psychology the hormic is the only one that can give to philosophy the psychological basis essential to it."²⁹

Now what function does reason play in this world of instincts? 'Reason' is sometimes used to mean a 'mental cause' or it may mean a special kind of capacity or faculty of human mind (ultimately, the two senses are like the two sides of the same coin). But in neither sense can reason create an activity or desire to act. Take this example from McDougall:

"Suppose a hungry man to be in the presence of a substance which he does not recognise as food; by the aid of reason he may discover that it is edible and nutritious, and he will then eat it or desire to eat it; but if he is not hungry, reason will not create the desire or impel him to eat".³⁰

McDougall also adds to the above that "... in the moral sphere, the function of the reason is the same. Reason aids us in determining what is good ..."³¹ My understanding of reason is that it is our faculty of anticipating the consequence. Reason serves the practical purpose of our drives for survival and in this sense; it is really "the slave of our passion", as Hume puts it. Passions or emotions arise when our instincts are thwarted. The real purpose of instincts is survival or self-preservation and human beings have reasoned out that they could survive only by forming a society and being in it. Reason comprises memory of experience, and experiences itself in deducing propositions from other propositions prior to the experience corresponding to the propositions deduced. For instance, the primitive man discovered that he did not succeed in killing wild animal when he went alone for hunting, but the result was different when he went with a group. Thereafter, none went alone. "If I go alone, I will not succeed" could be deduced by them without relevant experience. In this way, human beings realised that it is only through living

²⁹*Ibid*, p. 482.

³⁰*Ibid*, p. 325.

³¹*Ibid*, p. 325.

in a society, only through joining hands with one other, sharing food and roof that they could survive. And they survived without further bodily evolution. Thus the rational realisation in morality is:

“Just as in developed animal organisms the individual cells have an independent life to live but yet they cannot do so without the co-operation and co-existence of other living cells, so each individual social being has a double life, a life that he has to himself and a life he leads in co-existence and co-operation with the lives of other selves. Yet the very independent life, which the cell or the man may be said to have as different from the life of other cells in the organism or of other men in the society, would not have been possible except for the co-presence of these other cells or men.”³²

Can we then say that moral values have evolved biologically? It would not be outlandish if we are inclined to answer in the affirmative. There is no one notion of value which is ubiquitous. The trinity of truth-goodness-beauty represents the norms of our cognitive, volitional and affective experiences respectively. But there is a subset of values which are founded upon satisfaction of our basic needs, providing security for the future. In other words, there are values based on instinctive urges. In the absence of a better word we have called such values ‘biological values’. We should not say that since these values are biological they are devoid of moral sense. Many of the moral agreements are extensions of biological values—agreements which we enter into with our fellows for security. Spencer held that “the new morality must be built upon biology”.³³ Although the Darwin-Spencerian approach has lost much of its strength, we may quote from S. N. Dasgupta in support of Spencer:

“... the teleological value ultimately manifests itself for its satisfaction in the same direction as the moral value. Two values may not be exactly identical but they would not point to two different poles; and in tending to be normally good one would find a supreme satisfaction of what is biologically good in the highest degree. If this is so, the biologically good should have to be acknowledged as being in some sort of unity with the morally good...”³⁴

I would like to conclude the present article by stating that the institution of morality started with the impulse of self-preservation, but it did not stop at individual survival.

³² S. N. Dasgupta, *Philosophical Essays* “International morality”, page 43.

³³ *The Story of Philosophy*, page 385.

³⁴ S. N. Dasgupta, *Philosophical Essays* “International morality”, page 40.