

BOOK REVIEW

A handbook of Indian ethical traditions

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Purushottama Bilimoria, Joseph Prabhu, Renuka Sharma. *Indian ethics: classical traditions and contemporary challenges.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2008. 431 pp

Rapid changes in the organisation and delivery of modern medicine, coupled with the challenges of structuring health services to meet the needs of globalisation and massive population transfers, have made the morals of medicine and health services a burning issue today across all countries of the globe. Medical practice has lately been the subject of legal wrangling, legislation and public outcry. The constant media glare and the accompanying mobilisations by activists on hospitals, epidemics and health services are witness to this phenomenon. In this hullabaloo the core issues of ethics and morality often get neglected. In a framework dominated by modern western medicine, local and indigenous traditions practised by different cultures in the domain of health and medicine get ignored. In this context the volume on Indian ethics edited by Purushottama Bilimoria, Joseph Prabhu and Renuka Sharma is a potential resource for health practitioners.

The book begins with a comprehensive introduction to ethics. The authors contend that most discussions on ethics in the West have concentrated on such matters as the rules and principles that govern the conduct of human beings, inquiries into the meanings of our moral statements, establishing criteria and methods of validating ethical judgements, and procedures for developing ideal patterns of behaviour. These have been crystallised in four traditions of thought: "Aristotelian ethics", "Kantian deontological ethics", "Utilitarianism", and the "Natural law tradition". Interestingly, whilst it is possible to extricate these schools of ethics from their religious underpinnings, in the case of India the relationship between ethics and religion is much more intertwined and complex. The general tendency is of "describing or codifying the prevailing and dominant 'ethos', mores, customs and habitual traditions – that is to say, giving expression to what in Sanskrit is termed 'dharma', very roughly, the social and moral order." (p 17) However, the editors contend that despite this, Indian ethics do make an attempt to formulate "normative ethical rules and endeavours to articulate the basis upon which those rules and principles are grounded." (p 26)

The bulk of the book is divided into three major sections. The chapters in Section A discuss ethics in the early period of the Indian *darsanas*, from the period of the Vedas to that of the Gita. Chapters in Section B discuss the Buddhist and Jaina

approaches to ethical decision making. These two sections are then compared and contrasted with chapters in Section C which discuss modern ethics in India. Each of these sections is prefaced by an elaborate (and helpful) editorial introduction to the subject matter of the respective essays and there is an effort to philosophically contextualise the contents discussed.

In the introduction to Section A the editors pose the problem of discussing early Indian ethics in terms of the debate between "rites" and "rights". Classically speaking, most ethical considerations are circumscribed by the formalised procedures (or rites), of following the *rita* and *dharma*, the cosmic and natural law of the world. Rightness lies in following these rites. In this period, Indian ethics is largely of the Brahmanical Hindu order, which is marked by the absolute superiority of the Vedas, the *varna* system, and certain humanistic values (such as restraint, charity, austerity, and truthfulness). In later centuries these features culminate in the four important and well-known concepts/institutions of *asrama*, *dharma*, *karma* and *purusharthas*. The last refers to the "four avenues of volitional pursuits in life which are of intrinsic value, namely: *artha*, material interests; *kama*, pleasure and affective fulfilment; *dharma*, again, social and individual duties; and *moksa*, liberation." (p 39) The ethics of the early period are followed by Upanishadic ethics and Smarta ethics. Although metaphysically inclined, the former concentrate on *damyata*, *data* and *dayadhvam*, that is, on self-restraint, self-sacrifice and compassion. The latter ethics, based largely on the Dharmasastras (eg, works by Manu and Kautilya), are extremely codified, ritualistic and legalistic in nature.

Perhaps the most flexible understanding of ethics is to be found in the epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata and in the Gita, where there is evidence of a good deal of discussion, debate and agonising over the classical ideals of Indian ethics which preceded this period. The most startling ethical formulation of this period is in the Gita which stresses that one has a right to action but not the fruits thereof.

The introduction ends with a long discussion on the debate between rights and duties in the Indian context, raising the question whether there are anything called rights. It is evident that although *moksa* (freedom) is the only right, it can be achieved only if the duties of the other stages of life are sincerely followed. Whatever freedom is granted, for example, by the Gita to the devotee or the karmic, is contingent upon the requirements of *varnasrama*.

J N Mohanty's paper contends that early Indian ethics is pluralistic and monistic in nature, and that precisely because it is based on the system of *rita*, it is not theologically oriented but is autonomous in nature. Moreover, the superiority and autonomy of *moksa* as a *dharma* to other stages or injunctions of *dharma* remains a source of conflict throughout Indian thought.

Bimal Krishna Matilal's paper highlights the open-ended nature of much of the morals and ethics of the epics and the Gita. Daya Krishna's paper argues for the problematical nature of the *purusarthas*: given their ever-changing meanings over centuries, can such a fluid concept have substantial moral significance? Laurie Patton's paper has the advantage of analysing Indian texts and their concepts by situating and contextualising them philologically, philosophically and historically – the ethical concepts then show up very differently from when they are analysed as absolutes. Roy W Perrett and Ian Whicher's papers look at ethics in the yogic tradition. Perrett discusses the three elements of Samkhya – Yoga ethics (viz "the first-order precepts, the consequentialist theory of the right, and the theory of the good") whereas Whicher contends that Patanjali's system tries to harmonise the two principles of *purusa* and *prakriti* towards achieving integrity of being and action thereby resulting in correct knowledge and freedom. Bilimoria's paper mulls over the different meanings of *karma* and (despite its fatalistic overtones) contends that the volitional nature of karmic theory has to be accepted if the world of human moral action is to be intelligible. Maria Heim's paper on *dana* has the virtue of highlighting its several meanings across different cultural and religious traditions and thus how it can serve as an important comparative device.

The papers in Section B by Christopher Key Chapple, Padmasiri de Silva, Damien Keown, Jay L Garfield, Mark Siderits, and M K Sridhar and Purushottama Bilimoria discuss Buddhist and Jaina ethics. These ethics arise from within a person out of self-discipline because there are no external Supreme Beings, gods or deities who have laid down the natural and cosmic law: "Through the acknowledgement of the frail and evanescent nature of reality, the Buddhist seeks to understand the root causes of his or her suffering. This leads to a path of introspection and self-correction. For the Jaina, the path to the moral life begins with a moment of awakening (*samyak drsti*) wherein one sees the all-pervasiveness of life forms and seeks to promote the protection of life (*jiva*). This compassion helps release some of a person's bondage (*bandha*) and advances one along a fourteen-fold path of spiritual ascent (*gunasthanas*) leading ultimately to the *Siddha Loka*, a goal not unlike the goal of achieving Buddha-Nature." (pp 211-2)

Chapple argues that much of Jaina ethics is conducive to building a larger socio-cultural, political and economic network to save the world from rampant consumerism and ecological destruction. De Silva shows in his paper how Buddhist ethics is open to the most creative interpretations thus providing flexibility in building strategies to address the same consumerism and ecological harm that Chapple has

talked about. In their paper Sridhar and Bilimoria argue for animal ethics and nurturing ecology from both ancient Indian as well as Buddhist and Jain premises. Keown raises the very important issue of rights in Buddhist ethics and contends that this domain offers greater prospects for the deepening and stability of liberal democracy than existing Occidental theories. Siderits argues that Buddhist ethics is a form of aretaic consequentialism which is grounded in reductionism, given the importance of self-effacement and of virtues in Buddhism.

The last section is a motley collection of articles by Bhikhu Parekh, Christopher Key Chapple, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Rajendra Prasad, Joseph Prabhu and Stephen Phillips, covering a diverse range of topics such as the Hindu attitude to tolerance, action-oriented morality in Hinduism, social injustice, Gandhian thought, the philosophy of Aurobindo, and a comparison of Weberian and Hindu ethics. Common to all of them is the attempt to deal with the tension between tradition and modernity. Some of the specific questions discussed are the normative universality of western modernity and the overlap between modernisation and westernisation. Prasad finds it difficult in his paper to identify in the Indian tradition the modern equivalents of social justice, equality and distributive justice. Prabhu's chapter on Gandhi tries to flesh out the details of the process through which Gandhi tried to reconcile truth with non-injury. Parekh contends that the "Hindu theory of tolerance approaches the question of tolerance from an angle very different to that of most of its European counterparts... Although it does not reduce religion to morality, it takes the latter to be central to religion. Since religious beliefs have only an instrumental value, quarrels about them are unnecessary... Since it expects each individual and social group to lead their own appropriate way of life, it places pluralism at the centre of morality, and avoids the all too familiar monistic disputes about which way of life is the best and can be imposed on others." (p 341) Chapple's paper traces the links between classical Indian ethics, their modern forms and Sramanic traditions.

This is a bulky volume of uneven material. Some of the papers are well-argued with appropriate historical and textual references whereas some others are almost casual and do not make a weighty point. Moreover, many of the points being argued about ethics can be gleaned from a perusal of the several standard textbooks on Indian philosophy. Although it remains a handy reference for those who are interested in exploring certain specific aspects of Indian ethics in a philosophical vein, it may, I suspect, be somewhat difficult and (at times) confusing for a health practitioner who wishes to familiarise himself with the cosmological ethical parameters of Indian patients and health services providers. What strengthens this suspicion is the absence of sociological background to the ethical practices – accordingly, we have no clue to how caste, gender, community and class played a role in the unfolding and actual operation of these ethics.