

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Morality is natural – but difficult

SUNIL K PANDYA

Neurosurgeon, Jaslok Hospital and Research Centre, Dr GV Deshmukh Marg, Mumbai 400 020 INDIA email: shunil3@gmail.com

**Gurcharan Das. *The difficulty of being good: on the subtle art of dharma*. New Delhi: Allen Lane; 2009. 434 pp. ISBN 9780670083497**

In 2002, Mr Das “decided to take an academic holiday”. His purpose was not to visit destinations frequented by tourists, howsoever enlightened they may be. Instead he travelled to the University of Chicago, where he and his wife spent the next two years. He delved into the rich collection of books and other texts on the Mahabharata in the Regenstein Library and interacted with scholars such as Sheldon Pollack, Wendy Doniger, Steve Collins, Mathew Kapstein and Dan Arnold. Eventually he was to spend six years continuously with the epic before crystallising his thoughts and concept into this book. His comparison of the Mahabharata to the great western epics such as the Odyssey and the Iliad is especially welcome as it emphasises the many strengths of the former.

As far as possible he studied the almost 100,000 couplets of the Mahabharata in Sanskrit – hard labour but “good for the soul”. Over time he made more than nodding acquaintance with scores of works on the epic. One of the strengths of his book is the privilege he grants his readers of seeing these master works through his eyes whilst providing opportunities for consulting them through his list of references.

He summarises the epic at the start of the book and then proceeds through its crucial episodes, providing illustrative anecdotes and drawing lessons from the thoughts and actions of the various protagonists.

He derives the first part of the title of his book from the fact that the epic is about our incomplete lives, about good people acting badly and about how difficult it is to be good in this world.

“All very well,” you might say, “but how does this concern readers of a journal on medical ethics?”

In the prelude Mr Das tells us of his increasing disquiet at the “moral failure that pervades our public life and hangs over it like Delhi’s smog”. Envy, self-importance, anxiety on one’s own status and the desire for revenge are some of the ugly sides of human vanity encountered in the epic and dissected by Mr Das for our benefit. Let me just quote Mr Das on one of these: “Envy is thus a leveler and it levels downwards. Instead of motivating one to better performance... envy prefers to see the other person fall. The envious person is willing to see both sides lose...”

In undertaking his study he sought ideas that would give meaning to life under these circumstances.

At the heart of the epic he encountered the changing concepts of *dharma* – moral and cosmic balance. He devotes chapter 10 to this subject and not surprisingly quotes at the start from Mahabharata XVIII.113.8: “One should never do to another what one regards as injurious to oneself. This, in brief, is the law of dharma.” Elsewhere in the chapter we learn that when Yaksha asks Yudhishtira, “What is the highest dharma in the world?” Yudhishtira replies simply, “Compassion is the highest dharma.” The quotation from the Mahabharata sums up this concept in the final chapter: “Who has in his heart always the well-being of others and is wholly given, in acts, thoughts and in speech to the good of others, he alone knows what dharma is.” Mr Das reminds us that the basic principle of *dharma* is the realisation of the dignity of the human spirit. Vivekananda’s “dharma of humanity” forms an ethical code applicable to the whole of mankind.

Throughout the book we encounter references to *satya*, *ahimsa* (not harming others) and *maitri* (benevolence) as the components of compassion. We are also introduced to the term *anrishamsya* – embodying compassion, altruism and paying heed to the needs and interests of others. The 18th century philosopher Francis Hutcheson’s phrase “calm universal benevolence” strikes a chord, as does Auguste Comte’s “religion of humanity”.

If “moral rules are the minimum demands of behaviour that a civilised society expects from its members,” our society in general and in our profession appears to give these rules short shrift. In the final chapter Mr Das tells us about how we are false to others, how we oppress fellow beings, how deeply unjust we are in our day-to-day lives and the lessons to be learnt from the Mahabharata on the means for overcoming these failings. In his concluding chapter he points out that morality is natural to the way human beings have evolved.

There is much else that is of great interest in this book. Take the concept of heroes. “A society without saints and heroes would be impoverished.” “Heroes (are) of many kinds: heroes of sacrifice, heroes of self-control,...heroes of truth,...heroes of giving, ...heroes of intellect, ...heroes of patience,...heroes of honesty,...heroes of tranquility”.

He discusses more than once the questions: “Why do bad things happen to good people?,” “Why be good?,” “Is it right to

abandon the individual to save the family?"; "Can *dharma* be taught?" and other similar issues.

Lest you think that this book is an epitome of sobriety, let me allay your anxiety by pointing to just one example of hilarity – Mr Das' account of the frustration experienced by Mr Arun Shourie when, as minister of administrative reforms, he tried to answer a query on whether government officers could use inks

other than blue and black. He also uses several contemporary examples of unethical acts such as the misdeeds of the Ambanis and Mrs Pratibha Patil.

After reading this book for the first time (as I shall surely return to it), I am also inspired to revisit the epic itself. I shall now do so with fresh insights provided by Mr Das and the host of philosophers to whom he refers throughout his book. I strongly commend this book.

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## Matters of life and death

GEETA BALAKRISHNAN

Director, Research Unit, College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan, 38, New Marine Lines, Mumbai 400 020 INDIA email: geeta.balakrishnan@gmail.com

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**Nancy S Jecker, Albert R Jonsen, Robert A Pearlman, editors. *Bioethics: an introduction to the history, methods and practice*. Second edition. New Delhi: Jones and Bartlett India Private Ltd; 2010. Student edition. 545 pp ISBN 978-93-80108-09-4**

This is a textbook on bioethics with contributions from major writers in the field. The editors are professors at the University of Washington and have carried out pioneering research in ethics. Part I of the book takes the reader through the history of bioethics, explaining its emergence as a discipline. Part II examines the methods of ethical reasoning and developing justification of moral beliefs. Part III covers ethical concerns related to reproductive decisions such as abortion, prenatal genetic testing and assisted reproductive technologies.

Albert Jonsen sets the tone by providing information on developments in medical ethics. Daniel Callahan comments on the use of technical jargon in the discussion of ethics. He points out that the discipline of bioethics should be so designed as to help physicians and biologists make practical decisions.

The essay by Leon Kass is an attempt to provoke discussion on the meaning of concepts such as "betterment of mankind", a "good man", a "good life", a "good community" and the values that should guide society. According to Kass, all decisions to develop or use biomedical technologies inevitably contain judgments of value. He argues that the very definitions of benefit or risk to individuals or society are based upon value judgments, not simply technical ones

James Childress takes on the question of "who can live when not all can live", giving examples of moral questions specifically related to scarce life-saving medical resources such as haemodialysis and kidney and heart transplants.

Hans Jonas's contribution is a philosophical reflection on experimenting with human subjects. This essay, considered a seminal exposition on the ethics of medical research, exhorts

us to remember that while slower progress in the conquest of disease will not threaten society, the erosion of moral values most definitely will. This erosion will render the most dazzling research achievements worthless.

The article by Nancy Jecker examines the central methods of ethical reasoning used to support ethical judgments in particular cases. She comments that none of these methods offers ways of dealing with human rights questions such as health inequities between rich and poor nations, a statement that also has serious implications for medical practice in India.

The challenge of caring for patients in multicultural settings and the related philosophical problems of ethical relativism are brought out by Ruth Benedict and James Rachels. They state that different societies have different moral codes which determine what is right in that society. Further, there is no universal truth in ethics and there are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times. Thus, the moral code of any society at any given time has no special status; it is one among many. They conclude that we cannot sit in judgment on the conduct of other people and we should adopt an attitude of tolerance towards the practices of other cultures.

Arguing that women's moral experience has been discounted in the construction of ethical theories and principles, Virginia Held concludes that the practice of mothering has important perspectives to contribute to ethics. Susan Shermin adds that the critical question of the structure of medical practice and its role in a patriarchal society is largely ignored and is not considered a part of the standard curriculum in textbooks of medical ethics.

Writing on the ethics of reproductive technologies, John Robertson states that theological, social, psychological, economic and feminist perspectives would emphasise different aspects of these technologies. Susan Shermin, discussing the context of the alarming increase in the range of reproductive technologies, argues that in vitro fertilisation should be