

A Comparative Study of Indian and Western Ethics

Ms. K. Anuradha¹ , Dr. D. E. Benet²

¹M.A. B.Ed. M.Phil. SET. (Ph.D),Assistant Professor
Department of English,Seethalakshmi Ramaswami College (Autonomous)
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University
Tiruchirapalli- 620 002,Tamilnadu,India

²Research Supervisor
Vice – Principal & Associate Professor of English,
National College (Autonomous),Affiliated to Bharathidasan University
Tiruchirappalli- 620 001,Tamilnadu,India.

Abstract : English Studies today include a wide range of subjects that come close to be called literature. Philosophical treatises on ‘all things human’ form the core of literary endeavours. The history of English Literature shows how writers like Robert Burton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, George Berkeley, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell and very many others have established a rich tradition of writing or a form of literature that has human happiness and welfare as its focus. Ethical principles and precepts are always regarded as categorical imperatives that govern human lives and are directly related to morals and duties. Literature has always been either didactic or entertaining. The text *Hindu Dharma* is a selected discourse of the great Acharya, Chandrashekarendra Saraswathi Shankaracharya. It was translated into English by the renowned writer RGK. The book *Hindu Dharma* (original text *Deivattin Kural*) translated by RGK into English includes only volume I and II. The text *Hindu Dharma* not only focuses on Dharmasastra but also guides all aspects of life and by throwing light on all the branches of knowledge.

Key Words: Ethical Writings, Didactic and religious literature

Hindu Dharma advises human beings to look upon the world as it belongs to the God and it explains further that it is the duty of human beings to conduct them as to conform to this belief. This is referred as dharma of humanity; actions directed by selfish interest will lead to unrighteousness. Man is advised to live less selfish in his thoughts and actions and remember God is the master of this entire world. Thus, all religion is involved based on this principle.

St Augustine, a successful teacher of rhetoric lived during the significant period in the history of Christianity. He changed his philosophical position many times in his search for a satisfactory set of beliefs. In his later life, his neo platonic teaching proved his mastery. He also rejected the philosophy of human soul which is the part of world soul. His Neo-Platonic doctrine exemplifies his own theory of knowledge in which he talks about the ultimate level in knowledge. The supreme reality can be experienced by only a few; it is a mystical intuition in the ultimate Knowledge. St. Augustine says love and truth are one and the same. He further says people can discover it when they desire true knowledge. *Where I found truth, there I found my God, who is truth itself.* Anyone can know truth by preparing their mind and take efforts with a strong will (to receive / understand it) conviction and inner experience help one.

He says true knowledge can be obtained only with faith. In order to understand one should have faith and belief. The intellectual knowledge of god is not enough and does not help for the perfect and ultimate understanding of God which is human happiness. He suggests that for spiritual seeing of God one should go beyond the normal limits of reason to mystical vision which is called the spiritual seeing of god, the soul of all truth.

St. Augustine disposes the general view that the knowledge of God is indispensable to our blessedness and he mocks at the false pride of the people who believe that they can know God by their efforts. According to him, an individual can grasp the truth only by god's grace. When his mind is illuminated, he equally believes in salvation which is possible only through God's grace. He holds the fact that all human beings are predestined by god either to damnation or to salvation. He insists that what is called evil in the universe is nothing but the absence of good. He further explains vices in the soul are privations of natural good. He quotes, "where there is no true religion there are no true virtues".

Taittiriya Upanisad says ‘Brahman is the Truth, the Knowledge, the infinite’. Isa Upanisad says

They who worship ignorance

Enter blind darkness:

They who delight in knowledge

Enter darkness, as it were yet deeper. (Roebuck 5)

Bhagavatgita chapter nine on *Works, Devotion and Knowledge* says:

The souls that have not faith in this dharma,

Not attaining to me, O Prantapa

Into the path of the moral world return.

(Jhunjhunwala 49)

Others again offer me sacrifice of knowledge,

And worship me in oneness, in separate existence,

In manifoldness, my faces fronting everywhere

I am the ritual action, I the sacrifices,

I the food- oblation,

I the fire-giving herbs: I the mantra,

I the birth, I the flame, I the offering,

Of this world I am the father,

Equal am I in all existences,

None is dear to me, none I hate,

But those who with devotion adore me,

They are in Me and I also in them.

(Jhunjhunwala 53)

Prophets associate dharma with “rta” and “satya”. He says “rta” is mental perception and realization of god. According to the saint Adi Sankara ‘satya’ means speaking the truth and dharma means practicing it in action. The term ‘satya’ (means truth) is derived from *sat* (means existence). It refers that *nothing exists in reality beyond God*. So Truth/ *Satya* is the most important name of God. *Satya* is also the central theme in the Vedas.

According to Aquinas, the domains of theology and philosophy overlap. He is of the view that both theology and philosophy include the judgment that God exists. Trinity is a distinctively theological and revealed truth which is beyond the resources of philosophy to him. Aquinas thought humans have two sources of truth - One is human faculty and another one is God’s revelation. To make it clear he calls the proper activity of human reason that develops from both of them. Aquinas guides people morally by explaining humans should recognize that God is the law giver and human should possess the rational mind and will to understand and obey eternal law since humans are made in God’s image.

As a Christian philosopher, he believed what is good or evil is judged by the intention of the agent and not by the consequence of the act. So one’s intention includes foreseeable consequence by the agent. Aquinas is highly aware of human limitations. He believed that those acts leading to consequences in which the agent could not foresee do not make will bad.

Sri Adi Shankara, an Indian philosopher and theologian advocated Advaita Vedanta (a school of philosophy and spiritual practices). The modern Indian religious thoughts are derived from his principles. He affirms there is “one eternal unchanging reality and the illusion of plurality and differentiation”.

Advaita means non – duality. It teaches self realization, self liberation, spiritual awakening and enlightenment. He is glorified for unifying and establishing the main ideas of thought in Hinduism. He has also written commentaries on the Vedic texts, Upanisads and Bhagavat Gita.

His classic system of spiritual realization in Indian tradition refers and believes Brahman alone is ultimately real; the transient world in which humans live is illusion (maya). The Brahman and atman are not different. The followers of these principles are called Advaita Vedantins or Advaitins.

Ramanuja, south Indian theologian and philosopher was an influential thinker in Indian ethics. He differs from Adi Shankara in his philosophy that discursive thought is necessary in man's search for ultimate truth. He believed that the phenomenal world is real and it provides real knowledge and the requirements of daily life do not affect or act on the contrary to the spirit.

The followers of Vedanta system and Ramanuja accepted the principle that the base of any Vedanta system must have three points of departure namely the Upanisads, Brahma-sutras and the *Bhagavatgita*. Unlike Adi Shankara he did not write any commentaries on Upanisads. But he has written the methods of understanding the Upanisads which is considered as his major work, the "vedarta-samgraha" means the the summary of the meaning of the veda.he has written commentaries on the Brahma-sutra, the Sri-bhasya and Bhagavatgita- bhasya. He related the religion with the pursuits of philosophy and provided bhakthi with intellectual basis.

Thomas Hobbes was acquainted with outstanding contemporary philosophers and scientists like Galileo, Bacon, Kepler and Descartes. Hobbes's moral philosophy is related to psychological theory. He constructs his mechanistic conception of motivation and propounded mind and body are not different substances; he strengthens his view explaining mental phenomena are nothing but psychological motions.

Hobbes believed that desires prompt one to pursue objects. Endeavors are the chief determinants of behavior and also the basis of evaluations. Hobbes's conception of human nature is completely and exclusively egoistic. He portrays human beings are by nature completely selfish and lack any genuine feelings like sympathy and kindness or sociability. Each individual is preoccupied with the satisfaction and pleasure of personal desires and one's achievement in maintaining a continuous fulfillment of desires, which is the measure of one's happiness. He explains a "social contract" through which the state of nature can be transformed into a civil society when desires related rights are deputed to a central governing authority and each individual asserts that he/she authorize and give up his/her rights of governing himself to a man or assembly of men.

Hobbes finds three principle causes of quarrel in the nature of men. They are competition, diffidence and glory. The first one makes men invade for gain; the second is for safety and the third gives reputation. Hobbes discovers three sources in controversy in human nature while examining the contentiousness of people in the absence of political organization. He believes "every man as much as in him lies endeavor to protect his life and members" and nature hath "given all to all".

Hobbes believes social relations are artificially created. According to him, society is only a means to proceed each individual's likes and happiness. As for as moral obligation is concerned, the state of nature has neither meaning nor application and the fundamental moral concepts like right/wrong, just/unjust develop and coexist with the establishment of a civil society.

Western ethics investigates matters related to life and probes some of the specific element thinking they are important for leading ethical life but Indian ethics gives importance to ethics in each and every walk of life. Indian religion and ethics are inseparable and it claims it is universal way of life.

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