

CHAPTER 1

HINDU ETHICS

Satyam eva jayate nanritam.
Truth alone is victorious and not falsehood.

THE CONCEPT OF DHARMA

The Sanskrit word for ethics is *dharma* (“to hold”). It signifies that which upholds or embodies law, custom, and religion, and is analogous to the concept of ‘Natural Law’ in Christian ethics, though the idea of ‘law’ should not detract from its dynamic character. *Dharma* is activity, mobility, and is possessed of catalytic qualities. By contrast, *a-dharma* is stasis, stoppage, and therefore unnatural.

From the beginning of Indian civilization, the Indian mind has chiefly been preoccupied with the notion of *dharma*. K. N. Upadhyaya notes that “the persistence and intensity with which the inquiry into *dharma* has been pursued is mainly on account of the firm conviction of the Indian people that *dharma* constitutes the differentia of man,” just as in Western philosophy, following Aristotle, rationality has been upheld as the mark that distinguishes humans from all other creatures.¹

Notwithstanding this historic preoccupation with *dharma*, the Hindu scriptures do not have systematic discussions of moral doctrines, fashioned in the manner of Aristotelian or Thomistic models. At the same time Hindu scriptures are rich repositories of certain theoretical statements that define the shape of reality and the nature of things, along with prescriptive and practical sayings, aimed at the cultivation of moral behavior. The terminology in which these ideas and ideals are expressed is richly suggestive, making it possible to reconstruct these fertile fragments into models of systematic ethics.

The common scriptural ground on which the whole system of Hindu ethics is founded is the postulation of a *summum bonum* and the proper means to achieve it. This highest ideal is the state of liberation or *mokṣa*. In it a person finds self-fulfillment and deepest bliss. It is established on the metaphysical conviction of the oneness of Reality, which is attainable through direct experience. *Mokṣa* serves as the ultimate standard of right conduct. An act is of value or disvalue to the extent it either helps or hinders the attainment of freedom. Actions most distinctively oriented to *mokṣa* are those characterized by truth, non-violence, sacrifice, and renunciation.

At first glance the philosophical ideal of *mokṣa*, which calls for detachment and progressive resignation, appears antithetical to ethics, because ethics involves a person's active role in the world.

There is no doubt that the Hindu philosophical ideal transcends the ethical ideal, but, as with the rungs of a ladder, the higher and lower levels are connected and cannot function separately. Thus while Hinduism draws a sharp distinction between the spiritual and material, the eternal and the temporal, these dimensions of existence are not polarized but correlated within the inclusive concept of *dharma*. *Dharma* incorporates the metaphysical and practical wisdom of the Hindus.

The unity between philosophical wisdom and ethical excellence is clearly illustrated in the doctrine of *adhikāra*. This doctrine teaches that before a disciple can aspire after knowledge, he must first be morally qualified. The Upaniṣads are replete with references correlating *prajñā* or saving knowledge with moral practice. The Kaṭha Upaniṣad clearly states:

Not he who has not ceased from bad conduct,
Not he who is not tranquil, not he who is not composed,
Not he who is not of peaceful mind
Can obtain Him by intelligence (*prajñā*).²

Commenting on this verse, Rāmānuja explains that it “teaches that meditation, which should become more perfect day by day, cannot be accomplished without the devotee having broken with all evil. This is the indispensable condition of pleasing the Lord and winning His grace.”³

The *adhikāra* doctrine underscores the intrinsic connection between rationality and morality. A truly rational person is bound to demonstrate qualities that are moral. In the pursuit of truth he or she is obligated to be free of bias, self-interest, and double standards. All of these are moral

qualities. It follows that to be rational is to be moral, and just as a sound mind requires a sound body, a sound philosophy requires a sound ethics. Saksena says: “The moral and spiritual qualification of a philosopher is . . . a condition of his philosophizing properly. Passion or ethical failings cannot but distort the vision of even a philosopher. In fact, what is called intuition is not so much an independent faculty as a purity of the moral being of the knower which itself constitutes enlightenment.”⁴

The moral discipline Hinduism enjoins upon the seeker after philosophical truth springs from a comprehensive ethic. Hindu ethics is a systematic progression from the Objective level to the Subjective level, culminating on the Superethical level. The first is the stage of Social Ethics; the second is the stage of Personal Ethics; and the third is the stage of the “Transcendental End.”⁵

Objective Level: Social Ethics

In its objective aspect Hindu *dharma* is tridimensional. Social duties are classified as (1) *Āśrama-dharma*; (2) *Varṇa-dharma*; (3) *Sādhāraṇa-dharma*.

(1) *Āśrama-dharma*

The *āśrama* scheme provides the framework within which an individual may express the total needs of one’s personality. These needs are incorporated within the doctrine of the four values of life or *puruṣārthas*, and are identified as: success (*artha*); passion (*kāma*); virtue (*dharma*); and self-perfection (*mokṣa*).

The *puruṣārtha* doctrine constitutes the psycho-moral basis of *āśrama-dharma*. It perceives human personality as a complex organism that is socially oriented. It recognizes an empirical side to life, represented by the first three *puruṣārthas*, having natural desires and social aims. Persons are conceived as naturally craving sex, and feeling the need for prosperity, power, and public good. The fourth *puruṣārtha* acknowledges a spiritual side to life marked by otherworldly hungers. Moreover, both sides are integrated within a holistic view of the person. Thus the *puruṣārtha* schema allows for no schism between desire and aspiration, or between the demands of the earth and of heaven. Both are good, when viewed relationally. True, the earth perishes, while heaven abides, but to treat the perishable as non-existing is to invite ruin. As the Upaniṣad declares: “In darkness are they who worship only the world, but in greater darkness

they who worship the infinite alone. He who accepts both saves himself from death by the knowledge of the former and attains immortality by the knowledge of the latter.”

Success is the first ideal worthy of pursuit. *Artha* is cognizant of the economic, social, and political needs of persons, and is especially important for a king. Through numerous passages wealth is praised, not only for its contribution to physical well-being, but also for its cultivation of social significance and political prestige. Wealth is said to transform a person of low social status to one of high status. Contrary to the adage, “Money is the root of all evil,” it is said that “all virtues attach themselves to gold.” However, there is nothing *laissez-faire* about *artha*; it must be regulated by *dharma*, and must express itself through liberality. “Let the rich satisfy the poor, and keep in view the long pathway. Riches come now to one, now to another, and like the wheels of cars are ever turning.”⁶

Kāma is the second ideal every normal person must embrace. It refers to any pleasure derived from the five senses, including the sensuous enjoyment of art, music, literature, and especially sexual activity. Hindu religious and secular literature is replete with sexual allusions, symbolism, and undisguised eroticism. In the Middle Ages sexual intercourse was divinized to illustrate the wonder of creation, as figures of couples in close embrace were elaborately carved on temple walls. The celebration of sex reached its most exaggerated form with the introduction of ritual intercourse within certain religious sects. But, as historian A. L. Basham observes, this extreme form of sexual religiosity in the later Middle Ages was “only an expression of the vigorous sexuality which was to be found in Indian social life at all times.” Here, too, *kāma* is not without limits: passion is good when it unites body and soul, and is regulated by *dharma*.

This brings us to the third value of life: *dharma*. It posits the moral nature and structure of the universe, because God is in it. The world is not just the evolution of an unconscious material force, creating and expressing itself in a world of increasing complexity and heterogeneity by its own unconscious dialectic. “It is a world of Divine and spiritual immanence with fullest reality of moral values and forces, because they flow from the power or Śakti of God.”⁸

We have said that *artha* and *kāma* must be regulated by *dharma*. The rationale for this hierarchy of values is that whereas passion is born of inertia (*tamas guṇa*), and success is born of energy (*rajas guṇa*), the source of *dharma* is purity (*sattva guṇa*)—the highest of the three fundamental

qualities of nature. By this criterion Manu enjoins that wealth and pleasure that are alien to righteousness must be discarded.⁹

Knowledge of one's own *dharma* or *sva-dharma*, as the Gītā puts it, is possible for the common person through a fourfold guide: (1) the Vedas; (2) the Smṛtis or expositions of Vedic wisdom; (3) the conduct of exemplary individuals; and (4) one's own conscience.¹⁰

The three *puruṣārthas* reviewed so far represent the ideals of the empirical life. They recognize and give balance to basic human needs. But higher than the desire of the empirical self are aspirations of the spiritual self. Maitreyī knew this well in her interrogation of Yājñavalkya. The old sage is forced to admit: "Of immortality . . . there is no hope through wealth."¹¹

Immortality (*mokṣa*) is the fourth and highest *puruṣārtha*. It is the state of liberation wherein one's spiritual self comes fully into its own. Correctly pursued, *artha*, *kāma*, and *dharma* lead to *mokṣa*. Self-realization is not the negation of these mundane values, but their fulfillment.

Thus the doctrine of the four *puruṣārthas* presents Hindu ethics as a rich compendium of elements in life that less imaginative systems have deemed exclusive and antagonistic.

The structure of existence defined by the *puruṣārthas* calls for a correlative social organization through which human nature in all of its variegated forms is actualized. This is supplied in the *āśrama* scheme. Not only does this scheme channelize the individual's natural inclinations, it is a practical outlet for a sense of social obligations formalized in the ethical concept of the three debts (*ṛṇas*).

Before a person qualifies for *mokṣa*, it is obligatory to pay off vital debts. These are debts to one's teachers (*ṛṣi ṛṇa*), to ancestors (*pitṛ ṛṇa*), and to deities (*deva ṛṇa*). They are repaid through study, by begetting offspring, and through ritual performances. The notion of *debts* in the moral consciousness of the Hindu must be distinguished from the Western notion of *rights*. *Ṛṇa* is the by-product of a culture in which the whole web of life is seen as interdependent, and this elicits feelings of gratitude and responsibility.

Having explored the four ends of life and the three springs of social obligation, we pass on to the ethical organization in which the *puruṣārthas* are realized and the *ṛṇas* redeemed. The ancient Hindu philosophers were not content to theorize about life. They were practical enough to organize the life of the individual in such a way that he or she would have ample scope to find fulfillment in all areas of life. Modern Hindu philosophers

should pay heed that the notion of applied ethics was a vital part of Upaniṣadic culture.

Āśrama-dharma enjoins that each individual pass through four stages in the quest for his true self. The *āśramas* are: (1) student (*brahmacārin*); (2) householder (*grhasthya*); (3) forest-dweller (*vānaprastha*); (4) hermit (*sannyāsin*).

The student was expected to live at close quarters with his mentor, for the sake of training both mind and body. While the body was disciplined in continence, the mind was exercised in knowledge of the arts and sciences. In earliest times, women could enter *brahmacārya* and participate in Vedic studies, but the practice ceased when the pool of females entering society included persons deemed of lesser stock and custom.

The student was not expected to repress his desires for the opposite sex indefinitely, but was obliged to find fulfillment of his natural impulses in marriage. Marriage was upheld as a universal ideal, because it helped transform individuals with private interests and inclinations into companions committed in love to each other, and to future generations. Family solidarity included the living as well as members who had passed on.

When responsibilities to kith and kin are accomplished, as generations come and go, it is time to enter the third stage of life that leads to the forest and to a life of solitude and meditation. Social success has a point of diminishing returns, as the demands of the mind and the senses yield to the demands of the soul. A wife may join her husband if she shares his spiritual aspirations.

In the final stage, the path of life narrows and must be walked alone. The *sannyāsin* strives to free himself of all ego-consciousness that permits his unfettered Self to appear. Once a person realizes the Self, he or she becomes detached from all encumbrances associated with former notions of 'I' and 'mine.' Since detachment is fundamentally renunciation of ego consciousness, and not renunciation of the welfare of the world, a liberated person may continue to strive toward human well-being. Like the Buddha, moved by compassion, such a person may even eschew liberation from *saṃsāra*, in order to relieve the sorrow of creatures who suffer.

Thus the scheme of *āśrama dharma* answers the moral question of how a person should live by observing that there are distinct periods of life, each having diverse needs that call for diverse deeds. Morality is not monotone. Each stage is born of nature, and is therefore normal, necessary, and good. The moral life is less a matter of chronology, as of biology,

physiology, and psychology. What is good for spring is not necessarily good for summer, and what is bad for autumn may be welcome in winter.

Varṇa-dharma

We now shift from the ethical organization of the individual, represented by *āśrama-dharma*, to the ethical organization of society, represented by *varṇa-dharma*. Both *dharmas* are coordinated, forming a composite system. Whereas the organization of *āśrama-dharma* approaches life from the side of nurture (*śrama*), training it through successive stages; the organization of *varṇa-dharma* approaches life from the side of nature (*guṇa*), defining the role of the individual in society by virtue of natural inclinations, tendencies, and innate dispositions.

The Sanskrit word *varṇa* literally means color. Originally it was connected with the class structure of the Vedic Āryan tribes. It is scientifically inaccurate to apply the meaning of “caste” to *varṇa*. Basham explains:

There are only four *varṇas*. There never have been less than four or more than four. It is said that at the present time there are 3000 castes, and the number of castes is known to have risen, and perhaps has sometimes fallen, over the past 2000 years. Caste and *varṇa* are quite different institutions, different in origin, different in purpose, and different in function.¹²

Originally the class structure was devised to promote a functional harmony between the various segments of society. Society was conceived as constituting four distinct types. Brahmins belonged to the first type. They were the priest-teachers. Due to the assumed prevalence of *sattva guṇas* in their nature, they were deemed capable of living on an exalted plane of intellect and probity. The *kṣatriyas* belonged to the second type. They were the warrior-kings. Possessing a large portion of *rajas guṇa*, they demonstrated uncommon virility, and were primarily men of action. The *vaiśyas* belonged to the third type. They were traders and craftsmen. The dominance of *tamas guṇas* made them into persons of feeling. The *śūdras* belonged to the fourth type. Being manual laborers, it was assumed that they did not possess any of the traits found in the other classes.

Modern Hindus consider the rationale behind the original classification generally valid. Realistically speaking, all persons are not created equal. People differ in their gifts and graces. It is unwise and unproductive to put a round peg in a square hole. Mahatama Gandhi’s comment on *varṇa-dharma* was: “It is a law of spiritual economics and has nothing to do with superiority and inferiority.”¹³

However, it was not long before the original class structure was displaced by the law of heredity, and an ironclad caste system took on all the marks and trappings of superiority and inferiority in respect to food, clothing, language, ceremonials, social intercourse, marriage, and occupation.

The evils of the caste or *jāti*-system are too well known to bear repetition or reproach. It goes against the grain of Hindu *dharma* where only virtue counts. In the Mahābhārata, Yudhiṣṭhira teaches: “truth, charity, fortitude, good conduct, gentleness, austerity, and compassion—he in whom these are observed is a *brāhmaṇa*. If these marks exist in a *śūdra* and are not found in a twice-born, the *śūdra* is not a *śūdra*, nor the *brāhmaṇa* a *brāhmaṇa*.”¹⁴ In his study of the Bhagavadgītā, K. N. Upadhyaya notes that whereas the text accepts the caste ideal on religious, biological, and sociological grounds, it universalizes the orthodox concept of salvation to make it accessible to all persons, and refuses to categorize moral acts by hierarchical standards.¹⁵

Buddhism and Jainism were not alone in condemning the caste system; their opposition was taken up by Hindu sects such as Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas. Modern reformers, such as Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) and Swami Dayananda (1824–1883), declared caste a departure from the Vedas; and Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) crusaded on behalf of India’s outcastes (Untouchables), giving them the new designation of Harijans or sons of God.

Thus it was when India became a democratic republic in 1947, the abrogation of caste by her Constitution was not seen as being in conflict with the original spirit of Hindu social ethics.

Sādhāraṇa-dharma

In addition to *viśeṣha* or specific duties, objective ethics includes *sāmānya* or ‘generic’ duties. Whereas the first is relative and conditional, the second is common and unconditional. The common duties (*sādhāraṇa-dharma*) are so named because they are independent of caste and station in life, and are binding upon humans as humans—all members of one community. As such, human rights precede communal rights. A brahmin wanting to make a sacrificial offering is not at liberty to acquire the object of sacrifice by stealth, for *asteya* or nonstealing is a universal duty. S. K. Maitra observes that notwithstanding the social degradation of the *śūdra*, the code of universal duties that are obligatory on persons as persons provide a certain amount of moral protection. He says, “These duties are to be observed by all alike, being the duties obligatory on every-

body in his dealing with everybody else. They are thus to be observed not merely by the *shudras* but also by members of the higher caste.”¹⁶ What are these universal duties? Manu lists the following:

1. Steadfastness (*dhairya*)
2. Forgiveness (*kshama*)
3. Application (*dama*)
4. Non-Appropriation (*chouryābhava*)
5. Cleanliness (*shoucha*)
6. Repression of sensuous appetites (*indriya-nigraha*)
7. Wisdom (*dhi*)
8. Learning (*vidyā*)
9. Veracity (*satya*)
10. Restraint of anger (*akrodha*)¹⁷

It is apparent that the virtues in this list of universal duties are predominantly ascetical (steadfastness, application, and repression) and dianoetic (wisdom, learning, and veracity). Their end is self-culture, based on an ethic of autonomy. This harmonizes well with the law of karma that states that a person rises or falls by virtue of his or her own deeds. The emphasis on self-sufficiency is important, but we miss any reference to social service.

The element missing in Manu’s list is partially compensated for in Praśastapāda’s record of generic or *sāmānya* duties. The humanitarian component comes through in the inclusion of duties such as *ahimsā* (refraining from injury to living beings), and *bhūtahitātva* (seeking the good of all creatures).

Objective ethics constitutes the first stage of Hindu *dharma*. On this stage morality is represented by social codes demanding external conformity. In psychological understanding, this is the stage of socialization and introjection. The voice of conscience is for the most part the interiorized voice of the group. The thrust of conscience is the sense of “must.” The feel of conscience is driven by fear of punishment for duties not done.

Subjective Level: Personal Ethics

‘Must’ and ‘Ought’

Hindu *dharma* is cognitively developmental. It teaches that one should progress from the ‘must consciousness’ to the ‘ought consciousness.’ This

shift proceeds from a heightened awareness of the Self, which purifies the mind and issues in actions that are consistent with the true nature of the Self. This is the subjective stage of Hindu ethics, known as *Cittaśuddhi* or purification of the mind.

Subjective ethics is an advance over objective ethics, because virtues are superior to duties. Whereas duty is other-directed; virtue is inner-directed. Duty represents tribalistic morality; virtue represents individual morality. Duties are related to experiences of prohibition and fear, but virtues arise from feelings of preference and self-respect. Duty is ad hoc and specific, with reference to particular commandments, codes, and customs; virtue is generic and is expressive of fundamental orientations in life, such as the Golden Rule.

Thus, on the level of *Cittaśuddhi*, the purified mind internalizes the rules of objective morality, and transforms duty into virtue. You may continue to follow the old rules, but now it is not because you must, but because you ought. The quality of what you do, speak, and think is free, and this internal freedom is characterized by *vairāgya* or detachment. *Vairāgya* and virtue are two sides of the same coin. According to Vātsyāyana, virtue (*dharma*) has three forms, namely:

1. Virtues of the body—charity, helping the needy, social service
2. Virtues of speech—truthfulness, benevolence, gentleness, recitation of scriptures
3. Virtues of the mind—kindness, unworldliness, piety

Like virtue, vice is also threefold:

1. Vices of the body—cruelty, theft, sexual indulgence
2. Vices of speech—falsehood, harshness, scandal
3. Vices of the mind—hatred, covetousness, unbelief

Transcendental Ethics

For all of its elevation of individual perfection, subjective ethics is not the highest level of spirituality. Like social ethics, personal ethics is not an end in itself but a means toward the ultimate end which is “the life absolute and transcendental.” Here social morality and personal morality are reincarnated in a new light and “charged with absolute significance.”

Maitra reminds us this precisely is the goal of Patañjali's Yoga, Śaṅkara's view of *mokṣa*, Rāmānuja's doctrine of *bhakti*, and the Buddha's understanding of *Nirvāṇa*. "All these agree in recognizing the transcendental as the limit of the empirical life, the timeless as the truth of all that is in time. This timeless, transcendental life is therefore the culminating stage of the spirit, the sphere of its consummation and fruition."¹⁸

This transcendental life is not a new acquisition, something given from above, like the Christian view of salvation. The self is already perfect, immortal, and free, but has been concealed through *māyā*. Through the veil of *māyā*, all one sees is the chrysalis, but when knowledge penetrates ignorance, the chrysalis is transformed into a butterfly. The transformation is a total experience, which reveals the essential nature of the soul as pure existence (*sat*), pure consciousness (*cit*), and pure bliss (*ānanda*).

The transcendental level of life is a post-ethical plane of being. The ethical plane, as the Gītā dramatizes, is always a field of battle, with contending impulses and wants. Morality is significant to the extent that one finds multiplicity in the world. The enemy has to be engaged and overcome. But on the transcendental level, ethics loses its substance, once all empirical contradictions are transcended—cold and heat, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, and also, good and evil, right and wrong. This position is not antinomian. The person who has achieved the mystical state of *mokṣa* does not consciously follow the moral path, but neither can he or she deviate from it. Virtue is not victory through battle, it is the spontaneous overflow of wisdom. The Bhagavadgītā declares:

The holy men whose sins are destroyed, whose doubts (dualities) are cut asunder, whose minds are disciplined and who rejoice in (doing) good to all creatures, attain to the beatitude of God.¹⁹

Thus love and compassion are the natural expression of enlightenment. This kind of knowledge helps one transcend mundane conflicts, but since through it one sees the divine in all things, it is no prescription for otherworldliness. To the contrary, social responsibilities are taken ever more seriously. Eminent philosophers, like Śaṅkara, have also been great humanitarians, not in spite of their philosophy but because of it.

In the remaining section we shall first highlight the cardinal principles of Hindu ethics, and then focus on its contextual orientation, which facilitates the task of making choices when dilemmas arise.

Cardinal Principles

The cardinal principles found in most Hindu sects are: purity, self-control, detachment, truth, and nonviolence. Each of these ideals has its own inner evolution and is therefore a mixture of ingredients not easily understandable to one unfamiliar with their cultural history. Thus, *purity* has a history of ritualism and ceremonialism, but progressively many of the rules pertaining to ablutions, food habits, and the like are internalized to signify the purity of mind and heart. So also, *self-control*, on one level, refers to the physical and mental senses. In the history of Hinduism such preoccupation has glorified asceticism and has made heroes of fanatics who have destroyed their sight glaring at the sun or atrophied their limbs through yogic acrobatics. On a higher level, self-control has gradually been perceived as a means for harmonizing all of one's calls and claims toward the development of a happy and healthy personality.

The ideal of *detachment* also has a long history, representing the perennial tension between the ideals of *dharma* and *mokṣa*—of world-affirmation and world-negation. The early Mīmāṃsā espoused the ideal of *dharma* so that the purpose of ethical action was that of enjoyment, both in this life and the next. The Mīmāṃsā consequently ridiculed ascetics who practiced renunciation. In time, under the influence of Jainism and Buddhism, Vedic orthodoxy adopted the *mokṣa* ideal and thereby ethics became the instrument for the attainment of liberation. However, even when it incorporated this new ideal into its philosophy, the Mīmāṃsā continued its former emphasis upon activity in the world. Against the objection that such activity, even when it is good, keeps one bound to the wheel of *samsāra* or rebirth, because a person must reap what is sown, the Mīmāṃsā responded that action performed in the spirit of detachment is emotionally empty and therefore not subject to the operation of karma.

The Bhagavad Gītā built on the ethical stance of the Mīmāṃsā. Its formulation of ethical activism is a refined synthesis of two orthodox though conflicting modes of discipline: *pravṛtti* (active life) and *nivṛtti* (quietism).

Devotees who embraced the first ideal engaged in Vedic rituals and duties prescribed by the Kalpa-sūtras with a view to reward in heaven. Devotees who embraced the second ideal abandoned all such works and relied solely on *jñāna* or knowledge as the pathway to liberation. They reasoned: since all actions—good or bad—must have their consequences

in reincarnations, the most direct way to escape the pain of rebirth was to minimize all activity.

The Gītā counters the earlier argument that karma is evil and should be abandoned, because it leads to rebirth, by making a shrewd analysis of human behavior. It does not stop with karma, but goes beyond karma to *kāma*. Behind the deed lies the desire. Aversions and attachments determine a person's behavior, therefore an individual's real enemies are not actions but passions.²⁰ Actions are only the motor manifestations of the impulse to love or to hate.

The implication of this analysis is that the power to bind one to continued existence resides in *kāma*, not karma. Accordingly, karma without *kāma* has no consequence for rebirth. Once desire is removed from the deed, the deed loses its fateful sting. One who knows this is wise. He can work and yet do nothing that binds him. In the Gītā's words, "Having no desire, with his mind and self controlled, abandoning all possessions, performing actions with the body alone, he commits no sin."²¹

The Gītā's analysis of action as the extension of desire, along with the inference that detached action per se has no binding power, brings one to the conclusion that what is ethically required is not "renunciation of action" but "renunciation in action."²²

The Gītā's nomenclature for detached activism is *karma-yoga*. *Karma-yoga* treats the act as an end in itself and not as a means to another end. The classic formulation of *karma-yoga* is embodied in the admonition, "In action only hast thou a right and never in its fruits. Let not thy motive be the fruits of action; nor let thy attachment be to inaction."²³

Thus in the principle of *karma-yoga* the Gītā synthesizes the positive elements of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*. "While it does not abandon activity, it preserves the spirit of renunciation. It commends the strenuous life, yet gives no room for the play of selfish impulses. Thus it discards neither ideal, but by combining them refines and ennobles both."²⁴

The next two ideals, truth and nonviolence, are combined, and are regarded as Hinduism's highest ideals.

The ethical imperative of truthfulness flows from the metaphysical concept of Truth as Reality. Gandhi utters Upaniṣadic insight when he says, "Truth is by nature self-evident. As soon as you remove the cobwebs of ignorance that surround it, it shines clear."²⁵ Earlier, Gandhi believed that God is Truth, but subsequently he revised it to: Truth is God. By taking this step he felt he could include in the fold of believers all persons who were lovers of Truth and yet could not subscribe to any theistic

ideology. His seeming innovation was not far removed from the Sanskrit word for Truth (*Sat*), which literally means “Being.” The ontological meaning of *Sat* as “being” or “existing” is translated into the ethical meaning of *Sat* as “good.”

The cardinal virtues reach their apex with the concept of *ahimsā*. It is *parama dharma* (highest virtue). The word is a compound of *a* = ‘not’ and *himsā* = ‘harmful.’ It literally means, “Not to injure or harm.” *Ahimsā* is a correlate of Hinduism’s cosmic outlook and therefore its moral mandate comprehends the whole created order as being worthy of nonviolence.

As with the other cardinal virtues that have been tried and tested through the centuries, *ahimsā* has ancient origins. There is some speculation it began as a “protest against blood sacrifice.” The ambitious Āryan settlers were hardly disposed to the values of *ahimsā*, judging by their records of wars and their aftermath. By the time of the Upaniṣads, when the meaning of sacrifice was ethicized, truthfulness and nonviolence were given prominence. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad says, “Austerity, almsgiving, uprightness, harmlessness, truthfulness—these are our gifts to the priests.”²⁶ Strict adherence to *ahimsā* was observed by Buddhism, and more so by Jainism. Classical Hinduism, while maintaining the primacy of *ahimsā*, adjusted the ideal to social and political realities and developed a “just war” theory not unlike its Christian counterpart.

The strict interpretation of *ahimsā*, without qualifications or caveats, continued to appear in Hindu scriptural texts. For instance, in the the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali, *ahimsā* provides the ethical framework for all the other virtues classified under *Yama* (restraint). *Ahimsā* is more than nonviolence, it is nonhatred (*vairatyagah*). Its scope is universal, and it cannot be relativized by a series of “ifs,” “ands,” or “buts.”²⁷

The individual, par excellence, who served as a bridge to bring the pristine character of *ahimsā* into the twentieth-century was Mahatama Gandhi (1869–1948). His innovation was the application of the principle of nonviolence to national and global affairs. *Satyagraha* (nonviolent protest) was the technique by which he took *ahimsā* out of the scriptures and on to the streets.

Gandhi acknowledged that “nonviolence is common to all religions,” but found its highest expression and application in “Hinduism” which, for him, included Buddhism and Jainism. He declared, “Hinduism believes in the oneness not merely of all human life, but in the oneness of all that lives. Its worship of cow, is in my opinion, its unique contribution to

the evolution of humanitarianism. It is a practical application of the belief in the oneness and, therefore, sacredness of all life.”²⁸

On the point of cow protection, Gandhi thought it was “the gift of Hinduism to the world.” “It symbolized the protection of the weak by the strong. It subsumed everything that feels. Causing pain to the weakest creature on earth incurred a breach of the principle of cow protection.”²⁹ Gandhi discovered nonviolence in his pursuit of Truth. He found that *ahimsā* and Truth were so intertwined that it was impossible to disentangle them. Even so, *ahimsā* was considered the means and Truth the end. “Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so *ahimsā* is our supreme duty. If we take care of the means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later.”³⁰

This concludes our overview of Hindu ethics. Next we focus on certain distinctive features of Hindu ethics that uniquely equip it in the task of doing bioethics.

Contextual Structure of Hindu Ethics

Any survey of clinical cases reveals that dilemmas lie at the heart of bioethics. For its part, Hindu ethics is a moral system that acknowledges genuine moral dilemmas. We encounter a dilemma when values to which we are equally committed are brought into conflict, so that the honoring of one value necessitates the violation of the other. Western ethicists admit that moral dilemmas are the Achilles heel of most problems encountered in bioethics. Beauchamp cites the classic case of Socrates in prison, sentenced to die. His friend Crito offers him an escape route with many good reasons to justify his act of breaking the law. Socrates countered with equally weighty reasons to support his own position to respect law and stay. The illustration serves to highlight the central problem of bioethics. “The reasons on each side are weighty ones, and neither is in any obvious way the right set of reasons. If we act on either set of reasons, our actions will be desirable in some respects but undesirable in other respects. And yet we think that ideally we ought to act on all of these reasons, for each is, considered by itself, a good reason.”³¹

The Hindu position is to be distinguished both from the *religious fundamentalist*, who views dilemmas in the light of revelation, and the *secular rationalist*, who views them as problems to be solved by the use of reason. For the religious fundamentalist, the problem is the need for better

faith; for the secular rationalist, it is the need for superior knowledge. In either case, there are no genuine dilemmas.

In Hinduism, dilemmas are not denied. Its scriptures strain with the tension of irreconcilable alternatives. The best examples are found in the epic literature. The Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa are not just works of antiquity but embody the social sinew that connects past with present and makes the epics dateless treasuries of true dilemmas.

The Bhagavad Gītā opens with a moral dilemma tugging at the heart and mind of Arjuna, as this lonesome warrior faces the choice of having to kill or be killed by his own kinsmen. Bimal K. Matilal in his *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata* transports us to another episode in the life of Arjuna in which he confronts the difficult claims of promise keeping versus fratricide.

On the very day of final encounter between Karṇa and Arjuna Yudhiṣṭhira fled the battlefield after being painfully humiliated by Karna in an armed engagement. When Arjuna came to the camp to pay visit to him and asked what really happened, Yudhiṣṭhira flared up in anger and told Arjuna that all his boastfulness about being the finest archer in the world was a lot of nonsense because the war was dragging on. He reminded Arjuna that the latter claimed to be capable of conquering everybody and thus end the war within a few days. In a rage, he not only insulted Arjuna but also slighted the “Gāṇḍiva bow,” the most precious possession of this valiant warrior. The bow was a gift to Arjuna from Agni, the fire-god. He held it so dear to his heart that he had promised to kill anyone whou would ever speak ill of “Gāṇḍiva.”³²

Yudhiṣṭhira’s vehemence put Arjuna in a tight corner where he would either have to kill his elder brother or break his promise. “When his Kṣatriya duty (dharma) made him choose the first alternative, Kṛṣṇa (his alter ego) appeared. On being asked, Arjuna explained: he was obliged to commit fratricide in order to fulfil his obligation to keep his promise.”³³ His strong sense of duty made Arjuna reduce the situation to a moral conflict in which duty must prevail. To be sure, the duty of promise keeping was inviolable—the moral equivalent of protecting the truth (*satya-rakṣā*). Matilal observes that the scenario resonates with Kantian ethics, which also gives highest priority to truth telling.³⁴ But Kṛṣṇa was no Kant. He argued with Arjuna that “promise-keeping or even truth-telling cannot be an unconditional obligation when it is in conflict with the avoidance of grossly unjust and criminal acts such as patricide or fratricide. Saving an innocent life is also a strong obligation; saving his elder

brother would naturally be an equally strong obligation, if not stronger. Hence, in fact, according to Kṛṣṇa, two almost equally strong obligations or duties are in conflict here.”³⁵

In all such conflicts, the *dharmic* thing to do is to be guided by the *demands of the situation*. There is no question about the need to maintain the consistency of an ethical system, but sometimes the infraction of these virtues is permitted to achieve noble ends. This does not reduce ethics to opportunism; but neither is it made the hostage of absolutism.

The point is illustrated by Kṛṣṇa’s story about Kauśika, a hermit who had taken a vow always to speak the truth. One day, while seated at a crossroad, this holy man was begged by a band of fleeing travelers not to divulge their escape route to bandits in hot pursuit, with intentions to take their lives. Kauśika did not reply. When the bandits arrived at the scene, knowing fully well that the hermit could not tell a lie, they asked about the travelers, and Kauśika told them the truth. The travelers were caught and killed. Kauśika’s fate was equally sad. Though he had punctiliously practiced virtue in order to reach heaven, he failed to achieve his goal, because, in this instance, truth-telling was a violent act that emptied his store of merit. Clearly the demand of the situation was the overriding duty to save precious lives, even though to effect this meant recourse to dissimulation. But Kauśika was an absolutist who could not see that truth-telling ceased being an unconditional obligation when weighed in the balance with the need for preserving lives.³⁶

The Mahābhārata recounts numerous other instances illustrating the relativity of moral conduct in the context of “duties in distress.” A Brāhmaṇa in distress is allowed to perform sacrifice even for an unworthy person, and may eat prohibited food. A Kṣatriya, unable to subsist by his caste duties when his own avocation is destroyed, is allowed to engage in the duties of a Vaiśya, taking to agriculture and cattle rearing. The Śantiparvan declares it is not sinful to drink alcohol for medical purposes, to accede to a preceptor’s wish to cohabit with his wife for the purpose of raising progeny, to steal in a time of emergency, to tell lies to robbers, and so on.³⁷

Similar exceptions are permitted by Manu, the greatest exponent of orthodox morality. Personal survival is deemed higher than the stealing of property, making it justifiable for a hungry person to steal food when all other measures fail.³⁸ Following Manu, other Dharmaśāstra writers permit perjury to save life as an act of dharma.

However, notwithstanding the dharmic justification of lying and other

such acts in situations of moral conflict, Hindu ethics strictly enjoins the maintenance of its integrity in keeping with the *puruṣārthas* or values of life. These values are integrated and progressive, culminating in the *sum-mum bonum* of liberation.

Thus the internal flexibility of Hindu ethics gives it a certain advantage over two extreme positions on the current social spectrum, dealing with life-and-death issues.

First there is the position of *authoritarianism*. It surfaces in different degrees in the moral stance of religious groups such as the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant fundamentalists, Mormons, and Operation Rescue, an activist organization responsible for the bombing of several birth control clinics. These groups base their truth claims on holy books in which they find objectively valid norms of conduct. They see human reason as flawed, and therefore rely on revelation for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This makes them tend to see moral issues in terms of black and white, and therefore to have little tolerance for exceptional cases.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the position of *relativism*. Relativists argue that value judgments and ethical norms are reducible to matters of subjective preference, and therefore questions of life and death are considered private issues to be answered by each individual. They, too, minimize the capacity of reason. With hedonic overtones, relativists make the individual's own experience of happiness the standard of value, worthy of protection by the American Constitution.

Hindu ethics is distinguished from both extremes by the importance it gives to *rational authority*. This claim may be queried because of the part played by revelation within its own system. However, Hinduism's recognition of revelation as a conduit of knowledge does not depreciate the role of reason. The Hindu *sāstras* make a liberal use of reason in support of the positions they take. Only the final validity of reason is questioned in mystical matters that lie beyond its purview. Thus the admission of revelation does not prejudice reason, for there is continuity between the two. Whereas in Western thought revelation is an external mode of testimony, in Hindu perspective revelation is an internal activity, similar to intuition. "It begins, no doubt, as an external opinion inasmuch as we appropriate it from a guru. But we do not merely acquiesce in it. We are under an obligation to intuit it and make it our own, when it will cease to be external and become inwardly as clear to us as it is to our teacher."³⁹

Through reason and intuition, Hinduism finds the source of ethics in the *nature of the person, holistically perceived*. It agrees with the relativ-

ists that the claims of authoritarianism to finding absolute values are illusory and pretentious, because social morality is inevitably the construct of subjective, historical forces that reflect the accidents of time and place; but this admission of subjectivity is not tantamount to saying that all of our choices between life and death are merely the products of subjective preferences. To the contrary, we can arrive at objectively valid norms based on our knowledge of deep-seated human capacities for life, for love, for freedom, and for integrity. Our cultural formulations of these psychic strivings will always be relative, constantly to be refined over the long haul of human experience—which is to acknowledge that objectivity is not absolute or unconditional. The notion of *absolutism is alien to Hindu ethics*, because it is a concept of transcendental revelation that is removed from an appreciative understanding of human nature and human history.

This approach imparts to Hindu bioethics a *contextual orientation of moral reasoning* in its dealings with moral problems. It eschews the paths of authoritarianism, creedalism, emotionalism, and takes the road of rationality. However it is not the rationality of the disembodied mind, but the rationality of the whole person. The autonomous individual gives due weight to scriptural injunctions and the precedents of persons of probity, but in the final analysis he turns to his own conscience, guided by what collective religious experience has defined as being of ultimate value.

Notwithstanding its claim to rationality, Hindu bioethics acknowledges that persons of reason might not always agree on what is good, but they can agree more generally on what is evil. Rational people wish to avoid for themselves and for their loved ones evils such as pain, disease, premature death, and the loss of abilities to do what one wants to do. Therefore, while promoting the good, the basic agenda of Hindu bioethics is to prevent evil by advocating principles and proscriptions against behavior that inflicts harm to persons and all sentient creatures. Its bottom line is: Do no harm—*hiṃsaṃ mā kuru*.

The vehicle that brings Hindu ethics into the new world of bioethics is the notion of *dharma*. This we have seen is not some static moral concept, standing palely for the values of India in a bygone time with little relevance for other peoples and other places. *Dharma* is a catalyst for change. It preserves order in the midst of change, and change in the midst of order; and thereby is always on the side of progress. For further discussion of ideas presented here the reader is referred to my *Dilemmas of Life and Death* (see Bibliography) in which the arguments of the concluding section appear.

Fuller treatments of Hindu ethics may be found in my earlier works on which portions of the Introduction depends: *The Evolution of Hindu Ethical Ideals* (Hawaii: The University Press of Hawaii, 1982), *In Search of Hinduism* (UTS Press, 1986) *World Religions and Global Ethics* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), and *Dilemmas of Life and Death, Hindu Ethics in a North American Context* (New York: State University of New Press, 1995).