



ADVAITA VEDĀNTA AND OUR VALUE – SYSTEM

Shubhra Jyoti Das

CP, JawaharLal Nehru University

New Delhi

The problem of value is probably the most difficult of all the existing problems in the realm of Philosophy. This is because we can afford to neglect Metaphysics if we are not interested in the ultimate reality and are happy with our so called immediate reality. Epistemology also can be overlooked, in its great detail, if immediate knowledge of the objects of this world satisfies our quench for knowledge of knowledge. But we can't afford to neglect the problem of Ethics i.e. the problem of values since our life is full of choices. Our value – system decides all our choices. Apart from that, in order to run institutions of all kinds starting from family to the nation state we need to have a well – formed system of values. No one can afford to neglect the problem of values since it governs every step of our life. We decide our values taking them from various sources, from our family, culture, education etc.

The problem of value turns out to be very difficult due to the relativity factor involved with it. Every culture has its own value – system. So values change from place to place. Then from time to time also, values have changed in every culture. Therefore the biggest problem is to find an objective standard for morality.

Some philosophers have thought that though it is very difficult to find moral objectivity, there are some eternal values of any changing society. There are some values like truthfulness and integrity which are simply not relative to culture but go beyond the cultural boundaries. And therefore we need to cultivate those values. But this also does not give a solid foundation to any system of values since we can't accept a value just because it is practised in most of the societies in the world or simply since they have been practised for a prolonged period of time.

Some of the values like the food habit and clothing are bound to differ and vary from place to place since they depend mainly upon the geographical set – up and natural conditions. We cannot decide on objectivity of values just based on numbers. But can we think of a set of values which go beyond these limitations and can be entertained based on some metaphysical foundation and not simply upon the number of societies that practise them or based on the period of time they have been practised? I have tried to examine this problem of values in the light of *Advaita Vedānta*. It



appears that the epistemology of *Advaita Vedânta* and metaphysics propounded by it has important implications to this problem of values.

The epistemology of self as propagated by *Vedânta* and the value problem

The first problem arises with the idea of the absence of the moral agent. Some sceptics believe that there is nothing like self or no such principle exists in us. As David Hume puts it,

“For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep, so long I am insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death and I could neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate, after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is further requisite to make me a perfect non – entity. If anyone, upon serious and unprejudiced reflection, thinks he has a different notion of himself, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps perceive something simple and continued, which he calls himself; though I am certain there is no such principle in me”¹

If this is the case, the problem is why should we think of being moral? If the agent is just a flow, why should we think of values at all? Here *Vedânta* has to give an answer. *Dg – Dya- Viveka*, one of the *prakarana* treatises of *Vedânta* reads –

Rupam Dsyam loāanam Dka tat dyam dktu mânasam.
*Dsya dhibtaya sakihi drigeba na tu dshyate*²

Meaning that when world is seen, eyes are the seer. When eyes are seen, mind is the seer. When mind is seen, witness is the seer. But there is no seer of this witness.

This can be further interpreted as – if a condition C1 changes to C2, an agent A1 who is present in C1 will be able to read the change if he is present in both C1 and C2. If with the change in the condition the agent also changes, let us say, from A1 to A2, he won't be able to read the change. The concept of change will vanish if everything in a system changes. There should be a constant to read the change. Therefore a



perfect new – comer to a place never raises the question of change. It is only the old visitors who talk about change.

Therefore any sceptic who says that there is nothing constant in him, since he perceives his body and mind only as changing phenomena, makes a mistake. By simply saying that he is able to perceive changes, he implicitly admits that he himself is not changing. To say that the seer also might change does not carry any meaning in this i.e. the first person perspective since that change would be known again only if there is a constant or witness to note it.

So *Vedânta* refutes the sceptic position of ‘no – self’ and establishes the presence of a constant principle which becomes the basis of morality and its agency. The Metaphysics of *Advaita Vedânta* and the Values

To read the implications of *Advaita Vedântic* Metaphysics, in the realm of Ethics, we must understand *Advaita* in terms of the three layers of reality that they talk. Úankarâcârya says that there are three kinds of *sattâs* or realities as a whole – *Prâtibhasika*, *Vyavâhârîka* and *Pâramârthika*.

Pratibhâsika is the layer of dreams, illusions and hallucinations. This layer appears to be unreal from the *Vyavahârîka satta* or the practical layer. None of us generally entertain that layer as real. But *Vedanta* maintains that *pratibhasika* layer is not absolutely unreal. This is exemplified by the rope – snake illusion in *Advaita Vedanta*. When we sometime see a rope in dim light, we start entertaining it as a snake. But after a close examination, when we discover that there is no snake but only a rope, our behaviour changes. Yet we can't say that the snake was absolutely unreal since we had a ‘real’ kind of experience of the same. So is the case with the *Pratibhâsika* layer some kind of relative reality is there. Similarly only when dream experience comes to an end with awakening, we say that the dream was unreal. There is no scope of doubting dream during the experience of the same. Thus *Prâtibhâsika* is unreal only from the *Vyavahârîka* or some other plane.

Vyavahârîka is the layer of our day – to – day mundane existence. Most of us entertain this to be ‘the real’ layer of existence. A common man never doubts the existence of the external world. We eat, drink, discuss philosophy and struggle for ethics only in this layer. Now *Advaita Vedânta* says that even this layer is also not the final. This layer is also relative and Unreal with respect a final layer called *Paramârthika*. *Paramârthika* is Absolute in nature. Now in this layer everything is One. Brahman alone remains. There is no dualism of any kind in this layer. The most



important point to note is that the perfect *Advaita*, which *Advaita Vedanta* has got its name from, exists only in this layer. There is dualism and in fact hardcore dualism in the other two layers.

Now it is very evident that in the *paramârthika* plane, where everything and being becomes One, can be seen as the metaphysical foundation of all our basic values. According to this position, we all are finally connected to each other on the third plane of existence. I am one with the whole universe. Therefore when I try to cheat someone, say by telling a lie, I actually cheat myself. If *Karma* theory is applied here, which *Vedânta* very cordially accepts, the result of all my actions will definitely come back to me in the due course of time. Similarly when I help a needy person in the hours of distress, the perfect result will come to me since in helping him, actually I help myself. When I give love to someone, this is bound to come back to me, could be through a different channel or agent on the *Vyavahârîka* plane, We can see a very solid metaphysical foundation of the essential values entertained, in global context, by different societies of the world.

Most of the religions of the world talk about the same set of values in different languages. The *Yama – Niyamas* of the Yoga in Hinduism and the *Panâa mahâbratas* of Jainism comprising of *satya*(truthfulness), *âsteya* (non – stealing), *ahimsa* (non – injury), *aparigraha* (non – possession) etc., the ten commandments of Christianity, The *Astângika Mârگا* of Buddhism like *Samyak Daræan*, *Samyak sankalpa* etc., the essentials of the five pillars of Islam like *zakât*, *rozâ* etc. do have all these values in common and we can see *Vedântic* Oneness as the substratum of all these value – systems. Every essential human value has a justification in the *Advaitic* scheme of thought.

Upani?ads also have a very great discourse to give about values. This is reflected in a passage from *Taittiriya Upani?ad*. The *Upani?ad* reads as –

“The knower of Brahman reaches the Supreme. As to this the following has been said: He who knows Brahman as the truth, as knowledge and as infinite (*satyam*, *jnanam*, *anantam*) placed in the secret place of the heart and in the highest heaven realizes all desire along with Brahman, the intelligent. Form this self, verily ether arose; from ether air, from air fire; from fire water; from water the earth; from the earth herbs; from herbs food; from food the person. This, verily, is the person that consists of the essence of food. This indeed is the head; this the right side, this the left side, this the body; this the lower part, the foundation”³



Here we can see that *satyam* or truth is included in the essence of the Supreme. And therefore, in the discourse of *Dharma*, truthfulness acquires the highest status.

We find, therefore, in the same *upaniad*, a passage where truthfulness is primarily instructed by a teacher to his outgoing student along with a prescription for the righteous way of life. It reads as – “Having taught the *Veda*, the teacher instructs the pupil. Speak truth, follow the path of dharma (*Satyam vada dharmam aera*). Let there be no neglect of your (daily) reading. Having brought to the teacher the wealth that is pleasing (to him), do not cut off the thread of the offspring. Let there be no neglect of truth. Let there be no neglect of *dharmam*. Let there be no neglect of welfare. Let there be no neglect of prosperity. Let there be no neglect of study and teaching. Let there be no neglect of the duties to the gods and the fathers.”⁴

The instruction to follow the path of truthfulness is explicit, since all other virtues like control of the mind and control of the senses turns indispensable to practice the discipline of truthfulness. Thus *Mundaka Upanisad* says, “Truth alone conquers (*satyameva jayate*), not untruth. By truth is laid out the path leading to the gods by which the sages who have their desires fulfilled travel to where is the Supreme abode of truth.”⁵

According to *Bṛhadâraṇyaka Upanisad* virtue is threefold. It reads, “Once upon a time the gods, men and demons all went to their common father, Prajâpati and asked him to communicate to them the knowledge which he possessed. To the gods Prajâpati communicated the syllable *Da*, and having asked them whether they had understood what he had said to them, received the answer that they had understood that they were asked to practice self control (*Damyatâ*), upon which Prajâpati expressed satisfaction. To the men he also communicated the syllable *Da*, and after having asked them whether they had understood what he had said to them, received the answer that they had understood that they should practice Charity (*Dattâ*), upon which Prajâpati said he was satisfied. To the demons likewise, Prajâpati communicated the syllable *Da*, and having asked them whether they had understood what he had said to them, received the answer that they had understood that they should practice compassion (*Dayadham*), upon which Prajâpati expressed satisfaction again”⁶

Again in the *Chândogya*, we meet with a different list of virtues. We read that the chief virtues of men are austerity, charity, straightforwardness, harmlessness and truthfulness⁷. Then in the same *Upanisad* we read, “He who steals gold, he who drinks wine, he who pollutes the bed of his teacher, he who kills a Brahmin, all these



go down to perdition; likewise also he, who even associates with them”⁸

If we analyse all these prescribed values, we will see that they can all be justified in the oneness of the *Advaita Vedânta*. And within the four walls of *Dharma*, *Vedânta* permits everyone to enjoy his life with *artha* i.e. material wealth and *kâma* or sensual pleasures.

Now the same plane of oneness can be used to justify military ethics also. Every religion has at some or the other point of time prescribed war as a means of protection. The philosophy of the *Bhagawat Geeta* and the Philosophy of *Zihad* in Islam can be sighted as two classical examples. At times, when an organ of our body degenerates due to some incurable disease, we chop that organ off in order to protect the rest of the body. Similarly, when some people become almost intolerable for humanity, they need to be eliminated for the protection of the larger interest of the society. So *Vedânta* and *Geetâ* does not rule out capital punishment in spite of the oneness that it preaches.

Vedanta and the negative Values

Now since positive values have been described and justified in the *advaitic* scheme we need to look at the problem of negative values. If everything is pervaded by *Brahman*, if human nature is basically Divine, why do we come across so much of evil in this world. *Advaita Vedânta* can be explained in a very interesting way in this regard. For this, the *Shada ripus* or six negative qualities viz. *Kâma* or desire, *krodha* or anger, *lobha* or greed, *moha* or infatuation, *mada* or pride and *mâtsarya* or jealousy can be taken up for examination. Traditionally these are thought as the genesis of all evils.

Human nature is basically divine, but the problem is that he is not aware of his divinity. Ego or empirical self is a part of the *Brahman* and it wants to go back to its original source. *Brahman* is all-blissfull, all- pervading and supreme consciousness. Therefore ego is all the time after happiness and wants to be Supreme in all respects. But instead of looking for this experience, turning inward, in the self, man looks for this experience in the world outside. He looks for happiness in the worldly objects and wants to grow big in his society. But none of the external object makes him perfectly happy.

Now, for instance, what is *lobha*? Ego looks for more and more to go back to the supreme state. Since he does not know how to reach there, he attempts to gain it by more and more worldly objects. With his experience of limited happiness with



certain objects, he suffers from the illusion that he would gain more and more happiness with more and more objects. In this process he fails to discriminate between right and wrong and his ignorance becomes his vice. The same thing can be said about all other vices. Since ego originates from supreme Brahman, the nature of Brahman gets reflected in ego. He is always busy in establishing his supremacy. And he can't accept if somebody surpasses him in any competition. When this feeling grows very strong, we call it *Mâtsarya* or jealousy.

Thus all vices can be understood as a form of ignorance in *advaita*. When ignorance is removed man gains proper directions to put his efforts and gives up his vices. But even during his ignorance, he unconsciously looks for the supreme *advaitic* experience which will make him perfectly happy.

That's why *Katha Upani?ad* brings a distinction between *preyas* and *æreyas*. *Preyas* is the source of transitory and *Æreyas* is that of perpetual joy. One should go for the eternal and abandon the ephemeral. The way of evil is mistaking *preyas* as *æreyas*. That is just a result of confusion and to remove it one needs to learn *Vedânta* and look at its applied side. That is the whole of the value – discourse in the *Vedânta*. The final joy is in realizing oneness with the whole cosmos. That leads one to perfect fulfilment. But that has to be realized by means of practising some values and very interestingly all those values can be justified based on the oneness which is the genesis of that fulfilment.

There is a common understanding that *Advaitic* idea of values is utterly other-worldly. But a careful study gives a different picture. All the four *purusharthas* are not purely spiritual. *Advaita Vedânta* does not consider wealth and marital life as an impediment to the attainment of the highest bliss, provided they are attained through proper means. Shankara has stood for the possibility of *Jivanamukti* i.e. the attainment of liberation in this life as opposed to many of the religious and philosophical contentions of freedom only after death. Bhagawad Geeta condemns escapism in the garb of mysticism. *Mithyachara*⁹ is the term for such hypocrisy. *Karma* has been promoted to the highest extent. In the second *sloka* of the fifth chapter Krishna says
“*Sannyasa Karma yogascha nishreyasa karabhuva
tayastu karma sannyasat karmayogo vishishyate*”

(Both renunciation and yoga of action lead one to the same goal. But of the two, yoga of action is superior to the renunciation of action)¹⁰.



This scheme takes all aspects like family, society, emotions, finance, desires etc. into account while chalking the path to spiritual enlightenment.

Since goodness is very relative, its content varies from situation to situation. The agent has to decide his action keeping the given situation, the eternal values and more importantly the final goal of bliss in mind. So called evil tendencies are bound to be there, but the agent needs to fight them if he wants pure bliss. There is a happiness in evil too, but one needs to renounce it for attainment of greater happiness. This is vedantic way of talking about values.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, we can very clearly say that the difficult problem of values seems to have been solved within the *Advaita Vedanta*. When examined properly, *Advaita Vedanta* can be seen as a metaphysical foundation of those values. So it simply is not metaphysics but contains a solid value- discourse within it. Apart from that *Advaita Vedanta* also has a causal explanation for the existence of negative values. It describes the root of evil as only ignorance and confusion. One should go for the eternal and abandon the ephemeral. The way of evil is mistaking *preyas* to be *areyas*. That is just a result of confusion and to remove it one needs to learn *Advaita Vedanta* and look at its applied side. The final joy is in realizing oneness with the whole cosmos. That leads one to perfect fulfilment. But that has to be realized by means of practising some values and very interestingly all those values can be justified based on the oneness, that comes through *Úabda pramāna* of *Upani?ads* and is of course accepted by *Advaita Vedanta*, which is the genesis of that fulfilment.

References

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