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Dharma and rationality: Through the eyes of BK Matilal

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Abstract

Religious experience is present in every religion. Since Dr. Radhakrishnan was born and brought up in an atmosphere where religion was dominant, he could associate himself with this thought from a young age. He was born in a dominant Hindu family but was brought up in a missionary school where he was taught Christianity is dominant and most powerful. This dual training from a young age made him aware that the core content of all religions is the same. Difference lies only in the form of interpretation. This is exactly what Dr. Radhakrishnan endorsed when he refuted the supremacy of Christianity. In this paper it is discussed how Radhakrishnan categorically refutes the special status of Christianity by taking the help of the arguments forwarded by the German Philosopher Schleiermacher.

Keywords: Dharma, rationality, morality

Introduction

The Europeans used the western idea of reason and science to differentiate between the native and the Europeans. They also tried to determine a hierarchy between these two groups. In the context of Indian civilization, Europeans built their own stereotype through the emphasis on the supposed superiority of analytical reason and Western science; they also built the image of Indians as passive, religious, and illogical beings.

Matilal's project was first, to deny the fact that "philosophy" is a rational enterprise uniquely found in the history of Western culture. He instead wanted to demonstrate the fact that the questions and methods of philosophy are found equally in Indian traditions. Second, to engage with Western philosophy in this intercultural way is not to give up working in and through Indian traditions of thought, but rather to do philosophy as it necessarily needs to be done now, in the conditions of the present. And third, it is no longer possible to continue making a claim to uniqueness when different cultures have come to mingle so much that philosophy is irreducibly intercultural. In this backdrop Matilal tries to relate the concepts of dharma and rationality.

In his book, "Ethics and Epics" ^[1], Matilal defines dharma as "an intelligible concept on its home ground in spite of its ambiguity and multivalent character". Ambiguity in the sense that it has to be understood in relation to artha, kama, dukhya (other such concepts). In some other texts dharma is also defined as law, justice, ethics, religion, duty etc. The meaning of dharma depends on the ways of living, ways of seeing and ways of relating different issues to life. He observes that the meaning of dharma has changed over the ages from the Vedic period till the present day. Hence, it is difficult to translate the word 'dharma' due to its fluctuations in meaning, context and application.

He is of the view that the two great Indian Epics are not just heroic tales but are also tales of practical lessons of morals and dharma deliberations. He in fact comments that dharma sastras provide just the skeleton of dharma. The epics and stories add flesh and blood to the skeleton.

Matilal at first tries to find out the primitive form of rationality and free riders and then tries to relate this to the Indian concept. He starts by analysing an old story. The story goes thus:

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¹ Matilal B.K, "Ethics and Epics", Ed. Jonardon Ganeri, Oxford University Press, 2002.

A king tired of looking at pools and lakes full of muddy water wanted to create a lake full of milk. So he ordered his fellow men to dig a lake and asked all of his men to pour a bucket of milk. As milk was dear to each and every country man, each independently thought that they would pour a bucket of water in the lake in the darkness of the night so that no one could notice him doing so. Each argued with himself that such a small amount of water will not create any difference to the lake filled with milk. The next morning, the king, to his dismay, found that the lake was filled with water. This means that no one has poured a single bucket of milk. Each thought the other would but in reality no one filled the lake with milk. From this story Matilal observed that this act of the countrymen showed that everybody wanted to be a 'free rider' and everybody acted with rational self-interest in mind. If it is seen from this angle that everybody wanted the lake of milk to be created so that it will help them and be good to society at large then from the point of view of primitive rational behaviour, every citizen acted not only immorally but also irrationally. That is, everybody knew everybody else could take the same line of action- based on the same argument and if everybody did this, nobody's self- interest would be served because nobody would receive the intended benefit.

From the moral point of view, the discussion is as follows: if by contributing a bucket of milk, the citizens are not subjected to any unbearable hardship, then according to any moral theory, it would be considered immoral to be a free rider. By dharma, Matilal means moral virtue or a theory of moral behaviour as is found in India's traditional wisdom. So, to him, the attempt to be a free rider is an a-dharma or violation of dharma.

Secondly, Matilal wants us to look into the fact that though dharma is a popular subject of inquiry, neither in Buddhism, Jainism nor in Hinduism was God cited as the authority on dharma. Hence the search for a rational basis of dharma is compatible with the religious traditions. Indian tradition did not have to wait for something like the Age of Enlightenment to make observations on social and moral behaviour. Even the actions of Krishna and Rama, regarded as incarnations of God on earth, were subject to rational criticism over the ages. In this regard let us cite an example from the Chhandogya Upanisad. Satyakam grew up with his mother Jabala and he wanted to have an education. He approached Sage Gautama for this purpose. Gautama had to go through the initiation ritual and wanted to know the name of the father of Satyakama. Unfortunately he did not know his father's name. So he went to his mother to get the information. There he learnt that his mother had been a maid and had to sell her body in order to survive. Thus she did not know the name of his father. Next day Satyakama went back to Gautama and told the truth of his birth in front of all the other pupils present there. Others started to laugh at this. But Gautama made a moral decision from here. Gautama embraced the boy and declared him to be a Brahmin for his courage, firmness and truthfulness. The sage accepted his mother's name as his family name. Later on Jabala Satyakama became a famous Upanisadic sage. Hence, here it can be observed that a moral decision was made on the basis of rational argument.

Thirdly, Matilal tried to understand dharma as morality or moral conscience. He observes that life presents us with moral conflicts. There are moral dilemmas. In genuine moral dilemmas rational arguments in favour of prescription or action are generally balanced. Hence, if a moral agent is forced to take action, it is usually under unresolved conflict and the agent may suffer from regret or remorse. There may

be cases where some of the moral conflicts may be resolved but due to lack of enough information, it is difficult to come to a rational decision. But since a decision needs to be taken, the agent may appeal to his own moral conscience. He needs to be unbiased and impartial. Matilal believed that many conflicts can be resolved this way through 'hearts approval'. This is found in the last qualification of the general definition of dharma cited in Manusamhita. There it is said that the roots of dharma are: 1. The entire Vedas. 2. The dharmasastras. 3. Virtues cultivated by the Vedic scholars. 4. The good conduct of the honest. 5. Satisfaction of the mind of the agent. Six verses later the virtues cultivated by the Vedic scholars and the good conduct of the honest are merged into a single authority. They are: 1. The scriptures. 2. The Dharmasastras. 3. The conduct of the good. 4 satisfaction of the mind.

We can see that the last point in both is 'heart's approval'. From this it is clear that Indian tradition accepts several authorities on dharma morality apart from scriptures and dharmasastra. This openness gives importance to the rational tradition and less importance to blind faith.

Fourth, Matilal tries to understand dharma from the perspective of moral weakness. He says that if we admit moral dilemma, then it is essential to admit using of some method for making a rational choice. For this some sort of pre-ordering or ranking of principles is required. In case of ritual oriented dharma, when conflict arises, the Mimamsa School has determined a fixed rule of pre-ordering and has given a rational argument in favour of it. But it is difficult to find a clear-cut pre-ordering in every practical instance. Exceptions do exist. It does not allow solving problems in a fixed pattern. Matilal observes that this respect for the difficulties encountered in real life is not a mark of irrationality or inconsistency but emphasises that we sometimes face moral dilemmas for which we cannot find a simple rational solution.

Let us state a dharma conflict or moral conflict. For example, the struggle against temptation or weakness of the will. This can be stated thus: 'I know what is dharma, but I cannot persuade myself to act accordingly. I know what is a-dharma[evil], but I am unable to refrain from it'.

This type of struggle can be found in the Mahabharata. Mahabharata is the struggle between two families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The leader of the Pandavas was Yudhisthira. He was called Dharmaraja or the king of Dharma, for his righteousness and moral behaviour. But he was addicted to gambling. This was a fatal flaw in his character. He lost everything, his kingdom, his wife, his brothers at the first gambling match. Rescued from this situation, when a second chance for gambling came he had the option to refuse. It should be kept in mind that in those days gambling was treated as a vice and yudhisthira knew it to be a-dharma. Besides this he had the experience of humiliation and shame after his first defeat. And it was immoral on his part to place his beloved and innocent wife and brothers in a morally unbearable situation of shame.

Matilal analyses that Yudhisthira's behaviour is in no way different. The temptation for the second invitation was great and he has reasons in favour of his action. As a prince he must accept the so-called challenge. But it should be kept in mind that a man under temptation can always argue for himself in favour of his action. For example, a bank employee who is about inappropriate funds can reason his act by arguing against the injustice done by the capitalist system to the poor and the middle class people. This same line of argument is found later in the Vana Parva. Bhima raised a question here

that what is the use of getting the kingdom back by fighting so much because given a single occasion to gamble Yudhisthira would perhaps gamble for the third or may be the fourth time. Yudhisthira replied in the affirmative. He unhesitatingly observed that in this matter he will be unable to check his temptation as he has no control over his own self. In this regard Matilal observes that there is a challenge but of a different kind. The challenge to Yudhisthira was to do what he himself (as Dharmaraja) recognised he ought to have done when desire, fear, temptation and irrational hope are in question. There was no doubt about what he ought to have done.

Some western philosophers (Plato, Aristotle) have observed that human beings are able to act against their sincerely held moral principles with full knowledge and deliberation. This is a simple fact of ourselves. Matilal observes that in classical India also there is a predominant view that people in fact act against their moral convictions. He refers to the New Testament where it is said that our weakness of the will is seen as a consequence of our sin and hence it is not philosophically puzzling.

From all the above discussions it can be concluded that Matilal quite rightly proves that dharma does not have a definitive form. It is ever elusive in nature. This is very well depicted in the Mahabharata. Dharma is open ended and rational. Dharma does not rule but it reigns from above. It is a concern for society as well as for the individual. It demands the best from our practical reason.

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