

Hindu Ethics: A Philosophical and Empirical Outline

INTRODUCTION

Talking about Hindu Ethics is not an easy task. In the first place, there is no Code (*regula*) which indicates more or less explicitly the ethical principles governing the life of the Hindu believer.¹ Secondly, the foundation of a system of thought does not fit into the Hindu frame of mind. The Hindu thinker is more bent on inculcating a correct mental attitude in his fellow men than on building up a systematic and well-elaborated theory about Ethics. For him, for example, it is more relevant to neutralize the exercise of the will itself than to find out a way of explaining philosophically the theoretical side of the free will. No wonder, then, that even in the classic works of Indian thought, like the *Upanishads*, there is little written *ut sic*, about Ethics. This, by the way, has led Western scholars to think that Indian Philosophy is unethical, or that, at any rate, it does not give to morality its proper place. We will, along this essay, attempt to clarify to what extent this accusation is true or false.

¹ Unless we like to call so the *Dharma-sastras*, which visualize the social organization in terms of castes and stages of life (*asramas*). But these "codes" cannot be called systems of Ethics, they are only lists of guiding principles, or rather laws and rules codified for ready use in social life and courts of justice" (Cf. P. T. Raju, "*Religion and Spiritual Values in Indian Thought*," in *The Indian Mind*, Honolulu, 1967, p. 199).

As an initial remark, we should note that, for the Hindu, obsessed with the attainment of his last goal, the ethical attitude is more to be presupposed than to be explicitly considered. The *Katha-upanishad* says: "Not he who has not ceased from bad conduct, not he who is not tranquil, not he who is not composed, not he whose mind is turbulent can obtain him (i.e., *Brahman*) by intelligence".² The principles of Ethics are not discussed elaborately, but ethical excellence is presupposed on the part of the prospective student of philosophy. Furthermore, without this ethical excellence, the individual will not be able to attain his experience, union with *Brahman*, which transcends the realm of morality.

Another obstacle that any researcher in this field of human behaviour will meet, is the variety of Schools, holding different tenets of thought even as regards fundamental questions.³ Of course, this is not exclusive to the Hindu Philosophy, it is a problem found in Western Philosophy as well, where the majority of the most fundamental ideas need qualification, depending on the school to which we refer them: God, soul, matter, substance, knowledge...

The scarcity of available material further complicates the matter. The Hindu doctrine, being traditionally held as esoteric, expounded by the "master" only to selected disciples, has remained hidden to many investigators, some of them hindered also by their ignorance of the Sanskrit language. A student, eager to delve into these teachings, finds himself laboring with each other, unable to check their accuracy and to probe into the real mind of the great founders, the "lovers of virtue", the "wise men".

Those difficulties notwithstanding, we shall trace down in the following pages what we may call the Indian behaviour as a result of the Indian convictions and beliefs; in short, the Indian *ethos* as found in their books and sages, witnesses and beacons

² II, 24.

³ Owing to this diversity of schools and the inherent difficulty of treating about them all, I have concentrated my investigation on the Samkhya — Yoga and Shankara schools, orthodox ones, and in many ways representative of the overall doctrine of all orthodox Indian Schools of thought.

of their history, and in their every day life, true battlefield where the small and great achievements of the human spirit are being tested, inexorably, day after day.

1. FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS UNDERLYING HINDU ETHICS

a) *Man, the real and the unreal*

The agent of the human behaviour is, as we well know, *man the individual*. No matter how great the influence of the social and religious environment, man as an individual will always emerge responsible, in a greater or lesser degree, for his own actions. For "westerners" this entity, "man", is always thought of as a "compositum" of body-matter, and soul-spirit.

This Aristotelian "*animal rationalis*" is perfectly alien to the Hindu mind. In one of the *Upanishads* we are graphically told that the vital essence of man does not differ from that of an ant, a mosquito, or an elephant. There is no fundamental distinction between "man" and "things". This vision -*cosmic-asuistic*, as it has been termed- has notably conditioned the Hindu concept of man, regarding his three basic aspects: his relationship towards a supreme being, towards his equals in the world around, and towards himself.

It is a well-known Hindu tenet that the "real" man is different from the "man" who moves, acts, and is conscious of various experiences in this world, the man we say is "alive". In philosophical terms this would imply the distinction between the essential ego⁴, the real ego of man -*atman*-, and the empiric self -*jiva*-. Man's essential ego is beyond the physical, vital, mental and intellectual dimensions of the human personality, and is identified with another more subtle, more interior, that is, the beatific dimension. Its ultimate nature is pure existence (*sat*), pure autoconscience (*cit*) and pure bliss (*ananda*). The empiric self (*jiva*) which we see, touch, strive to keep alive, etc. is no more than a dream destined to disappear once we come to the realization of the true, real man -*atman*-.

⁴ "Free from sin, free from longevity, free from death and sorrow, free from hunger and thirst, who wishes nothing, and imagines nothing." Cf. *Chandogya-Upanishad*, VIII, 7.12.

b) *The dream of this our world*

Following a parallel line of thought, the Hindu thinkers have endeavoured to study the nature of the external world, reaching the conclusion that this, too, is a pure phenomenon, subject to change and finitude. As a last analysis, it is just a composition of names *-nama-* and forms *-rupa-*. It is the deceiving surface of the underlying reality which is eternal, unchangeable, fully conscious. As in the case of man, and totally identified with it, this ultimate reality is also pure existence and pure autoconsciousness. The obvious conclusion, then, is that the real ego of man *-atman-*, and the ultimate cosmic reality *-brahman-* is one and the same. The empiric self and the external world, when submitted to an strict analysis, have no reality at all.⁵

Why, then, we may ask, do we perceive them as something real? How can it be that we do not, in any way, capture the absolute identity of *Atman* and *Brahman*?

The reason is simple: because of our *ignorance*, because of the original *avidya*. In virtue of this ignorance, the real ego finds itself immersed in the world of phenomena, which is, as we have shown, no more than an illusion created by the ego itself as a consequence of *avidya*.⁶

The removal of this *avidya* will be one of the main tasks, if not simply "the" task, which a Hindu will have to undertake throughout the cycle of his life.⁷ His constant behaviour should

⁵ As the Spanish poet, Calderón, puts it: "La vida es un sueño, y los sueños sueños son". Shankara tells us that "the universe of appearance is indeed unreal". And again: "Reason, sacred tradition, and hundreds of scriptural texts declare that the objective universe has no real existence. He who identifies himself with it encounters hosts upon hosts of sorrow".

⁶ It should be noticed that *knowledge*, in the Hindu context, does not refer so much to a function of our mind through the intellect, as to a sort of personal and illuminating intuition which brings the "Knower" to the realization of the *oneness of reality*, in the case of the higher knowledge, or to the "*manyness*", *multiplicity of reality*, in the case of the lower knowledge. The absence of this knowledge motivates the presence of *avidya*. This process, the Hindu would say, cannot be explained logically, since the original way of thinking is already a product, a consequence of *avidya*. Ultimately this explanation seems to be accepted out of faith and the testimony of the sages, the "seers", the wise men who have experienced it, and also because of the assurance found in the sacred books, the scriptures.

⁷ Or lives, as the case might be, for if one life is not enough to purify his Law of Karma, he will have to undergo another test, another cycle of earthly life, until he finally reaches his eternal state of bliss — *ananda* —, his *moksa*, salvation.

be carried out under this perspective, always in search of "knowledge", always striving to get rid of this phenomenal ego, of this phenomenal world that chains him to the present state of suffering and bondage.⁸ The real tragedy about it is, that despite the unreality of our empirical ego and the phenomena around us, we take them *as if* they were real; we accept the illusion, or even delusion, covering our own real ego, identified with Brahman; we suffer, therefore, because of an illusion. Man has to get out, escape from this illusion caused by ignorance, and acquire knowledge, *liberation*. That is his task.

c) *The Individual as Illusion*

Given that the true and real ego -atman- is fundamentally pure existence, pure autoconscience, and pure bliss, identified with the cosmic reality -brahman-, it is no wonder to find out that the *individual* -which belongs to the unreal world, that of phenomena, the realm of *avidya*- has been *greatly minimized*. The Indians are fond of universals, of abstract notions. The individual is only a manifestation of the universal, by virtue of which the individual is grounded and realized. He is purely a reflection of the universal. The individual self, even in the realm of illusion, is considered as an extension of other "selves", he has no identity of his own.

This consideration is all-important to appreciate the Hindu Ethics. The reasons, feelings, emotions, personal situation, etc., of the individual do not count. What is good for all in general, has to be good for this individual in particular.⁹ At the same time, this conviction brings the individual to realize that his actions, his whole life is to be valued in terms of the universal, he should not do that which goes against the well-being of the universal; he should not, for example, hurt himself, so that other "selves" will not be hurt.¹⁰ His liberation, his bliss will

⁸ "A man should be continually occupied in trying to free himself from the bondage of ignorance, which is without beginning. He who neglects his duty and is passionately absorbed in feeding the cravings of the body, commits suicide thereby". (Cf. Samkara, o.c., p. 46).

⁹ It is the opposite of what we could call situation Ethics.

¹⁰ This is the root of their famous doctrine of the non-violence -*Ahimsa*-. For a christian this should not be surprising. He also believes that all his actions, no matter how privately performed, have a repercussion

be a reality only when he is aware of his unrealness, when he ceases to exist as such, as an individual: "As long as a man identifies himself with his wicked ego, there can be no possibility of liberation. For liberation is the very opposite."¹¹ "Think: 'I am Brahman; I am not the individual soul', and reject everything that is non-Atman. Strive thus to destroy this illusion which has been created in the past by your craving for sense-objects."¹² "The air in a jar is one with the air everywhere... O prudent one, lose all sense of separation."¹³ "The Atman is the reality. It is true, primal self. It is pure consciousness, the one without a second, absolute bliss. It is beyond form and action. Realize your identity with it. Stop identifying yourself with the coverings of ignorance, which are like the masks assumed by an actor."¹⁴

d) *The Body called to disappear*

Closely connected with the individual is the idea of his material nature, his *body*. For a Hindu the term body (*deha* or *sarira*) is understood in a far more general way than in Western Philosophy, expressing all those limitations, unrealities, caused by *avidya*. That is why the individual *-jiva-*, the empirical ego, can and is also called corporeal ego (*sarira atman*). Limitations affecting the real ego (*-atman-*) vary according to the various levels of consciousness. Hence the Hindu specialists distinguish several kinds of bodies according to these levels of consciousness. Thus we have first the gross body, physical or corporeal (*sthula sarira*), composed of the five classical elements, water, earth, light, air and ether. It serves as a basis to the experiences of the external world. "It is composed", Samkara tells us, "of the gross elements, which are formed by a fivefold compound of their subtle elements. It is born through the Karma of the previous

-positive or negative- on the well-being of the whole Christian family united to Christ as its head. This Christian doctrine of the mystical body, based on the idea of grace, but maintaining the human and divine personality of the individual, is greatly enlarged by the Indian, depriving the individual of his personality in favor of the universal, all-embracing one, into which he is rooted and absorbed.

¹¹ Cf. Samkara, o.c., p. 77.

¹² *Ib.*, p. 74-75.

¹³ *Ib.*, p. 75.

¹⁴ *Ib.*, p. 78.

life, and is the vehicle of experience for the Atman."¹⁵ When the individual dies, this body disappears as well by dissolving into the five elements wherefrom it was created. "The inherent characteristics of this gross body are birth, decay and death. It has various conditions, such as fatness or thinness and various stages of development, such as childhood and youth. It is controlled by caste-rules of the four orders of life. It is subject to various diseases, and to different kinds of treatment, such as worship, dishonor or honor."¹⁶

Even after the disappearance of this corporeal body something remains there that allows the ego to pass to another body. This *vital force*, this *subtle body*, called *sukhma sarira*, is composed of seventeen subtle elements¹⁷, and serves as a basis to the *oniric* conscience. When the individual dies, it does not die with it, but as mentioned earlier, transmigrates to another corporeal body until eventually the ego realizes his absolute oneness with Brahman, the ultimate reality, and then, the individuality ceases to be, *moksa* has been achieved. This subtle body is the means by which the ego passes from one corporeal body to another. For, this liberation, cannot be achieved until the ego realizes fully his own identity with Brahman, and that could demand a further state of purification, a new cycle of life. This is made possible and determined by this subtle body -*sukhma*- which chooses the type of corporeal body that it will assume for the next project of life.¹⁸ Samkara says that "this body through which man experiences the whole external world, is like the house of a householder."¹⁹

There are times when the corporeal and subtle bodies function no more, as for example, in the state of deep sound sleep. In these moments another body, the third one of the empirical

¹⁵ Cf. o.c., p. 46.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 47. The four orders are, *vrnakarya* (life of student), *grihathasrama* (as the head of the family), *vanaprasthasrama* (life in solitude) and *samnyasa* (like a hermit).

¹⁷ Five vital breaths, five action organs, five organs of knowledge, the mind and the intellect.

¹⁸ The subtle body is affected, as it were, by the conduct of the previous life. The consequences of the previous existence determine the type of new type of new life to be assumed. This is known as the *Law of Karma*, of which we shall speak later on.

¹⁹ Cf. o.c., p. 47.

ego, is in charge of keeping the individual alive. This is called the causal body *-karana sarira-*, because out of it the other two seem to emerge. And it is also called *laya-sthana*, because they seem to finally resolve into it.²⁰

2. ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR AND DETERMINISM IN THE HINDU THOUGHT

Only after due consideration and understanding of the above mentioned concepts, can we really grasp the meaning and nature of the ethical behaviour of the Hindu believer. One thing is to behave in this or the other way; the purpose, meaning and finality we attach to that particular behaviour is another thing. The human behaviour, the human *ethos*, can coincide and coexist with the various cultures and ethnical groups of the world. But the meaning attached to that behaviour, the reason and drive behind it can be quite different. In Ethics we are concerned more about the purpose that man gives to his own life, the basis of his ethical behaviour.

Before proceeding any further, then, we deem it lawful to question the possibility of that ethical behaviour in the case of the Hindus. If man is purely an illusion and essentially unreal (in the sense explained before); if the world is a dream, the unreality of which we will realize one day, after our liberation; if the individual is the product, and nothing more, of *avidya*, with no personality of his own; and the body, "compounded of skin, flesh, fat, bone and filth"²¹ is just a "covering" of reality, who, we may ask, is responsible for that behaviour? Where is the freedom necessary to act ethically? Further more: what is the sense of life, anyway?

²⁰ Cf. R. N. Dankebar, *Hinduismo*, l.c., p. 309. "In dreamless sleep, when the mind does not function, nothing exists. Man seems to be in bondage to birth and death. This is a fictitious creation of the mind, not a reality. This is our universal experience". (Cf. o.c., p. 59).

Note.— Apart from these three bodies Shamkara distinguishes another two: the *Vijnanamaya*, or "discriminating faculty with its powers of intelligence, together with organs of perception" which he calls "the covering of intellect", a reflection of Atman, the pure consciousness; and the *Anandamayatman*, the body in state of bliss, identified with Atman itself, spiritual, beginningless, pure.

²¹ Cf. Samkara, o.c., p. 57.

When the Indian thinker tells us that this is a dream, unreal, and illusion, product of ignorance, he is not inviting us to forget about ourselves, and abandon ourselves into the all embracing arms of destiny. Man, the world, the individual, the body, etc., are illusory as seen from the *higher knowledge* point of view, from the point of view of the ultimate oneness of reality. But while subject to the Law of Karma, while venturing into a new cycle of earthly life, *man has to behave as if this world were real*, until that day of perfect liberation (perfect knowledge, for various schools). In other words, while subject to the law of karma, and therefore ignorant of his substantial oneness with Brahman, he has to behave according to his lower knowledge, *as if things, man and the world were different*. It is the price he has to pay for his original *avidya*. This *avidya* is the cause of the birth of the individual. In virtue of the law of karma, he might have to be reborn several times, if in a life's cycle he has not got rid of his ignorance, if he has not reached knowledge, liberation, salvation, *moksa*. His new individuality will be conditioned by the type of body (corporeal) assumed by the subtle body, after the death of the previous corporeal body. We saw that this election is made considering the consequences of the behaviour of the corporeal body in the previous life cycle. This way, the existence of suffering, the inequalities of life, etc., are explained as a consequence of the actions of the previous life cycle which have to be inexorably followed. Man's past actions will determine the type of body, the family, the society, as well as the kind of actions he will be inclined to perform in his present life. To some extent it could be said that every creature is a product of his own past deeds. There is nothing capricious, nothing casual, all is planned, a result of his inexorable and unchangeable law of karma. No external agent, be it destiny, fate or providence, intervenes in man's life. He is the only one responsible for it.

The obvious objection comes in sight: is the presence of these consequences of his past actions not by itself a strange, external force that preconditions his actual existence? What can he do *now* having been born that way? His past actions condition his present to a point where they fall well beyond the reach of his own free will.

It is a serious objection not only because the doctrine just mentioned does not seem to leave open to the individual any possibility of change, but also because it seems to deprive man of all freedom, and therefore, of all ethical behaviour.

The Hindu thinkers find the solution in the analysis of the nature of the action itself. All actions, they say, produce a sort of double effect: one *direct* (*phala*) which determines the nature of the next corporal body, as well as his birth and the consequences of it. The individual can do nothing about this effect of his past actions. But there is another effect, *indirect* one which concerns the *innate tendencies* (*samskaras*), in virtue of which man acts this way or the other way. These innate tendencies, they claim, incline man to act, but *they do not force him* to act in a determined manner. It is up to man himself to choose, to give them a direction, to master them.²² These tendencies are, according to the Indian thinkers, the fountain wherefrom future actions will spring, allowing for an ample margin of initiative and personal responsibility. They offer, therefore, the possibility of moral progress, based on the freedom to make use of them, along the path leading to liberation, in which *moksa* consists.²³

²² "To understand this", Dra. M. Alonso Villaba points out, "a little knowledge of what *action means* is required. In this connection, the Indians distinguish three types of actions:

1. *optional actions*: those that may or may not be performed, but if done, will give merit.

2. *prohibited actions*: those that should not be performed, so if done, they give demerit.

3. *compulsory actions*: those that must be performed. If done, they give no merit.

The line of thinking is that whether you perform acts that lead to merit or demerit you will reap the fruits of your actions. Thus the only recourse is to perform actions that will bring no merit or demerit. Now, if we examine the three types of actions, the last type alone does not entail merit or demerit. Logically, then, compulsory actions are the only actions that one must perform to stop the flow of karmic particles" (Cf. Dra. M. Alonso Villaba, *Philosophy, An Indian View*, Acta Manilana, Series B, Number 5 (23), June, 1976, p. 10).

²³ It should be noticed that, for the Indian, it is not the *action ut sic* that pushes man to the whirlwind of the phenomenal world, depriving him of his opportunities of liberation. The real cause is not *action per se* but the passion and appetites that normally accompany it. What is transcendental to achieve is not so much the abandonment of all actions, pure inactivity, but to remain perfectly detached, while acting, from all kinds of passion and appetite. It implies renunciation *in* the action, but not *to* the action itself.

3. (IR)RELEVANCE OF THE ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

There are questions that the Indian mind will always have to answer. If man, the real man, *atman*, is not concerned about this our world of phenomena, and *jiva*, the empirical man, is always striving to get rid of his coverings, his illusory existence, in order to attain his liberation, *what is the use of the human commitment in this life cycle?* If the aim of all human existence, is to reach *moksa* by the continuous effort to detach the self from the world, to regain independence from the world, *to what extent is man bound to cooperate with this society where he is kept in bondage?*

In fact, these questions, no matter how transcendental they may sound to us, find little echo in the Hindu mind. Life here on earth is a passing experience, the shorter the better, and is valued only as the bridge we have to traverse to be able to cross to the other side of the turbulent river. It is insane trying to linger in your present existence, to care about it, to the extent of losing sight of your real objective, the knowledge of the self. Our dealings with this world, with our fellowmen will always result in pure appearances, illusory phenomena detached of true reality. *Why, then, care about them?* At this point, we have to admit, Ethics does not occupy a place among the most important issues of the Indian thought.

Still, no matter how clear these convictions might appear to the Indian mind, the every day life, the presence of suffering, of joy, order and injustice, and the like experiences will speak to him of the other urgent reality -based on ignorance, of course, but nonetheless reality- of the daily human experience, the river *has* to be crossed. It would not be prudent to build a house on the bridge, but this bridge has to be traversed. In other words, man is bound to solve the apparent contradiction between the real and the phenomenal, the ultimate reality and the present situation of bondage, between the spiritual and the material, the temporal and the eternal. Hunger, thirst, need for shelter, communication with others, cooperation and the need for self fulfilment, among others, are exigencies that demand attention, com-

promise. Man is involved in the construction of this world, and has to answer according to expectations. If the Hindu believer would be tempted, out of his personal convictions, to adopt the way of resignation and inactivity *-nivrittimarga-*, the social environment and his bodily exigencies will still demand from him his share of action. That is why he is bound to come to a sort of compromise in virtue of which his contemplation of the ultimate reality and the action of his human endeavour will go hand in hand. In other words, he, the Indian believer, just as every one else, will have to set intermediate and, as it were, provisional finalities to his life, in virtue of which he can act, without losing his own identity. The character, therefore, of these finalities will speak for the quality of his life while in the state of bondage. They will tell us something about the Indian behaviour and, consequently, about their ethical dimension, the reason underlying that behaviour.

4. AIMS OF INDIAN LIFE

These can be reduced to four, to meet the four basic urges in man's complex personality, namely, the natural instincts and appetites, grouped under the term *kama*, as an expression of the pleasures of the personal life. The longing for material prosperity and power as represented by *artha*. Man's concern for personal and social security and progress, difficult to achieve without the acceptance and fulfillment of religious and ethico-social norms, which then, present themselves as something desirable. This is expressed by *dharma*. And finally, man's yearning for eternity, immortality, spiritual deliberance and emancipation conveyed by the term *moksa*.²⁴

²⁴ Some authors name only three, wealth being an aim not in itself, but only for the miser, in his moments of miserliness. Cf. T.M.P. Mahadevan, o.c., p. 153-154. I personally am inclined to think of it as an specific end, if subordinated to other more embracing ones. There is no reason to think differently about *kama*, with category of aim only for those who thirst for pleasure in their moments of unhappiness. It is to be noted that *artha*, according to some expositors of Indian Philosophy, would imply more than the simple idea of material prosperity. The economic, social and political aspects of life are regulated by laws, pragmatic in nature, oriented towards the achievement of the personal aim. Cf., for example, C. Regamey, *Las Religiones de la India*, in *Cristo y las Religiones de la Tierra*, III, BAC, Madrid, 1970, p. 166.

Of all these four, only the last constitutes an aim in itself; the other ones are subordinated to this one. However, these aims have to be further explained to avoid misunderstanding.

When a Hindu speaks of wealth as his aim, he does not mean that all his life should be geared towards and conditioned by the acquisition of material prosperity. "If this entire earth, filled with wealth, were mine", a wise lady, Maitreyi, asks her husband, Yajñavalkya, "would I become immortal by that?". Her husband's answer leaves no room for doubt: "No; just as is the life of the man of means, so will your life be. There is no hope of immortality through wealth."²⁵ Wealth is not an intrinsic value, but it has its own place in the scale of values. As such it is a means of helping man to achieve his higher aims. Which amounts to saying that wealth *-artha-* is valued in so far as it is ordered to other higher values, in so far as it makes it possible for man to dedicate himself to other higher values and more relevant tasks. Property must be held as a trust. As Kalidasa, the great poet, puts it: one should acquire wealth in order to give it away.²⁶

As for pleasure *-kama-*, it is an all-important value only for one school of thought, the *Charvaka*, well renowned for its hedonistic, positivistic and materialistic approach to life. As such, it is considered heterodox within the Hindu doctrine. For other schools, pleasure constitutes a value, but very much in the line of wealth; it ceases to be so when it turns out to be the only value sought. Its nature and finality is to help other desires and emotions to function joyfully; to allow them to reach higher levels of experience. Pleasure, then, is a means to facilitate the achievement of higher goods. *Krishna*, in the *Bhagavadgita*, says: "I am pleasure *-kama-* that is not opposed to goodness" (*dharma*).²⁷

Dharma, goodness, righteousness, is closer to the heart of the Hindu Ethics. The more a man approximates the moral standard, the more he is acting according to his own nature. That

²⁵ Cf. *Brhadaranyaka-Upanisad*, II, iv., 2. Cf. T.M.P. Mahadevan, o.c., p. 154.

²⁶ Cf. *Raghuvamsa*, IV, 86.

²⁷ VII, 11.

is why each man's *dharma* is to perform the duties that pertain to his station of life, as stated by the wise men, the "lovers of virtue". Only these perfect ones can afford not to follow any regulation set by man. They have acquired perfect knowledge, they are not subject to the law of *Karma* any more, their nature being good they cannot but act accordingly. The rest of humans need to follow their example, as well as the declarations of the scriptures, tradition and practice of those who are learned in scripture, virtuous men, and the dictate of their own conscience. If we want a sort of summary of all this, we would find it in the golden rule: "What is harmful to oneself, one should not do to others. This is the quintessence of *dharma*. Behaviour which is contrary to this is born of selfish desire"²⁸.

When we come to *moksa*, salvation, the last of the human aims, its achievement is the aspiration of all mortals. Its achievement can be a reality only when the consequences of *Karma* are exhausted; no new actions are produced that could have new consequences. The *Atman*, free from earthly bonds, free from ignorance, is definitely united to the all-transcendent *Brahman*, reaching a state of bliss which is eternal, unchangeable, inexplicable, imperishable.

"Cease to identify yourself with race, clan, name, form and walk of life. These belong to the body, the garment of decay. Abandon, also, the idea that you are the doer of actions or the thinker of thoughts. These belong to the ego, the subtle covering. Realize that you are the Being which is eternal happiness."²⁹

"You are the *Atman*, the infinite Being; the pure, unchanging consciousness, which pervades everything. Your name is bliss and your glory is without stain."³⁰

These four aims represent a sort of ethical organization of the personal life of the individual. They are subordinated to and, as a result, dependent on *moksa*, the ultimate aim.³¹

²⁸ Cf. *Mahabharata*, XIII, cxvii, 8; See also *Manu-Smṛiti*, xxii, 91.

²⁹ Shamkara, *oc.*, p. 76.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 78.

³¹ Regarding the nature of *moksa*, it varies according to the different schools. Some, basically theistic schools, will make it consist on man's self giving to God (*bhakti-marga*); the *Upanishads* find salvation through knowledge (*jñānamarga*) that is, identification with Brahman. It is also,

5. ETHICS AND THE FOUR SOCIAL ORDERS

The individual normally carries on his actions and seeks an aim to his life *within the frame of social life*. That is why, apart from his own personal finalities, he has to be mindful of the context in which he finds himself, and see how these aims can be persued there. He has to find out how can he be perfect, how to attain his aim in the present social environment to which he is related.

The answer depends on the stratum of society he happens to belong to. The difference between the duties of one and the other social orders is explained by the scheme of society embracing the four castes, *varnas*.

A Hindu is born, as it were, "qualified", framed within the structure of society. His birth will condition the type of life he will have to follow, for his duty is to accept and follow the exigencies and privileges of the caste³² to which he belongs. It is the Law of *Karma* which will have to be inexorably followed.

The subtle body has chosen the new state of life according to this law. Man's future perfection will depend on how well he performed the duties assigned to his caste. To some extent, the state of life is irrelevant as regards the possibility of true liberation. To value the quality of life purely in terms of the different task assigned to each particular caste is really senseless.

as we have shown, the doctrine of Shankara and the Vedanta School. Others would rather recommend the performance of good works (*karmamarga*). While still others would prefer to reach their *moksa* by means of meditation (*dhyanamarga*). As regards the nature of that state of bliss, we find the same diversity. Samkhya and Nyaya-Vaisesika systems think of it as something negative, the absence of sorrow as a result of the Atman's realization of his complete differentiation from his previous state of evolution, *prakriti*. The spirit remains alone, pure, perfect. This state is known as *kaivalya*, aloneness, isolation. The soul-Atman is stripped of all qualities, including consciousness. For the Vedanta School this state of *Moksa* is a positive experience of happiness, not as opposed to pain, but as an experience of fullness and peace that transcends both.

³² We are identifying caste and *varna*, although we are conscious of its differences, as regards the origin: *varna* is anterior to the later system of castes as it exists until today. Etymologically *varna* makes reference to the colour — *varna* means colour of the skin — of the arian invaders — *arya-varna* — as different from that of the tribes conquered by them — *dasa-varna* —. It refers, therefore, to the colour of the skin. Later on, the term *varna* was used as equivalent to caste, meaning social order, without any racial connotation. We are following, as it is usually done, this second meaning.

Rather, the castes are interdependable, none can subsist without the other, but specific tasks are assigned to each of them. Together with these specific tasks, special virtues are expected of their members.

Thus, a *Brahmanin* is expected to practice self-control, purity, religious knowledge, faith in God, and the philosophical study of truth. The *Ksatriya* should be courageous, brave, firm, just, charitable. Nothing less could be expected of soldiers and decision policy makers. As for a *Vaisya*, he is supposed to excell and be really skillful in the exercise of all professions, sincere, generous. The attitude of dedicated service to others constitutes the core of the *Sudra's* life. They all are described as the mouth, arms, legs and feet of the Cosmic Being -*Purusa*-. All of them can achieve *moksa* by being faithful to their pre-established lot in life.

Independently of his specific obligations, every man, irrespective of his social standing, is bound to follow some norms common to all humans: sincerity, non-violence,³³ and the fulfillment of his ritual obligations.³⁴

Some of these virtues compulsory to all, sincerity, for example, non violence and renunciation are so rooted inside the Indian soul, that we could take them as characteristic of the Hindu behaviour. Close to them are equanimity, self-mastery, charity and compassion. The *Bhagavadgita* is full of references to many other virtues, such as intrepidity, purity of intention, righteousness, capacity for sacrifice, modesty, diligence, etc. The idea is also to inculcate the escape from various vices like avarice, anger and covetousness, "hell's triple door", leading to the soul's ruin. Sankara summarizes all of them into four: a) distinction

³³ The famous idea of *Ahimsa*, as non violence towards oneself, the others and even the animals

³⁴ These ritual obligations are connected with the "strong" moments in the history of the human person. From the first moment of his existence, still in his mother's womb, until his last farewell to life, the Hindu use to accompany the important moments of his life with the performance of a sacred activity, similar to that attached to the christian sacraments. Among other elements used during these sacramental activities — *samskaras* —, we can name the sacred fire, prayers, sacrifices, purifications, symbolic actions, taboos and magic. Besides the ritual obligations every individual has normally to pass through the four stages of life — *asramas* —, namely, the *brahmakaria* (life of student), the *grihashtasrama* (as head of a family), the *vanaprasthasrama* (solitary life) and *samnyasa* (ascetic life).

between the eternal and the transient; b) renunciation of all enjoyment here and hereafter; c) the six qualities of: 1. tranquility, 2. restraint of the senses from their objects, 3. withdrawing the mind from outer objects, 4. endurance of all pains without complaint, 5. faith in what is rationally understood from the teacher and the scriptures, and 6. keeping the mind always directed towards *Brahman*; d) Passionate desire for liberation by understanding the true nature of the ego, mind, and the senses and their objects.³⁵

6. MAN ON HIS OWN. GOD THE UNKNOWN

After all that has been said, we feel we have given the necessary data for every one to draw his conclusions. Hopefully, we all agree on at least one thing: that the Hindu is consistent with his principles handed down to him from time immemorial. All these principles are drawn to solve the problem, the all-important question of how to insure eternal immortality, which consists in his knowledge of the unity of his "ego" with the ultimate truth. The nature of this ultimate truth may be different according to the different schools, but all of them hold that the attainment of this is possible through a moral process, through moral excellence. This helps the individual to overcome his lack of knowledge and the evil tendencies of his character. "The 'I' that knows is also the 'I' that is above false perspectives and false values; the empirical 'self', whose conduct is appraised or to whom the commands are issued, has to correct and develop itself in the light of this truth and can eventually achieve enlightenment and perfection, and there is no further dichotomy between these two."³⁶

The Hindu's highest loyalty, then, is to his own moral values. Despite the moral obligations laid down by society, the higher nature of man is considered to be of greater significance. "A man", we are told, "can give up his own interest for the sake of his family, give up that of the family for the sake of the community, and give up that also for the good of the greater number

³⁵ Cf. *Vivekacudamani*, Bombay, Lakshmi Venkateswar Press, 1949, pp. 18 ff.

³⁶ Cf. Surama Dasgupta, *The Individual Indian Ethics*, in *The Indian Mind*, Honolulu, 1967. Hawaii University Press, p. 357.

of people; but he may give up every thing for finding out the spiritual truth of the self."³⁷ Being loyal to himself, the Hindu is conscious of his contribution to the good of the universe with which, he knows, he is deeply united; with which, he will eventually realize, he forms an absolute unit. The question addressed to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" (Gen. 4, 9), would be an impertinent question if addressed to a yogi. He is conscious of his brother, but in the sense that he is well aware that, by reaching his own perfection, he is cooperating in the perfection of his brother, in the perfection of the whole universe with which he forms a unity. This task excludes all sorts of selfishness. Another way for a yogi to offer his contribution to mankind is by giving others a good example, a reflection of his own perfection.³⁸

Hindu Ethics is *personalistic*, and I would add, unique. Unlike the Greek Ethics, which refers more to the citizen than to the isolated man, Hindu Ethics is concerned with only the individual, isolated from society. For Plato, good conduct is conduct that is good for the community as a whole. For Aristotle, conduct is an art, the art of living, and like all other arts, it has an aim: "virtue", or "goodness". However, the individual's aim of "*his good life*" is subordinate to the good life of the community. Both, Plato and Aristotle, were very conscious of the fact that "man is born to be a citizen", that he is "by nature a social animal". Only in the service to the community can he become fully "wise, temperate, courageous and righteous". Greek Philosophy exalts the loyalty of the individual to the whole of which he is a part."³⁹

Nothing like this can be said of Hindu Ethics as such. We have seen why. Furthermore, the Hindu does not behave purely out of obedience to a set of rules given by an exterior agent, as it is the case with Jewish Ethics, expression of God's command. We have stated at the beginning of this essay that we can hardly speak of any written ethical laws. The personal side of man's responsibility in the Christian Ethics would come closer to the

³⁷ *Mahabharata, Udyoga-parva*, 15.14, 20-23.

³⁸ This is, by the way, one of the criteria to understand in all its depth the famous concept of *Kaivalya*, so dear to the *yogi's* soul.

³⁹ Cf. G. Murray, *Humanist Essays*, Unwin Books, London, 1964, p. 123.

essence of Hindu Ethics, but the Christian all-embracing and all-important commandment of love for our neighbour, be it a friend or an enemy, is absent from Hindu Ethics, if not, perhaps, alien to their lives.

We call this Ethics "*realistic*", because it demands a continuous consideration of man's present situation in life. The Hindu is asked to exert effort so that his duties be adjusted to the concrete circumstances of his existence. A man walks along the path to perfection whenever he is capable of adjusting to the state of life he belongs to.

A final point. Throughout our exposition the question about God had been nestled down in our mind waiting for the right moment to erupt into the forefront. Is it possible, it may be asked, to accept the exigent Hindu "Code of Ethics" without taking God into consideration? Would a man be able to submit himself to so many privations, sacrifices, etc., purely in the hope of his ultimate union with *Brahman*, the all embracing reality?

For many Hindu systems of thought, not theistic in nature, the answer is in the affirmative. God does not, apparently, come into the picture, be it as creator, as a motivation for the Hindu's behaviour, or as remunerator or punisher of man. The Hindu thinker seems to have taken for his starting point the question about his own self, and not about God.⁴⁰

This should not lead us to think that the Hindu does not care about God. Rather, at the emotional level, God is very present in the lives of many Hindus, who find no incompatibility between their profession of faith in monism, and their emotional attachment to God. God is related to the ultimate reality as the individual is related to his essential ego. Thus the relationship between God and man is influenced by the relationship between the ultimate Being and the essential Ego. In the case of the theistic systems, man tends to dwell in the same world where God is, or to remain close to him, or to assume the same divine form, or, finally, to reach an intimate union with God -*sayujyata*-,

⁴⁰ This is not tantamount to saying that his approach is anthropocentric. Man is not the measure of all things. But neither God seems to be the center. The Cosmic World has usurped their place.

similar to the identity proclaimed between the supreme being and the essential, real ego: "In the theistic systems, the individual shares the divine nature of God in his enlightened and perfected self, which has completely overcome his imperfections and ignorance. In other systems, the ultimate state is an awareness of this duality of the higher and lower selves, and their conflict, have ultimately been dissolved into a state of purity, and this is associated with joy."⁴¹

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⁴¹ Cf. Surama Dasgupta, o.c., p. 357.