

Ethics and the Moral Life in India

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(This is a paper I wrote in 2008 for an edited volume by Jyotirmaya Sharma for Penguin India, which unfortunately did not come to fruition. Since then, a lot has changed with respect to Sharma's relationship to Penguin India, so perhaps this was all just prescient karma. I have circulated it with friends, who want to refer to it, so I thought I would upload it. Please refer to it as an online source: PhilPapers being the placed published. SR)

To talk about ethics and the moral life in India, and whether and when Indians misunderstood each other's views, we must know something about what Indians thought about ethical and moral issues. However, there is a commonly held view among scholars of Indian thought that Indians, and especially their intellectuals, were not really interested in ethical matters (Matilal 1989, 5; Raju 1967, 27; Devaraja 1962, v-vi; Deutsch 1969, 99). This view is false and strange. Understanding how it is that posterity has managed to misunderstand ethics and the moral life in India so profoundly is not something that we can address without thinking about issues pertaining to scholarship, interpretation and translation. Most importantly, studying a culture demands a philosophical engagement with the categories against which one attempts to understand it. If one believes, as many scholars do, that it is a rigorous study of Sanskrit and other classical Indian languages alone that holds the key to understanding classical India, then there is apparently neither need nor room for such reflection. It is this very same failure to engage philosophically with the category of the ethical and its place in translation that has allowed many modern Indians to misunderstand Indians of yore.

What is Ethics or Morality?

Critical reflection in the study of ethics and the moral life in India begins with reflecting on the meaning of "ethics," "moral" and other value terms by means of which we wish to understand India. No sooner than we begin our task of determining what "ethics" and "moral" mean than we find that the very question leads to more puzzles. The term "ethics" and its near synonym "moral" derive from Greek and Latin, respectively, from words that mean something like "custom." But notions of the customary and the ethical diverge, to the point that it is possible to provide ethical

criticisms of customs. In asking about ethics, we might be enquiring about social practices, or perhaps how we should treat each other. Some philosophers are famous for arguing that there is an important difference between the ethical and the moral: the former concerns a rational inquiry into how to live well, while the latter is restricted to a highly constrained domain of social obligations (cf. Williams 1985). Evidence that this is an idiosyncratic distinction that reflects very little is that “ethics” and “moral philosophy” are treated synonymously in philosophy text books and journal publications.

Perhaps in asking about ethics, we are concerned to find an answer to the question of what is ethically correct. But it seems that posing the very question opens us to more perplexity. The number of answers to this question in the history of Western moral philosophy *alone* are numerous. Deontologists are famous for arguing that the ethical concerns adherence to basic moral rules independently of their consequences, though they disagree on what these rules are. Virtue theorists have argued that the proper anchor for ethics is in the character of the virtuous agent, though they do not all agree on what these virtues are. Consequentialists, such as Utilitarians in turn, have argued that the ethical promotes certain ends, while the unethical hinders them. They disagree on these ends. Finally, there is an ancient but venerable answer to the question of the ethical, which understands value as a non-natural, rationally intelligible object, like numbers, that one grasps through reason. This option was first argued for by Plato in the *Republic*. It influenced centuries of Platonistic philosophy and in the Twentieth Century was defended by the great British moral philosopher, G.E. Moore (cf. 1903, 1912).

Given the plethora of substantive views on the ethical one might think that the way to solve such controversies, or at least to circumvent them, is to narrow the inquiry into the ethical by focusing on the definition of moral or ethical terms. However, there is no obviously unique and correct answer to this question. From the 1950s to the 1970s, there was a prolonged debate on the question of defining moral terms and judgements, and the debate ended with a fizzle, and not a bang. Some held that the ethical concerned formal questions of value and action in general, while others were clearer that ethical questions could only be intelligible as questions about our duty and obligations to other persons (cf. Frankena 1951). Others yet held that moral or ethical questions were all about formal rules to live by, yet others insisted that they had to be the supreme or

overriding norms that one recognizes (Hare 1955, 1971, 1981; Cooper 1970). This debate characteristically ignored the great variety of positions on ethics that have been articulated in the history of Western philosophy alone (cf. Quinn 1986). But importantly, the debate is not entirely separate from substantive questions of ethics. Definitions of moral terms and judgments can render some substantive positions untenable, and others correct by default.

The preceding inquiry suggests one thing. That what “ethics” and “moral” mean in the Western tradition is a controversial matter. Moreover, the controversy is not something to take lightly, as it is a disagreement among many serious and eminent thinkers. One might take this as reason to be despondent about our prospects of understanding the ethical and moral life in India.

Interpretation, Translation and Philosophy

Actually, the controversy over the nature of the ethical and the meaning of words such as “ethical”, “moral” and “good” is our ticket to understanding the role of ethics and the moral life in Indian intellectual history, but only if we properly take stock of the significance of this controversy.

If we understand “ethical”, “morality,” “good” and other such words as devices that mediate a philosophical disagreement about how we should employ these terms, then we have a way to understand their meaning that is consistent with the various controversies that we find in the history of philosophy about these matters. Understanding terms like “ethics”, “moral,” and “good” in terms of their philosophical role in mediating certain disagreements would also allow us to be receptive to the unique diversity of perspectives and forms of life in India that may not have exact analogues in European history.

If we could find a term in India that played the same role as “ethical” and “moral” in categorizing and mediating a certain philosophical disagreement, we would thus have our way into understanding what Indians had to say about ethics, and this would give us a way into understanding how their beliefs meshed with their life. Identifying such a term would be relatively easy: we would need to be sensitive to a term whose employment changed systematically according to philosophical commitments and that such a shifting can be understood as part of Indian participation in a philosophical disagreement on the

ethical. An easy way to discern if a disagreement is in fact a disagreement on the ethical is if some of the familiar ethical theories we know of are represented in this disagreement.

It so happens that there is a term in the Indian tradition that fits this bill: “*dharma*.” Not only is “*dharma*” employed to articulate a deontological theory (for instance, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*), Hedonic Utilitarian theories¹ and virtue theories,² but it is the central term employed by many Indian philosophical systems to articulate ethical theories of a peculiarly Indian variety. When the employment of “*dharma*” changes in the Indian tradition it does so on systematic grounds, in accordance with the philosophical commitments of the author in question. This is exactly how things should be in philosophy.

The easiest way to make sense of these observations is to argue that the words “ethical” and “*dharma*” have the same meaning in their respective languages and thus we should translate these terms interchangeably. This approach to translating “*dharma*” as “ethics” or “ethical” would be supported by the general expectation that translation should preserve meaning. If we translate a sentence, or text, and the meaning of the original is not preserved, then we have reason to criticize the translation as unsuccessful. Certainly, we could not assess the truth or falsity of the original claims through their translations if it did not save meaning. So, indeed, it seems that successful translation ought to save the meaning of the original text and thus it stands to reason that a successful translation of the word “ethical” should save its meaning, which is tantamount to holding that whatever word we translate “ethical” with must have the same meaning as this word in English.

¹ Hedonic Utilitarianism as an account of *dharma* is considered and rejected by Kumārila the Pūrvamīmāṃsā philosopher (Kumārila 1983 II.242–47). Hedonic Utilitarianism seems to have been defended by Cārvāka philosophers but we have no primary records of their views that have survived history and must rely upon secondary reports (cf. Guṇaratna 1990, 276).

² Virtue theory is everywhere in the so-called “Hindu” tradition, and can be found in Buddhist ethics as well. Prominent examples of virtue theory in the Indian tradition can be found in the *dharmasāstra* literature that links right action as what the virtuous agent, raised and knowledgeable about the sacred tradition, would choose. Similarly, one can find a type of virtue theory articulated in Śāṅkara Misra’s gloss on the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra*, where *dharma* is presented as a characteristic of the sage steeped in the wisdom of Vaiśeṣika (Śāṅkara-Misra 1923, 27).

There is a significant obstacle to this manner of theorizing, namely that if translation is successful, it cannot rely upon words across languages having the same meaning. The main reason that we cannot understand translation as a mere exchange of synonymous words is that languages are so syntactically diverse in the grammatical categories they recognize and how they mandate sentence formation that the notion that translation depends upon cross-linguistic synonymy is naive indeed. Moreover, given the culturally and historically unique nature of languages, it is a matter of coincidence if languages have words that have the same linguistic meaning.

The only general account of translation that saves both the expectation that translation preserves meaning and the observation that translation cannot be understood as a mere exchange of words across languages on the basis of their synonymy is a textual account of translation that takes the goal of translation as the *reconstruction* of a text of a certain *type* with new semiotic resources. The idea of a *text-type* can be found in the translation studies literature (cf. Holmes 1988 [1972], 74-76; Laviosa-Braithwaite 2001, 277-278; Neubert and Shreve 1992). A *text-type* is like a genre, but with institutional support. Examples of *text-types* include *science, mathematics, history, law, poetry, literature* and *philosophy*. The mediation of a type in translation helps us overcome linguistic differences and succeed in translation in two ways. First, it allows us to understand how two texts, written with very different languages, can have the same meaning, with respect to narrow concerns identified by a *text-type*, though they differ in other respects. Second, it allows us to understand that successful translation may at times involve making use of neologisms and technical terminologies that are not part of the language we employ in translation. If translation were restricted to matching expressions across languages, and not reconstructing texts with new resources, this would not be possible, though it is absolutely vital in many technical areas of translation, such as science, law and philosophy.

Textual meaning is also our answer to a deeper problem in cross cultural research, namely truth. If meaning is ultimately linguistic and if languages are different, then it seems that any epistemic pursuit, whether it is science, mathematics, philosophy, or history, would be indistinguishable from culture and language. We could neither say whether we have accurately re-expressed the meaning of a claim in another language in

our language, for the languages would comprise differing systems of meaning, nor could we say that the fruits of scholarly pursuits amount to anything more than esteemed orations in our cultural practices. If however we require *text-types* in order to facilitate translation and if *text-types* underwrite avenues of inquiry, whether it be philosophy, science, mathematics or even literature, then the discipline's *text-type* is its basic semantic consideration that we can employ in criticizing claims within a domain of inquiry, regardless of its cultural source, for the *text-type* would be what renders such claims translatable. It so happens that this textual approach to meaning, which I call "*Text Type Semantics*" (Ranganathan 2007b, 2007c) matches how things are in scholarship. Canons of criticism in scholarly pursuits are discipline relative.

If we were to spend some time assessing the *text-type* of philosophy, we would find, I believe, that philosophy is a type of text concerned with universal and general theories. Some of these theories are standards against which the world is judged (such as value theories), while others are not. Moreover, the theories are considered in dialectics that aim at providing reasons that function to objectively vindicate the theory in question. If this is what philosophy as a type of text is intrinsically concerned with, then it is easy to see why "ethics" and its cognates should be treated as equivalents of "dharma"—that is because in philosophical texts these terms play the same role as evidenced by the employment of "dharma" to articulate familiar and uncontroversial ethical theories in philosophical texts.

One question that might remain is the notion of how we figure out what the *text-type* of philosophy amounts to? We can determine a *text-type* of a discipline by identifying a canon of texts and their translations employed in teaching students about a discipline. While there are usually controversies over what texts in a discipline should be included in the canon, we can identify the canon as comprised of the texts whose place in a canon is not controversial among scholars of a discipline. The *text-type* of a discipline is what these canonical texts and their authoritative translations (employed in teaching students about the discipline) have in common. This will always be something discipline relative, and it may even change over time as the canon changes. However, once we have this generalization, we can employ it as a key to aid us in identifying content in texts to be preserved in translation.

One might object, at this point, that texts that are uncontroversially part of a discipline's canon will exclude texts of non-western origins. Some poorly informed scholars, one might note, are of the opinion that there is no philosophy in India. If we look to what is uncontroversially a text of philosophy and thus what is uncontroversially part of the canon of philosophy, we will have a small number of European texts, including Plato, Aristotle, some Christian Medievals and the Modern philosophers. Would not this render the canon Eurocentric? Yes indeed, but the *type of text* we can come to understand from these texts is not a type that we could not find elsewhere. In determining the *text-type* of philosophy as what canonical texts and their translations have in common, we are looking for a commonality among texts that take various opposing views in philosophical debate. This is not simply because philosophy is especially contentious, but because canons of disciplines that attempt to make truth claims are canons comprised of a variety of different views of what is true. Whatever generality we come to by studying such canons will be quite general enough for us to comprehend new contributions to the controversy and it will often lead us to revise our understanding of the breath of a controversy in a discipline. Most importantly it should also demonstrate to us that Eurocentric or otherwise culturally restricted canons are arbitrary given the *text-type* that they exemplify.

I suspect that some might still charge that the approach I am urging is procedurally unfair in starting with European exemplars as foundational in the case of philosophy. Perhaps we could amass all the texts of philosophical interest from diverse cultural sources and look to what they have in common as a *cynosure* to what is foundational about philosophy cross-culturally. But of course this would be very naive: how would we decide what texts are of philosophical interest? Given that this is innately controversial, the only option is to start with the uncontroversial exemplars and look to generalities from translations of these and the originals as the criteria we employ in studying and translating philosophy.

Only a *text-type* theoretic approach to translating and understanding Indian philosophy can *demonstrate* the biases and ethnocentric errors of traditional, linguistic orientations to studying Indian thought, while being grounded on what are uncontroversial facts of the discipline of philosophy, namely uncontroversial exemplars

of philosophy. But before I fully show this, let me address a classic objection to the claim I have made, namely that “dharma” in the Indian tradition has a unitary philosophical meaning that is equivalent to “ethical”. This is the objection that “dharma” is a word in Sanskrit that has many meanings and that only some of these meanings are commensurate with “ethical.”

This is a claim often made in the scholarly literature (Larson 1972, 146; Rangaswami Aiyangar 1952, 63; Dasgupta 1975 vol.4 p.2), but we might ask how it is that scholars arrive at this conclusion? One way to generate the evidence for this conclusion is the traditional notion of literal meaning as the systematic or basic role of an expression in a language (Salmon 2005). The advantage of this notion of meaning is that it allows us to understand the various employments of a term within a language (whether ritualistic, metaphorical or pragmatic) as explainable by reference to this basic meaning (cf. Davidson 1996 [1978]). However, meaning so defined is linguistically relative. It is impossible on this account of meaning for words in different languages to have the same literal meaning, as the literal meaning is defined relative to a specific language. Thus, we could still try to compare the literal meaning of expressions across languages, but because none of them are truly equivalent, we would rather come to multiple pairings. If we tried to understand the meaning of “dharma” this way, we could come to many pairings of “dharma” with words in English. But note, we could do the same for any term between very different languages and we would have to conclude that all words have many meanings. Evidence of this observation can be found in any Sanskrit-English dictionary. Fortunately, a textual approach to translation and meaning circumvents this problem. In translating “dharma” in philosophical texts, we are uninterested in how its linguistic meaning lines up with “ethical” or other terms, but rather how it functions in philosophical texts.

Another way to generate the conclusion that “dharma” has many meanings is to follow a methodology that seems prevalent in a dominant tradition of Indology that takes philology as its founding science. According to this method, one must take each employment of “dharma” as a distinct occasion of meaning and determine what the meaning of the term is by figuring out what “dharma” is used to label or articulate in these distinct scenarios. If there is some uniformity in such uses, then one could be

justified in holding that “dharma” has many meanings, but it so happens that if we adopt this methodology, we find that Indian authors used “dharma” to label very many different things. At times Indian authors called the constituents of reality “dharma.” At other times they called rules of conduct “dharma,” and yet at other times they called teachings “dharma.” Such uses are virtually innumerable and only few of these employments are commensurate with “ethical.” I have called this an *extentional* method (Ranganathan 2007a, 17-31).

It is important to note that if we employed the extentional methodology in determining the meaning of “good” in English, we would also have to come to the conclusion that “good” has several meanings. When “good” was used as a modifier for “ice cream” we would have to conclude that “good” means “ice cream” and when an author called their car “good” we would have to conclude that “good” meant “car” on that occasion. But the deeply unscientific and unobjective nature of such pronouncements derives from the fact that it relies upon tacit assumptions on the part of the scholar as to what employments of “dharma” could count as ethical in significance. To assume that “good” when used to designate “ice cream” ceases to have its evaluative meaning is to assume that it is incompatible with the meaning of “good” that it could be employed in this manner. But this involves assuming a particular *conception* of the good in which ice cream plays no part.

The scholar who defends the orthodoxy in Indology could argue that whether or not “dharma” within a context has a moral significance depends on more than hidden assumptions about the ethical, but also other things an author says about dharma. On the basis of these other statements in a text, we can discern whether “dharma” is being employed in an ethical fashion or not. Of course, this does not address the problem at all for any such evaluation of whether “dharma”’s employment on an occasion is ethical or not would further defer to the scholar’s assumptions about the ethical. Here, the prejudices and ethnocentric biases of the author come to flourish under the camouflage of philological objectivity that analyzes texts with a fine tooth comb. A textual approach to understanding “dharma” bypasses the danger of the translator projecting their own assumptions about the ethical on to the text. It recognizes that “dharma” has a philosophical function and in deciding to translate a text as a text of philosophy, we treat

this philosophical function as a fixed point against which the rest of the text is to be understood. But as this fixed point amounts to a pivotal point in philosophical disagreement, the remaining features of a text fill out our appreciation of the theory of “dharma” employed by an agent of a text as it fills in our appreciation of the various theories of the various other philosophical matters discussed in the text. Thus, for instance, if the text has it that “dharma” identifies constituents of reality, then the agent of the text is to be understood as considering or forwarding (as the case may be) an ethical theory that regards constituents of reality as ethically significant. If the text shows an agent calling ritual sacrifices to the gods “dharma,” then the ethical theory of the agent who calls such rituals “dharma” regards the rituals as part of the correct theory of ethics. This results in an appreciation of many ethical theories in the Indian tradition that are not known to the Western tradition.³ On a *text-type* theoretic approach, prejudice is not rendered impossible, but it is provided no decisive role in determining the translatable meaning of a text.

In response, some scholar might argue that not only is assumption or prejudice involved in coming to conclusions about the meaning of “dharma” but that this is unavoidable for prejudice is an essential, determinative feature of interpretation and understanding as such. This is defended by the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. But Gadamer denies that the propositions that we project in interpretation are simply those that are idiosyncratic to us alone. Gadamer writes, “[t]he anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition” (Gadamer 1996 [1960], 293).⁴ On Gadamer’s

³ In fact, the number of moral theories that we derive from this *text-type* theoretic approach to translating and reading philosophy exceeds what can be covered here. In my *Ethics and the History of Indian Philosophy* I provide a survey of the major moral theories of the various major nine *darśana*-s of Indian philosophy. However, as I note there, many of these *darśana*-s are themselves families of philosophical views, such as Buddhism and Vedānta, and each sub version of these philosophical orientations have slightly distinct moral theories. The survey I provide in this article is geared largely to the question of what major moral theories would have inspired the moral life on the ground and how these ideas would have been disseminated. Much important detail is omitted in such a survey article.

⁴ Students of the analytic philosophical tradition will recognize that this position is very similar to the theory of interpretation defended by Donald Davidson. Following his teacher Quine (1960, 59), who followed N.L. Wilson (1959), Davidson argued that interpretation involves understanding interlocutors in light of the beliefs that one takes to be true for the only way to render people intelligible is in light of what one takes to be true. Davidson, following Quine, called this the *principle of charity* (Davidson 2001 [1975]). Davidson’s position is far more nuanced than Gadamer’s stance as Davidson clarifies that charity is simply a starting point and not an inevitable feature of all interpretation (Davidson 2001 [1974]).

account, the indispensability of projection to interpretation comes from Heidegger's insight that the very nature of understanding is governed by this process (Gadamer 1996 [1960], 260).

The only way that this argument could be impressive is if 'tradition' revealed no dissent or controversy, for only then could tradition provide one with pre-judgements necessary for interpretation. Gadamer is clear that human beings are responsible for the contemporary continuation of tradition via their interpretative choices (Gadamer 1996 [1960], 293). But posterity on this account is bequeathed to the individual and the individual is thus not subjectively responsible for that. Otherwise "tradition" would be an act of subjectivity. 'Tradition' thus, for Gadamer, is very much a matter of cultural cohesion and enculturation. But when we look to the history of any "tradition," there is no, *sui generis* commonality that could bind us to a tradition. Any so called "tradition" could only appear as real in light of a myopia that ignored dissent in history, within and without "tradition." The fact is that the only notion of tradition that provides us with such a commonality is an act of subjectivity, constituted by the subjective choice to maintain affiliations and to not take up the ever-possible role of the rebel or critic. In this way, human beings insulate themselves from the reality of disagreement and create the illusion that they are simply passive recipients of their basic convictions. But any discipline concerned with truth records many contrasting views and the only commonality in such disciplines are thin generalities that render disagreements of the discipline's sort intelligible in the face of an ever expanding array of options. And such disciplines show us that a Gadamerian conception of tradition as the bedrock of common substantive beliefs that we project in interpretation is a fantasy born either of bad faith or wilful ignorance.

The failures of interpretation theory as exemplified by Gadamer and a philological orientation to the study of India are at bottom the same, because both are disinterested in the depth of disagreement within Western philosophy. The best illustration of the failure of these approaches is found in the work of Wilhelm Halbfass.

Moreover, Davidson does not prescind from applying this methodology to alien cultural phenomenon, though Gadamer does (Gadamer 1990).

Halbfass is instructive in two ways. First, Halbfass is a consummate philologist and thus is an excellent representative of the philological approach to Indology that takes the study of language as the fundamental determinant of Indian thought. Secondly, Halbfass endorses Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics of prejudice (Halbfass 1988 [1981], 165-166; Franco and Preisendanz 1997, xii) and thus takes prejudice to be a necessary foundation in cross cultural scholarship. He writes:

Numerous statements have emphasized the fullness of meaning and the complexity of *DHARMA*, as well as the difficulty of translating it or of even adequately paraphrasing it It has been repeatedly emphasized that the concept of *DHARMA* is so difficult to define because it ignores or transcends differences which are essential or irreducible for Western understanding— differences between fact and norm, cosmos and society, physics and ethics, etc. (Halbfass 1988 [1981], 311–13)

Halbfass could not be more wrong about Western understanding. The dichotomy between fact and norm, cosmos and society, physics and ethics, is an influential dichotomy that begins with Hume (taken up in earnest by Kant), but one that is certainly absent in classical and ancient Western philosophy and is not a permanent fixture in subsequent Western philosophy. For a doctrine that violates and transcends these supposed essential distinctions to the Western understanding, one should look no further than what many consider to be the foundational text of Western civilization, Plato's *Republic*. In the *Republic*, Plato argues for a theory of justice that sees the soul and society as analogously composed, and equally capable of being just, but, moreover, the normative importance of justice is a function of THE GOOD, which in Book VI, Socrates argues is the Form of the forms, which is to say that it is the ultimate ideal object and ground of reality, and that all facts, including physical facts, are constituted by goodness, even if indirectly. (Plato's notion of THE GOOD thus is similar to the Vedic notion of *Rta*, the forerunner to numerous subsequent theories about dharma in the Indian tradition.) It was this theory that allowed Plotinus in *The Enneads* (I.8) to argue that matter is Evil, because, unlike the world of Ideas, matter is far removed from THE GOOD. This reduction of the physical to the evaluative can be found in Aristotle as well, to the extent that teleology is woven into his basic physical notions such as causality and his biological classifications. For instance, Aristotle's view that man is a rational animal is not a descriptive generalization, but a normative claim about what is normal in

humans: if a human being presents a lack of rationality, on Aristotle's account, this human fails to be human in some essential respect. Biology is thus not a matter of brute fact for Aristotle: it is an evaluative matter that takes into account the teleology of organisms. Recent scholarship has shown how Aristotle's writings on nature parallel his writings on ethics, and in this respect, Aristotle's thinking about facts and values parallels many discussions of dharma in the Indian tradition.⁵ Closer to our time we need look no further than the tradition of Utilitarianism, that identifies goodness with pleasure, happiness, or the conditions of biological thriving. Utilitarianism, a mainstay of recent moral enquiry, rejects the physics-ethics distinction, to the extent that it attempts to reduce ethical considerations to basic facts about the empirical world that can be studied through natural sciences, including physics.

Once we have properly studied the *text-type* theoretic peculiarities of philosophy by a careful investigation of the canon of philosophy, it becomes clear how much of Indian philosophy has simply been misunderstood by scholars. Namely, everything that has to do with "dharma" has been misunderstood to the extent that it has been understood as incompatible with value concepts like *ETHICS*. Given that "dharma" has been used for moral theories like deontology, utilitarianism and virtue theories in Indian philosophy, it is *prima facie* inconsistent not to treat it as having this function in philosophical texts, and it is most illegitimate to decide that "dharma" does not have an ethical significance on the basis of unacknowledged or latent conceptions of the ethical. Of course, if one chooses not to read Indian texts as philosophy, one will be guided by different considerations, and some of these may legitimate an egocentric deference to the scholar's reactions, but not philosophy. When studying Indian texts as philosophy, the novelty and exotic nature of theories of dharma that have no corresponding ethical theory in the Western tradition is not proof that "dharma" does not mean "ethics" but that rather that it does, and that these peculiarly Indian theories are manifestations of a peculiarly Indian version of the disagreement on ethics. Of course, we only can appreciate this if we read Indian philosophy as philosophy, and one can only learn what philosophy is by learning about

⁵ See D. Charles (1991) for an account of Aristotle's teleological notion of causation. For a discussion of Aristotle's normative conception of biology, see Irwin's illuminating discussion of how Aristotle's thinking on ethics parallels his thinking about nature and biology (Irwin 2000).

the canon of philosophy. Philology and the study of language do not reveal such knowledge. Prejudice certainly does not either.

The reason that this appreciation of a meaningful type of disagreement has generally not been appreciated is that language on its own has thought to be the humanistic research and meaning as such (Lafont 1999; cf. Dummett 1994, 4). It is natural or conventional to suppose that what is essential to language is a type of social agreement.⁶ But what is fundamental to any type of mature discipline concerned with truth is the very opposite: a meaningful type of disagreement that cannot be reduced to a mere misunderstanding of the opponent's position.

With a *text-type* understanding of 'dharma' as having the same role in philosophical texts as 'ethics,' a whole vista of moral thought in the Indian tradition opens up to us. All associated concepts, and the term that 'dharma' supersedes, namely *Rta*, are shown by their logical associations to 'dharma' to have a similar, if not derivative, philosophical role. In the following short explication, I will generally focus on Indian treatments of *Rta*, and dharma.

A Short History of Classical Indian Ethics

Our earliest texts from the Indian tradition are the Vedas, which are clearly texts written in an Indo-European language, with close connections both linguistically and culturally to the literature and inhabitants of ancient Iran. Like the ancient Persian *Avesta*, the early Vedas shows a preoccupation with righteousness, goodness and a battle against threatening forces. However, as the Persian tradition had evolved a clearly dualistic moral framework in Zoroastrianism, where the force of evil is a formidable opponent to the

⁶ Much thinking about language and meaning in the Western tradition has proceeded from what the linguist Roy Harris calls the "language myth"—the notion that languages are a system known rules and meanings (Harris 1981, 2005). This type of myth rears its head in Gadamer's account of language. The thinkers who have been instrumental in showing the cracks in this account are actually linguists and philosophers who have meditated on how any such agreement could come about. The philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps the most influential philosopher of language in the Analytic tradition, is a trajectory that tracks the gradual deconstruction of this myth. (Consider for instance, the progress of his thought from the *Tractatus*, through the *Blue and Brown Books*, and through *Philosophical Investigations* and finally *On Certainty* which provides a rhetorical account of linguistic meaning.) This type of perspective on language as an open-ended process of social negotiation is nicely chronicled in the work of the linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein (Silverstein 1979, 1993, 2001 [1981]). While the language myth is certainly one worthy of criticism, all concerned also recognize that one of the guiding norms of language usage is the goal of consensus and the resolution of disagreement as a type of mutual misunderstanding.

force of goodness, the Vedas took a position far more similar to the position one finds in Plato's *Republic*, namely that evil is a privation of goodness. For the Indo-Aryans who authored and forwarded the Vedas, morality, dharma, or what they originally called "*Ṛta*" was a matter of cultural identity that set the Indo-Aryan off from others. They and only they (among humans) understood what the moral law is for it is set forth within their text, the Vedas. This theory was eventually codified by a formal school of philosophy, Pūrvamīmāṃsā, but it seems discernable from the earliest times. According to this Vedic moral theory, *Ṛta* or dharma protects the welfare of those who uphold this order (cf. *Rg Veda* I.141, VI.7). This order consisted of a caste system characteristic of Vedic society, ordained by God's self sacrifice as described in the Vedic hymn, the *Puruṣa Sūkta*, which separated those who lived in accordance with the moral order from those who did not. In not recognizing evil as a distinct force but rather a corruption of the cosmic moral order, the early Indo Aryans had developed a moral theory that saw them as the only forces of righteousness in human affairs. This may have been the earliest effort of humans to construct a moral theory to justify their cultural practices.

Opposition to this conservative orientation was plentiful by the end of the Vedic period, as recorded in early Buddhist and Jain texts.⁷ The majority of these critical positions came to be known as "*śramaṇa*" movements, where "*śramaṇa*" means striving and effort and contrasted with the conservative "*brāhmaṇa*" orientation of Vedic society. Typical of *śramaṇa* philosophers was a rejection of key features of the Vedic ethic, including the notion that wisdom and authority is a matter of heredity. But the various *śramaṇa* movements were very different in other respects and differed systematically on ethical issues.

The most globally influential of such *śramaṇa* moral philosophies is that of Gautama Buddha (ca 500 BCE). Whereas the Vedas presents dharma as intimately bound with cultural matters of peculiar importance to the Vedic Indo Aryans, such as the Vedas themselves, the associated rituals and the pantheon of Vedic gods who are defined in relation to the Vedic notion of *Ṛta* or dharma, the Buddha and his followers defined dharma as the fundamental structure of all reality. The fundamental principle of Buddhist

⁷ See for instance the Buddhist *Sāmaññaphala Suttanta*, or *The Fruits of the Life of the Ascetic* (*Dīgha-Nikāya* I.55). Also, the Jain *Sūtrakṛtāṅga* (II.i.17).

metaphysics, namely the notion that all things are dependently arising upon other events and that there are no self-caused fundamentals, becomes the main moral principle of Buddhist thought and the entire Buddhist philosophy is called by its followers as “Dharma.” In terms of practical matters this shift is significant. Moral evil is thereby explained not by a failure to uphold the Vedic order, but an effort to live in a manner that is contrary to dependent origination. Thus, any action that is based upon a wish for permanence, whether it is for one’s own bodily well being or for particular institutions, is thereby criticized as evil or contrary to dharma, which is dependent origination. A middle path in practical ethics is thus carved out by this novel moral philosophy, which mediates the extremes of mortification and indulgence. Both extremes fail to appreciate the reality of dependent origination. According to Buddhist dharma, the ethical life is best lived with a view to minimizing the friction against dependent origination, which the Buddhists call “*duḥkha*” or discomfort. Dharma, or the ethical, is what allows a person to live in harmony with dependent origination. Evil is any disposition that is contrary to the nature of reality on the Buddhist account. With this moral philosophy, the Buddhist unseats the privilege accorded to the Vedas in the older moral paradigm, both in terms of its teachings for how to live, but also as the central source for moral knowledge. In emphasizing that dharma underwrites the very structure of reality while undermining the notion of permanence central both to Vedic conceptions of the soul and God but also Vedic cultural conceptions of the centrality of particular cultural artefacts, like the Vedas themselves, Buddhism provides us with an alternative moral epistemology. Any one clear headed enough to analyze the nature of reality (comprised by what the Buddhists call “dharmas”) as such is afforded moral knowledge, on this account, and what is apparent to a sober, clear headed view according to the Buddhist is not permanent selves, but rather dependent origination, which is of the very structure of moral goodness, or dharma.⁸

The appearance of Buddhism, and other Śramaṇa movements also occurs with the introduction of the concept of *karma* which comes to dominant much of Indian moral thought. *Karma*, meaning “action,” comes to designate the idea of the lingering effects of actions that have a moral valence, good or bad. The idea of karma, or the notion that the

⁸ An excellent explication of Buddhist philosophical ethics that is in line with this explication can be found in Edward Conze’s *Buddhist Thought in India* (1967, 97).

universe keeps track of the morality of our actions, may itself be a descendent of the close connection between the Vedic idea of *Rta*, as the cosmic moral order, and action in so far as it can uphold this order, or work against it. But this is given a far more specific metaphysical explanation in the Śramaṇa schools that countenance karma. Buddhists defer to the principle of dependent origination to explain karma. The very important senior contemporary of the Buddha, the twenty-fourth “Fordmaker” or “Pathfinder” of the Jain tradition, known variously as “Mahāvīra,” “Nātaputta” and “Vardhamāna”, defended an alternate account of karma and Dharma.

On top of employing “dharma” to designate its overall teachings and rules, Jain authors also called motion “dharma.” The metaphysics of the Jain moral theory explains this claim. The Jains understand karma, or the moral status of our action, as a physical matter that cleaves to the soul, and this comes about anytime we act (i.e., karma). A very simple explanation for this corpuscular account of karma is the Jain insight that we constitute our very bodies through action, whether this is a matter of eating or tending to our needs. However, this is not a good thing, on the Jain account, for no act is entirely devoid of harmful effects to other living beings. The only way to avoid such evil is through a complete renunciation of action, which only the “hero” or advanced souls manage. This culminates in *sallekhana* or the fast unto death which comes about by the wilful renunciation of action (*Sūtrakṛtāṅga* [1895] I.ii.20–21)). In giving up on the corporeality of action the Jain view has it that the soul is freed and rendered motile and hence dharma, or morality that facilitates and constitutes this ideal state, is itself *motion* in contradistinction to the inertia and weighty corpuscularity of karma.

Each of the three moral philosophical frameworks discussed so far had clear practical implications for its votaries. Certainly at the political level there was much at stake in the moral theory endorsed by the political powers of the day. Patronage for traditions of scholarship and philosophy hung in the balance as did public policy goals. The moral life in India was thus in large measure an effort to integrate moral philosophical views within practical constraints of life, particularly for those who were not ascetics. This may have been easier for those within the Vedic orientation given its conservative stance to heredity, though the success of Buddhism in ancient India speaks to the manner in which its liberal and moderate approach to the moral life was appealing

on a mass scale. Jainism, though still clearly a very important force in Indian culture and history was always a harder sell for obvious reasons. It was and continues to be one of the most uncompromising moral philosophies in the world.

There were many other philosophical orientations that sprouted in the heyday of *śramaṇa* movements. Many of these are documented in the Buddhist and Jain texts. The majority of the philosophers mentioned appear to be a-moralists, who deny that there is anything like right or wrong, which was closely associated with the rejection of the notion that actions have lingering effects characterized by their moral valence.

The position of a-moralism was closely associated with an ancient school of Indian thought that, while rejecting the highly metaphysical accounts of ethical goodness, all the same advocated its own positivistic notion of ethics. This is the school that came to be known as the Cārvāka or Lokāyata —commonly known as Indian Materialism. According to this school of thought, there is nothing like a karma as a lingering effect of action with a moral valence, but yet life could be well lived or poorly lived, and the good life was one that consisted in the maximization of “*kāma*” or pleasure (cf. Guṇaratna 1990, 276).

While the Cārvāka were not so much a-moralists or moral irrealists as they were ethical hedonists, a sophisticated version of moral irrealism came to be defended in the Indian tradition by none the more famous personage as Śaṅkara in his Advaita Vedānta. According to Śaṅkara, dharma is something that advanced seekers of liberation must renounce as an evil (cf. his *Bhagavad Gītā Bhaṣya*, 2.11, 4.21, 5 preamble).

An important feature that sets Śaṅkara off from the earlier Vedic oriented philosophers was the emphasis he placed on *mokṣa* or liberation. Soteriological liberation is a matter that one finds discussed in the closing portions of the Vedas, and in Buddhist and Jain thought, as well as most all other schools of Indian philosophy (the exceptions being the Cārvāka who take a critical stance on it, and the early Pūrvamīmāṃsā authors who fixed their attention on Vedic ethics alone). Most schools of Indian thought attempt to find some balance between the two values. Indeed, the question of the relationship of dharma and *mokṣa* can be placed within a wider question of axiology. In the Indian tradition, four values came to prominence, and the good life in the broad sense consisted in a balance of these values. Each school of Indian thought had its own position on what

the content of these values are and what their relationship is. The values are commonly known as the “*puruṣārtha-s*,” which consist in dharma, *artha* (material prosperity), *kāma* (pleasure) and *mokṣa* (personal or soteriological freedom). The general position among mainstream philosophies appeared to be that dharma should temper and constrain the search for wealth and pleasure, though what dharma consisted in was different on every score. More importantly, most schools of thought saw *mokṣa*, or freedom, as a matter of perfecting the moral life. The search for personal freedom was thus very much a part of the project of the ethical life for most philosophical orientations. The clearest examples of this orientation include Buddhism (particularly in its later, Mahāyāna manifestations), Jainism, Patañjali’s Yoga, as well as Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita. Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta, and the school of thought known as “Sāṅkhya,” stands out as an exception that saw the ethical life as at cross-purposes with the search for personal freedom. The importance accorded to Śaṅkara by many modern Indian thinkers and educated elite is thus a very strange twist and departure from what was the dominant strain in Indian moral thought.⁹

After the sprouting of *śramaṇa* movements in India we find the rise of the epics. The most famous of the Indian epics are the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. Both are in some senses sustained literary engagements with the question of the moral life. One section of the *Mahābhārata*’s came to be especially significant in some circles as it consisted in an extended discourse by Krishna on the question of dharma and how the ethical life can be rendered consistent with the search for personal freedom. This is the *Bhagavad Gītā*. By no means a rigorous or consistent work (it is after all an excerpt from a work of literature, not systematic philosophy) it is however a very interesting effort to synthesise the various currents and thoughts on ethics and wider value theoretic questions at the time.

The end of the epic period gives rise in the early parts of the Common Era to the *śāstric* period in Indian history, of systematic texts on a variety of topics. Most significant for our concern is the rise of systematic philosophy in the form of what came to be known as *darśana-s* or philosophical perspectives. Each *darśana* had a view on all major

⁹ A more detailed overview of the various positions on the relationship between dharma and *mokṣa* can be found in chapter 14 of my *Ethics and the History of Indian Philosophy*.

issues of philosophy, including dharma. As noted, commentators on the history of Indian philosophy have often commented that professional Indian philosophers did not have much to say on the topic of ethics. But this comes from a failure to recognize the philosophical function of “dharma” and “ethics” and “moral.” If these are integrated in systematic philosophies, then the entire philosophy is an elaboration on the ethical. But if one sees ethics simply as pithy rules of conduct or a matter of practical rationality given contingent preferences it will be difficult to find all that much on ethics in Indian philosophy. But this should not be surprising for these latter considerations are not intrinsically philosophical in nature.

But this opens the question of where and how the concrete, practical aspects of ethics were discussed. Once again, if one recognizes the philosophical nature of the very topic of dharma or the ethical then systematic philosophies that talk about dharma have a lot to say on practical matters, but not with respect to particular actions or concerns, but rather general principles and concerns of relevance to the concrete. At times these discussions can be quite vivid, tending towards the concrete. The Pūrvamīmāṃsā stands out as an extended meditation on a Veda-derived notion of dharma and its implications for action. Similarly, Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*, the foundational text for a school of thought called simply “Yoga” is itself an extended meditation and elaboration on the integration of the ideals of morality, freedom and authenticity in life in the face of personal and social challenges to perfection (cf. Ranganathan 2008). Similarly the philosophical texts of Buddhism and Jainism often consist in elaborations of their general philosophy, which they each call “Dharma” and this no doubt has practical import. Given the ubiquity of the term “dharma” in Indian philosophy and given that all schools of Indian thought had something to say on it (in contrast to *mokṣa* which was not of universal concern), it would not be a stretch to characterize a concern for the ethical as a dominant concern of Indian philosophy.

Parallel to the systematic philosophy of India thus is another group of texts. While the systematic philosophy was always meant as a statement of doctrine in the public sphere of philosophical debate, this parallel tradition of semi-philosophical literature was meant for the insider or believer who was not interested in rigorous philosophical argument but practical motivation and advice. In the so called Hindu tradition, the epics

and *purāṇa*-s (stories of the Gods) stand out as texts that fulfil this function as does the strange and overly emphasized *Dharmaśāstra*-s. While these texts read largely as part Brahmanical apologetics and propaganda, they are also noteworthy for the meticulous manner in which they deal with particular instances of wrong doing and questions of duties of various people in society.

Many of these insider texts constitute grounds of synthesis and innovation. An example of such innovation is the doctrine of *bhāgavata dharma* that one finds in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. This is the ethic of the devotee of Vishnu, which distinguishes itself in its emphasis on non-violence to all beings while aligning itself with the Vedic tradition, known for the employment of animal sacrifices. Of interest, many *bhakti* or devotional movements in India adopted a vegetarian lifestyle along with an ethical egalitarianism that criticized the significance of status at birth for liberation. Vegetarianism and a radical egalitarianism that criticizes speciesism are likely two sides of the same coin, as many of the stories in the texts of these traditions speak of non-human animals receiving special favours from deities and achieving liberation.

Similar insider bodies of literature can be found in all the major traditions of Indian thought—some parts literary, some parts inventory, they fill in the details of more general views in philosophical ethics. They comprise what Kant called a *practical anthropology* (Kant 1956 [1785]—see especially Paton's introduction, p.14). In the Buddhist tradition such texts include the various *Jataka* stories, some of the later *Mahāyāna Sūtra*-s as well as the more formal portions of the canon that include inventories of recognized entities called “dharma-s” (the various *Abhidharma* texts) as well as texts on monastic discipline (the *Vinaya* texts). The Jain tradition has produced an understudied body of literature paralleling in many cases the stories of the Hindu epics, as has the Buddhist tradition. In each case, the protagonists, whether Rama, Sita, or Krishna, are deployed in distinct plots with distinct moral lessons according to the background moral theory.

The parallel “insiders” texts were thus meant for mass consumption in a way that the texts of systematic philosophy were not. Ironically, it is these texts that often get the interests of scholars interested in Indian ethics (cf. Matilal 1989±), for there is a superficial similarity between these texts and the texts of authors such as Aristotle and

Kant, two leading moralists of the Western tradition. The insider texts of Indian ethics and the latter works of systematic moral philosophy are provincial in the same way, in so far as they are directed to people who inhabit the same cultural space and outlook. Aristotle thus takes ethics to be an analysis of the political structure of the Greek polis in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Kant assumes quite clearly in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (chapter 2) that his audience are Christians who share his belief in Jesus as a paragon of moral perfection. The systematic works of Indian moral philosophy (namely, the vast majority of Indian philosophy) are not meant for insiders and do not assume a common cultural framework. Rather, they typically take the burden of justifying their perspective on dharma philosophically, without appeal to common modes of practice or shared values.

Misunderstanding Ethics and the Moral Life in India

Given the centrality of philosophy to overcoming problems in studying Indian ethics we might enquire about the relationship between philosophy, culture and history? Is there any clear connection? It certainly does not seem like there is any firm connection to the extent that philosophers can and often are idiosyncratic with respect to their cultural fellows, yet there seems to be no way to understand the different orientations of the major schools of thought except by reference to philosophy. Moreover, even though human beings are notorious for not living in accordance with their ideals, as any anthropologist will tell you, it seems that we as a species need ideas and ideals as reasons and motivating factors in action and there seems to be no other way to get at the ethically significant ideas and ideals except through philosophy.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is no genuine evidence of misunderstanding in the ethical and moral life during the classical and early medieval periods of India. This type of clear headedness was lost with the application of the notion of “religion” to India. Whereas philosophy is a type of text concerned with general and universal theories that battle for supremacy on rational grounds, religion takes faith as its foundation. If there were a *text-type* of religion, it would be able to teach and encourage students to invent their own religions and to become prophets, just as advanced training in philosophy or science ideally culminates in novel contributions to philosophical and scientific theory. A religion, with its insistence that its texts alone are unique, special, and not merely one of a

category that can be employed in adjudicating religious conflicts, is the very antithesis of a *text-type* driven inquiry.

In India, Buddhism, Jainism and many other *darśana*-s were general philosophical orientations, and typically the defining feature of the orientation was a moral philosophy or “dharma.” Seeming exceptions to this rule were schools of thought that attempted to defend the Vedas, such as Pūrvamīmāṃsā and Vedānta. But in taking the Vedas as requiring philosophical defence, these schools were acquiescing to the ground rules of Indian ethics, namely that it had to proceed philosophically. But with the arrival of the notion of religion from the West, Buddhism, and Jainism, came to be understood under the rubric of ‘religion.’ A third category was necessary to allow for the migration of the notion of religion to India in order to show that what we have in India is not at base a matter of reasoned disagreement but brute faith. And thus everything else was lumped under the heading of ‘Hinduism’ (a term coined by non-Indians, and ironically embraced with vigour by Indian nationalists). Minor concessions were made to those who actively resisted being lumped in with Hindus (such as some Sikhs). But the deal was basically done. The philosophical association of ‘dharma’ was suppressed, and Indians came to understand themselves in terms of something that is at base not philosophical, namely religion. As all the major orientations in Indian thought defended a conception of dharma, ‘dharma’ was thereby treated as the indigenous term for ‘religion’ and enshrined in the Indian constitution in its declaration of its secular character. It states there, in Hindi, that India is a country with no dharma (*dharmanirapekṣa rājya*) (India; Government of 1950). Of course, this is historically false. “Dharma” did not mean “religion.” If it had a unitary meaning this was the meaning it had by virtue of its role in philosophical texts, namely *ETHICS*. But the result of this transformation is likely a rupture in the engagement of Indians with other Indians.

This is not to say that there were never religions in India. What are called “*sampradāya*-s” parallel what “religion” amounted to in the West. But these were always minor movements within major philosophical tectonics. The reason for the religification of India is a complex matter that cannot be simply reduced to one factor. According to S.N. Balaghandara (1994), the Christian Jesuits who were among the earliest Indologists introduced the notion of religion and invented “Hinduism” in order to make sense of

India by analogy to their own experience. The fact that philosophers—that is, scholars who understand their primary training and interest in engaging in philosophical debate—have always been a slim minority in Indology is certainly a factor in the mix. The majority of historians of Indian philosophy are not themselves philosophers but linguists, and if *text-types* are essential to understanding the translatable meaning of texts, linguistic expertise will be insufficient. Certainly, the philosophical significance of much Indian thought will go unnoticed under such circumstances. As well, Indian intellectuals have often embraced the notion of religion and spirituality as a way of articulating their perceived difference from Western thought that is often stereotypically presented as positivistic.¹⁰ It is also important to note that philosophy is not easy. In times of crisis it is not unusual for human beings to rely upon faith as a means of getting by and thus in the face of foreign incursions, Indians may have psychologically cooled to understanding their positions philosophically and moved to understanding it religiously. Particularly if there were political incentives to self-identify with a “religious” identity, there would have been practical motivation to abandon philosophy and go the faith route.

While scholarship may not be sufficiently engaging Indian moral philosophy, Indian moral philosophy all the same seems to be engaging the world. The number of Buddhists outside of India seems to be on an ever increase. And yoga, which often looks to Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*, is ubiquitous in most developed countries. It is true; most of the adherents of this orientation are not drawn to these schools of thought for ethical reasons. Usually, people find Indian philosophical movements a type of balm for their psychological problems. (Usually, they mistakenly call their exercise “yoga”—which for Patañjali would have been merely *tapas* or austerities.) But the systematic nature of Indian philosophy, and its connection to the ethical, is difficult to suppress. Transformations of an ethical nature do occur in accordance with these ancient moral

¹⁰ Examples include Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan’s book *Eastern Religion and Western Thought* (1940). This polarization can also be found in the writings of Rammohan Roy, who identifies Western civilization with positivism and contrasts it with the poetic and religious spirit of India (Roy 1901, 325f). This is a common theme in Neo-Hindu writings, and can be found in the writings of Swami Vivekananda, who lauds the West for science, praises India for its spirituality (Vivekananda 1964 IV, 156), and criticizes philosophy that is not spiritually inclined: “Religion without philosophy runs into superstition; philosophy without religion becomes dry atheism” (Vivekananda 1964 VII, 36).

philosophies, though this is usually only foggily appreciated and inconsistently implemented given the suppression of the moral significance of dharma.

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