

Vice and Virtue in Sikh Ethics

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in analytic philosophy that engages with non-Western philosophical traditions, including South Asian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. However, thus far, there has been (to my knowledge) no engagement with Sikhism, despite its status as a major world religion with a rich philosophical tradition. This paper is an attempt to get a start at analytic philosophical engagement with Sikh philosophy. My focus is on Sikh ethics, and in particular on the theory of vice and virtue that can be gleaned from Sikh scripture. According to this theory, the five major vices have a unified source in the vice of *haumai*. *Haumai* is a kind of false conception of oneself as singularly important, and correspondingly, a false conception of the world as revolving around oneself, as a world of objects there for one's use. Vice, then, comes down to the failure to recognize the importance of others. The corresponding picture of virtue is that virtue consists in a recognition of the importance of others, through the recognition of an ultimate reality on which all are One. After reconstructing the Sikh theory of vice and virtue, I conclude with some comparative remarks on Sikh and Western ethics.

Introduction¹

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in analytic philosophy that engages with non-Western philosophical traditions. This has included engagement with the philosophical traditions of several South Asian religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. However, thus far, there has been (to my knowledge) no engagement with Sikhism.² This is so despite the fact that Sikhism has a rich philosophical tradition that is over 500 years old. Moreover, according to common estimates, Sikhism is the fifth largest organized religion in the world, with approximately 25 million followers.³ However, because relatively few Sikhs reside in the West,

¹ I am grateful to Sam Lebens, Inderjit Kaur, and Nirvikar Singh for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. And I am especially grateful to Sam Lebens for seeing fit to include Sikhism when considering religious traditions that have been neglected in analytic philosophy.

² Interestingly, some of the work that comes closest to being analytic philosophical engagement with Sikhism is a few sporadic texts of Sikh philosophy written by native Punjabi scholars. On the subject of ethics, the clearest example of such a text is Avtar Singh's 1970 *Ethics of the Sikhs*. This is not to say there is no contemporary writing in the Anglophone world that could be accurately described as "Sikh philosophy." However, the methodology of such work tends to be more on the sociohistorical side (see e.g. Mandair 2009 and Bhogal 2017, though Mandair 2014 is more straightforwardly philosophical).

³ McLeod et al. (2020).

there is little awareness of or engagement with the Sikh tradition in most corners of Western scholarship.⁴ And given that there are barely any Sikhs in analytic philosophy, let alone anyone who is even interested in Sikhism, it is ultimately not so surprising that there has been no engagement with Sikhism in analytic philosophy thus far.⁵

This paper is an attempt to get a start at analytic philosophical engagement with Sikh philosophy. My focus will be on Sikh ethics, and in particular on the theory of vice and virtue that can be gleaned from Sikh scripture. The primary Sikh scripture, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (hereafter SGGS), consists of 1430 pages of verse, written by 36 different authors, including seven of the ten Sikh *gurus*. Despite having so many different authors, some of whom were Hindus and Muslims whose writings preceded the foundation of Sikhism, SGGS has a strikingly systematic ethics that emerges upon close textual reading. Part of this ethics, I will argue, is a theory of vice and virtue that is not only of historical and religious interest, but holds up to Western theories in plausibility and systematicity.

According to this theory, there is a unity of vices – in other words, there is a sort of master vice in virtue of which all other vices are vices. This master vice is the vice of *haumai*, which is a central ethical concept in Sikhism. On the view that emerges, *haumai* is the source of human beings' separation from an ultimate reality in which we are radically interconnected, both metaphysically and ethically. The five primary vices are all forms of *haumai*, and all stem from a false sense of self-importance. Vice, then, comes down to the failure to recognize the importance of others. The corresponding picture of virtue is that virtue consists in a recognition of the importance of others, through the recognition of an ultimate reality on which all are One. While the vicious person is, at the extreme, a kind of ethical solipsist, the virtuous person is an ethical universalist, treating all others as bearers of the same value she herself has.

In elucidating what I take to be the Sikh theory of vice and virtue, I will draw substantially upon my own personal understanding of Sikh scripture, as well as the communal understanding

⁴ Notable exceptions of course, are the field of Sikh studies, as well as relevant subfields of religious studies, history, anthropology, and ethnomusicology.

⁵ Analytic philosophy of religion, historically, has really meant analytic philosophy of *Christianity*, with occasional forays into other Abrahamic traditions, and extremely rarely into non-Abrahamic traditions.

that is passed down through oral traditions such as *kathā* (discourse). Such communal understanding is, of course, difficult to cite. In fact, it is difficult to find much at all to explicitly build on in taking an analytic philosophical approach to Sikh ethics. The small bit of Anglophone academic writing that does deal with Sikh ethics is not written by philosophers, and while I will cite it in places, I will not draw on it when I find it less informative than the communal understanding, as I often do. Above all else, I will try to draw directly on the primary text as much as possible.

Here is the plan for the paper. I will first introduce and explain the concept of *haumai*, as well as several related concepts in Sikhism that are essential for understanding its ethical system. I will then explain how the five primary vices all manifest *haumai*, and thus how *haumai* unifies the vices. With this understanding of the unity of vices in hand, I will explain how a corresponding picture of virtue emerges. Finally, I will conclude with some comparative remarks on the Sikh ethical system and various Western systems.

1. Haumai and Other Central Concepts

The term *haumai* (ਹਉਮੈ) is a concatenation of *hau* and *mai*, each meaning 'I.' So *haumai* literally means 'I-I.' It has been translated variously as ego, egotism, self-interest, and individuation, but each of these translations only imperfectly captures the concept. As such, I will use it in its untranslated form, and instead attempt to explain what exactly this term refers to. Fundamentally, *haumai* is a kind of false conception of oneself as singularly important, and correspondingly, a false conception of the world as revolving around oneself, as a world of objects there for one's use. It is, at its extreme, a kind of ethical solipsism: an inability to conceive of anyone or anything but oneself as an ethical subject.

This makes clear how *haumai* is related to concepts like ego, egotism, self-interest, and individuation. Ego, in the sense referenced by translation of *haumai* as ego, is a person's sense of self-esteem or self-importance. Egotism is, essentially, a sense of undue self-importance. Self-interest is what is to one's own advantage, without consideration for the good of others. And individuation refers to the demarcation of some discrete individual out of a larger whole. None of these terms by themselves fully capture the essence of *haumai* described in the previous

paragraph, but all get at aspects of it. In *haumai*, one foregrounds one's own ego and self-interest, losing consciousness of others as fellow ethical subjects. At the extreme, one individuates oneself so thoroughly from others that one comes to conceive of oneself as the only thing that really matters.

In SGGS, the term for this false conception of oneself as wholly separate from others is *dubidhā* (ਦੁਬਿਧਾ), or sometimes *dūjā* (ਦੂਜਾ), both of which are standardly translated in context as 'duality.' The duality in question is not a real duality – a real separation at the level of ultimate reality – but rather a subjective duality imposed by the subject who conceives of himself as separate from others. This duality is referred to throughout SGGS as being *māiā* (ਮਾਇਆ) – literally 'illusion.' So, the vicious person, acting out of *haumai*, is under an illusion of duality between himself as subject and others as mere objects. Because ultimately, all are One, he is quite literally out of touch with reality.⁶

Because the focus of this paper is ethics, I will not say much about the underlying metaphysics of Sikhism. But some understanding of the sense in which we are all One is necessary to understand Sikh ethics. The Divine, in Sikhism, is conceived of as absolute and all-encompassing, and is often referred to as literally (the) One:

ਸਭ ਮਹਿ ਇਕੁ ਵਰਤਦਾ ਏਕੇ ਰਹਿਆ ਸਮਾਇ ॥

Sabh meh ik varatdā eko rahiā samāe.

The One is present in all; the One pervades everything. (SGGS, 27).^{7,8}

⁶ Similar points to those made in the preceding two paragraphs are presented in Mandair (2014), though Mandair's general approach is methodologically very different from mine, and he only gestures at a systematic account of the place of *haumai* in the Sikh ethical system.

⁷ English translations of SGGS are notoriously fraught, so I will translate the original text myself where possible, sometimes drawing on existing translations, but always attempting to capture the original meaning as fully as possible. I have relied heavily on SriGranth.org, an online searchable version of SGGS for the original Gurmukhi text, as well as its Roman transliteration, which was completed by Kulbir Singh Thind. The two existing translations I have drawn on are from Sant Singh Khalsa and Manmohan Singh, respectively, but my translations differ from theirs in many places. For critical discussion of existing English translations, see N. Singh (2018) and J. Singh (2018).

⁸ All scriptural references are to SGGS unless otherwise noted.

The term *ik* (or *ek*), literally denoting the number one, is used throughout SGGs to refer to the Divine as a kind of all-encompassing unity. It is because ultimate reality is unified in this way that duality is considered an illusion, as expressed in the following passages:

ਸਭੁ ਕਿਛੁ ਆਪੇ ਆਪਿ ਹੈ ਦੂਜਾ ਅਵਰੁ ਨ ਕੋਇ ॥
Sabh kichh āpe āp hai dūjā avar na kōe.
The One itself is everything; there is no other at all. (39).

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ਜਿਨੀ ਇਕੁ ਪਛਾਣਿਆ ਦੂਜਾ ਭਾਉ ਚੁਕਾਇ ॥
Jinī ik pachhāṇiā dūjā bhāo chukāe.
Those who recognize the One renounce the love of duality. (38)

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ਦੂਜਾ ਕਉਣੁ ਕਹਾ ਨਹੀ ਕੋਈ ॥
Dūjā kauṇ kahā nahī koī.
Whom should I call the other? There is none.

ਸਭ ਮਹਿ ਏਕੁ ਨਿਰੰਜਨੁ ਸੋਈ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥
Sabh meh ek niranjan soī. ||1|| rahāo.
The Immaculate One is in all alike. ||1||Pause|| (223)

Worth noting here is that the word *dūjā*, in this last passage meaning ‘other,’ is the same word that is often used to refer to duality in SGGs (as in the second of these three passages). That duality, of course, is precisely the duality between self and other. Thus, the takeaway of this passage is that, at the level of ultimate reality, there is no such duality. Duality is something that is projected by a person onto reality, creating the illusion of separation between himself and others. Thus, those who recognize the One reject this duality.⁹

With this structure in mind, we can see what is bad about *haumai*. According to Sikhism, enlightenment consists in experiencing ultimate reality, thereby merging with the Divine. *Haumai*

⁹ These remarks will naturally evoke some kind of monism for many readers. And though I am not going too deeply into the underlying metaphysics, it would be fair to wonder what exactly it means to say there is no such duality at the level of “ultimate reality.” As I understand the metaphysics espoused in SGGs, it is indeed a kind of monism. But it fits better with what Schaffer (2010) has labeled *priority* monism (the view that there is only one concrete object at the fundamental level), as opposed to *existence* monism (the view that there is only one concrete object, period). Thanks to Sam Lebens for suggesting I invoke Schaffer’s distinction here.

creates a duality between self and other, cutting one off from ultimate reality and preventing enlightenment:

ਦੁਰਜਨ ਦੁਜਾ ਭਾਉ ਹੈ ਵੇਛੋੜਾ ਹਉਮੈ ਰੋਗੁ ॥

Durjan dūjā bhāo hai vechhoṛā haumai rōg.

The evil person loves duality; they are separated through the disease of *haumai*. (1094)¹⁰

In this and many other places throughout SGGs, *haumai* is referred to using the term *rōg*, which denotes a malady or disease. Moreover, *haumai* is said in several places to be at odds with virtue.

For example:

ਜਿਨਾ ਪੋਤੈ ਪੁੰਨੁ ਤਿਨ ਹਉਮੈ ਮਾਰੀ ॥

Jinā potai punn tin haumai māṛī.

Those who have virtue as their treasure destroy *haumai*. (160)

The term *punn* (ਪੁੰਨੁ) here roughly corresponds to virtue, and contrasts throughout SGGs with *pāp* (ਪਾਪ), which roughly corresponds to vice (though it is sometimes translated as sin). As with Western conceptions of virtue and vice, *punn* and *pāp* refer to sustained traits of character that are cultivated through action:

ਪੁੰਨੀ ਪਾਪੀ ਆਖਣੁ ਨਾਹਿ ॥

Punnī pāpī ākhaṇ nāhi.

Virtue and vice cannot be proclaimed.

ਕਰਿ ਕਰਿ ਕਰਣਾ ਲਿਖਿ ਲੈ ਜਾਹੁ ॥

Kar kar karṇā likh lai jāhu.

It is through repeated action that they are inscribed. (4)

As such, it will be relatively innocuous to translate *punn* and *pāp* as virtue and vice, respectively. Virtue and vice, in these terms, are explicitly connected to duality, in the sense previously discussed:

ਪਾਪ ਪੁੰਨ ਕੀ ਸਾਰ ਨ ਜਾਣੀ ॥

Pāp punn kī sār na jāṇī.

Those who do not understand the nature of vice and virtue

ਦੂਜੈ ਲਾਗੀ ਭਰਮਿ ਭੁਲਾਣੀ ॥

¹⁰ I will use gender-neutral singular pronouns in translating SGGs, as there are no gendered pronouns in the original language.

Dūjai lāgī bharam bhulāñī.
wander astray, attached to duality. (110)

Aside from *punn* and *pāp*, there is another pair of contraries that roughly pick out the categories of virtue and vice. In SGGS, the term *gun* (ਗੁਣ) – literally ‘quality’ – in many contexts denotes the good character traits of a person. It is contrasted with *aogun* (ਅਉਗੁਣ) – literally ‘bad quality’ – which denotes the bad character traits of a person. When virtue and vice are discussed in these terms, there the opposition between *haumai* and virtue is made clear:

ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਗੁਣ ਵੇਹਾਝੀਅਹਿ ਮਲੁ ਹਉਮੈ ਕਢੈ ਧੋਇ ॥
Gurmukh gun v ehājhiāh mal haumai kadhāi dhoe.
The *gurmukh*, cultivating virtue, washes off the stain of *haumai*. (311)

At this point, it will be useful to introduce one more distinction – between *gurmukh* (ਗੁਰਮੁਖ) and *manmukh* (ਮਨਮੁਖ). This is another central distinction in the Sikh ethical system, and essentially picks out the virtuous person versus the vicious person. Literally, the *gurmukh* is someone who is *guru*-facing, while the *manmukh* is someone who is *self*-facing. How does this distinction pick out the virtuous person versus the vicious person? The *gurmukh* is *guru*-facing in the sense that she places importance on the *guru* – in this context meaning the ultimate *Guru*, the Divine, the One itself.¹¹ The *manmukh* is *self*-facing in the sense that he attaches importance primarily or only to himself *qua* individual. Using a more familiar English term, we might call the *manmukh* self-absorbed.¹²

As we can see, then, the *manmukh* is vicious precisely in the sense that he is consumed by *haumai*:

ਹਉਮੈ ਪਚੈ ਮਨਮੁਖ ਮੁਰਾਖਾ ॥
Haumai pachai manmukh mūrākhā.
The foolish manmukh is consumed by *haumai*.

¹¹ I will not take a position in this paper as to whether to whether the Divine is in any sense a personal God in Sikhism. There are interesting questions of both metaphysics and scriptural interpretation here that are beyond the scope of this paper.

¹² *Manmukh* is also often translated as ‘self-willed,’ to capture the sense in which, acting selfishly, the *manmukh*’s will is turned inward. But the more literal translation is ‘self-facing.’

Moreover, the *manmukh* is explicitly identified with the vicious person and contrasted with the virtuous person:

ਜਿਨ ਗੁਣ ਤਿਨ ਸਦ ਮਨਿ ਵਸੈ ਅਉਗੁਣਵੰਤਿਆ ਦੂਰਿ ॥

Jin guṇ tin sad man vasai aoguṇvantiā dūr.

[The Guru] dwells forever in the minds of the virtuous, far away from the vicious.

ਮਨਮੁਖ ਗੁਣ ਤੈ ਬਾਹਰੇ ਬਿਨੁ ਨਾਵੈ ਮਰਦੇ ਝੂਰਿ ॥੨॥

Manmukh guṇ tai bāhre bin nāvai marde jhūr. ||2||

The *manmukh* are bereft of virtue. Without the Divine Name, they die in vain. ||2|| (27)

Recall that *haumai* is understood as a kind of ethical solipsism: a looking-inward to oneself as of primary or sole importance. Whereas the virtuous person understands the true nature of things, including her interconnectedness with others, and thereby recognizes the importance of others, the vicious person cuts himself off from ultimate reality, and thereby from the divine, through his inability to look outside of himself.

As the above passages show, *haumai* is seen as the mark of the vicious person, and eradicating *haumai* is seen as the path to virtue. Moreover, virtue and vice are understood not just as markers of narrowly moral goodness and badness, but as markers of flourishing and lack thereof. The *manmukh* is not just a morally bad person; he is described as diseased, lost, and dying in vain, without having achieved understanding of the Divine. Through his attachment to duality, he creates a separation between self and other that does not exist at the level of ultimate reality. The virtuous person, by contrast, achieves understanding of, and *merges with*, the Divine. I will return later to questions of virtue in Sikhism, including both how virtue is achieved, and how it connects to flourishing. But first, the question of the unity of vices must be addressed.

2. The Unity of Vices

As we have seen, *haumai* and vice are intimately connected. The goal of this section will be to further establish that there is a unity of vices in Sikh ethics, in the sense that the five primary vices all have their source in *haumai*.¹³ This unity of vices is commonly assumed both in communal understanding, and in scholarly work on Sikhism. For example, Pashaura Singh writes:

¹³ For an introductory article on the five primary vices in Sikhism, see Bal (2017).

Traditionally, *haumai* is the source of five evil impulses: lust, anger, covetousness, attachment to worldly things, and pride. Under its influence humans become 'self-willed' (*manmukh*), so attached to worldly pleasures that they forget the divine Name and waste their lives in evil and suffering. (2014, 231)

Indeed, it seems fairly uncontroversial in both the community and the literature that *haumai* is the source of these five primary vices in Sikhism. But, perhaps precisely because it is uncontroversial, argument for this interpretation is rarely provided, and it is often asserted in the secondary literature without textual evidence. This has the unfortunate effect of making the structure of the Sikh ethical system obscure to those who are not already enmeshed in the Sikh tradition. In this section, I will show not only that there is ample textual evidence for this interpretation, but also that a rational reconstruction of the resulting view can explain *how* the five primary vices have their source in *haumai*.

In SGGS, the five primary vices are also called the 'five thieves,' 'five enemies,' 'five evils,' and several similar terms. They are the vices of *kām* (ਕਾਮ), *krodh* (ਕ੍ਰੋਧ), *lobh* (ਲੋਭ), *moh* (ਮੋਹ), and *ahankār* (ਅਹੰਕਾਰ). I will translate these as lust, wrath, greed, attachment, and arrogance, respectively, with the caveat that they are not perfectly captured by English terms, and their exact nature will require some explication. There are several passages in SGGS that make explicit the connection between *haumai* and the five vices. For example:

ਇਸੁ ਦੇਹੀ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਪੰਚ ਚੋਰ ਵਸਹਿ ਕਾਮੁ ਕ੍ਰੋਧੁ ਲੋਭੁ ਮੋਹੁ ਅਹੰਕਾਰਾ ॥

Is dehī andar panch chor vasēh kām krodh lobh moh ahankārā.

Within this body dwell the five thieves: lust, wrath, greed, attachment, and arrogance.

ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤੁ ਲੁਟਹਿ ਮਨਮੁਖ ਨਹੀ ਬੁਝਹਿ ਕੋਇ ਨ ਸੁਣੈ ਪੁਕਾਰਾ ॥

Amrit lūtēh manmukh nahī būjhēh koe na sunai pūkārā.

They plunder the sacred nectar, but the *manmukh* does not realize; no one hears their cries.

ਅੰਧਾ ਜਗਤੁ ਅੰਧੁ ਵਰਤਾਰਾ ਬਾਝੁ ਗੁਰੁ ਗੁਬਾਰਾ ॥੨॥

Andhā jagat andh vartārā bājh gurū gubārā. ||2||

The world is ignorant, its customs are ignorant; without the *Guru*, it is in darkness. ||2||

ਹਉਮੈ ਮੇਰਾ ਕਰਿ ਕਰਿ ਵਿਗੁਤੇ ਕਿਹੁ ਚਲੈ ਨ ਚਲਦਿਆ ਨਾਲਿ ॥

Haumai merā kar kar vigute kihū ḥalai na ḥaldīā nāl.

Acting out of *haumai* and mine-ness they are ruined; when they depart, nothing goes with them. (600)

And:

ਪੰਚ ਚੋਰ ਤਿਨਾ ਘਰੁ ਮੁਹਨ੍ਹਿ ਹਉਮੈ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਸੰਨ੍ਹਿ ॥

Panch chor tinā ghar muhnihaumai andar sannih.

The five thieves plunder their homes as *haumai* breaks in.

ਸਾਕਤ ਮੁਠੇ ਦੁਰਮਤੀ ਹਰਿ ਰਸੁ ਨ ਜਾਣੰਨ੍ਹਿ ॥

Sākat muthe durmatī har ras na jāṇannih.

The materialistic people are deceived by ill-will; they do not know the essence of the Divine. (854)

Though these passages don't go so far as to plainly assert that *haumai* is the source of the five vices, they make explicit not just that there is a connection between *haumai* and the five vices, but that *haumai* is not just another vice, at the same level of fundamentality, to be added to the list of vices. It is fair to infer from these passages, as well as the ample scriptural evidence linking *haumai* to vice in general, that *haumai* is to be understood as the source of the five vices. Less straightforward to glean from SGGs, however, is *how* in particular each vice is thought to manifest *haumai*. Nevertheless, I think such explanations can be rationally reconstructed.¹⁴ I will now attempt to do just this, taking each of the five vices in turn.

First, *kām*, which I have translated as lust. Though it is sometimes translated as 'sexual desire,' or 'concupiscence,' neither of these are good translations. The former is inaccurate, as not all sexual desire is considered vicious by Sikhism, and the latter is too closely tied to Catholic theology.¹⁵ Lust, though not a perfect term, is much more accurate to the meaning of *kām*, because of how it contrasts with love. Sikhism does not in any way reject healthy, loving sexual desire; in fact, as I will discuss later, Sikhism eschews asceticism and self-denial. When *kām* is

¹⁴ By rational reconstruction, I mean an attempt at reconstruction *qua* philosophical system. This contrasts with historical reconstruction, which reconstructs a view with an eye primarily to social and historical context. Non-philosophers writing about Sikhism have tended to provide only historical reconstructions of Sikh thought.

¹⁵ In general, translations of SGGs have tended to use Christian terms in various places, likely to make the text more intelligible to Western audiences. I reject this strategy for a variety of reasons, and have tried as much as possible to avoid falling into it.

mentioned as a vice, it is clear from context that it denotes a kind of sexual obsession or objectifying sexual desire:

ਅਹਿਨਿਸਿ ਕਾਮਿ ਵਿਆਪਿਆ ਵਣਜਾਰਿਆ ਮਿਤ੍ਰੁ ਅੰਧੁਲੇ ਨਾਮੁ ਨ ਚਿਤਿ ॥

Ahinis kām viāpiā vaṇjārīā miṭrā andhule nām na chit.

You are continuously engrossed in lust, merchant friend, and your thoughts ignore the Divine Name. (75)

ਕਾਮਵੰਤ ਕਾਮੀ ਬਹੁ ਨਾਰੀ ਪਰ ਗਿ੍ਹ ਜੋਹ ਨ ਚੁਕੈ ॥

Kāmvant kāmī baho nārī par garīh joh na chūkai.

The lustful, lecherous man desires many women, and he cannot stop peeking into their homes. (672)

What we see here is not mere sexual desire; it is an unhealthy, objectifying lust. This is precisely why it manifests *haumai*, and why the lustful person is a *manmukh*. This kind of lust, in treating the other as a mere object of desire, manifests in its outlook precisely the kind of duality that is cautioned against in SGGS. The lustful person conceives of himself as the sole subject, and the object of his desire as a *mere* object. He is self-facing in the sense that he attaches importance to himself *qua* individual, but in viewing the other as a mere object, attaches no importance to the other *qua* other.

This is precisely the kind of ethical solipsism in terms of which I have characterized *haumai*: a false conception of oneself as the only real subject in a world of objects there for one's use. In other words, it is in its objectification that objectifying lust manifests *haumai*.¹⁶ Now, perhaps unsurprisingly, I am going to claim that all of the other vices manifest *haumai* in similar ways. As such, we will get a truly unified explanation of the vices in terms of *haumai*, where it is not just that all the vices manifest *haumai*, but also that *how* they manifest it is, at a general level, the same.

In SGGS, *kām* is often discussed together with *krodh*, which I have translated as 'wrath,' but which sometimes gets translated as 'unresolved anger,' or simply 'anger':

ਹਉ ਰੋਗੁ ਬਿਆਪੈ ਚੁਕੈ ਨ ਭੰਗਾ ॥

Hao rog biāpai chukai na bhangā.

The disease of *haumai* clings to them, and their faults are not removed.

¹⁶ For a congenial Western perspective on the wrong of sexual objectification, see Nussbaum (1995).

ਕਾਮ ਕ੍ਰੋਧ ਅਤਿ ਤ੍ਰਿਸਨ ਜਰੰਗਾ ॥
Kām krodh at trisan jarangā.
They burn in lust, wrath, and appetitive desire. (1305)

Here, lust and wrath are connected not just to *haumai*, but also to *trisanā*, which literally means thirst or yearning, but in this context refers to appetitive desire more generally. It is relatively straightforward to see how lust is an appetite, but attending to the sense in which wrath too is an appetite on this conception helps to show why wrath and lust are seen as similarly related to *haumai*.

As with sexual desire, not all anger is considered vicious in the Sikh tradition; there is nothing necessarily wrong with, say, righteous anger at injustice.^{17,18} Like loving sexual desire is to be distinguished from objectifying lust, righteous anger at injustice is to be distinguished from appetitive wrath. I translate *krodh* as ‘wrath’ partly because, in SGGS, it refers not to anger in general, but to a kind of vengeful, consuming anger:

ਹੇ ਕਲਿ ਮੂਲ ਕ੍ਰੋਧੰ ਕਦੰਚ ਕਰੁਣਾ ਨ ਉਪਰਜਤੇ ॥
He kal mūl krodh’n kadanch karuṇā na uparjate.
O wrath, you are the root of strife; compassion never rises up in you.

ਬਿਖਯੰਤ ਜੀਵੰ ਵਸਯੰ ਕਰੋਤਿ ਨਿਰਤਯੰ ਕਰੋਤਿ ਜਥਾ ਮਰਕਟਹ ॥
Bikhyant jīv’n vasy’ṅ karot nirtyy’ṅ karot jathā maraktēh.
You control sinful creatures and make them dance like monkeys. (1358)

Here, wrath is contrasted with compassion. In other places, it is contrasted with forgiveness. And it is understood as a vengeful appetite that controls people like puppets. This understanding of wrath helps make clear how it manifests *haumai*: the wrathful person wants to hurt others to improve his own status or make himself feel better. In this way, he views others as mere objects, and considers only the importance of his own inward-facing desires.

¹⁷ See Guru Gobind Singh’s *Zafarnāmā*, for example, which is arguably written from a place of righteous anger at injustice.

¹⁸ Related points that have been made by contemporary analytic philosophers. See, for example, Frye (1983) and Cherry (forthcoming).

Lobh (greed, avarice, covetousness), is fairly straightforwardly a manifestation of *haumai*. It is understood not just as the desire to have more possessions, but also the desire to take things from others.¹⁹ The avaricious person sees the world around him as a world of objects for his use; he fails to take into account the needs of others. At its extreme, his greed makes him see other people too as mere objects – he becomes an ethical solipsist:

ਕਰਮੁ ਨ ਜਾਣਾ ਧਰਮੁ ਨ ਜਾਣਾ ਲੋਭੀ ਮਾਇਆਧਾਰੀ ॥

Karam na jāṇā dharam na jāṇā lobhī māiādhārī.

I know neither karma nor duty; in greed, I chase illusory possessions. (624)

This line is instructive because it connects vice to duty, making clear that what is wrong with the avaricious person is that, acting in *haumai*, he fails to recognize the importance of others, and so pays no attention to his duties. Again, we get a picture of the vicious person, the *manmukh*, as someone who is consumed by the illusion of duality, and can only look inward to his own appetites and selfish desires.

Turning to *moh*, I will follow the standard translation of it as ‘attachment,’ for lack of a better word, but it is not a perfect translation. It is sometimes translated as ‘emotional attachment’ in particular, which does a somewhat better job of picking out the phenomenon in question. But this still does not quite demarcate the phenomenon, at least not without a more precise understanding of attachment. Again, Sikhism does not prescribe ascetic self-denial, or enjoin us not to live in the world. Caring about things in the world then, is not the kind of emotional attachment that *moh* refers to. To understand what kind of attachment *moh* refers to, we have to understand its object. The most common object of *moh* mentioned in SGGS is *māiā* itself – the illusion of metaphysical and ethical separation from others:

ਮਾਇਆ ਮੇਹੁ ਗੁਬਾਰੁ ਹੈ ਤਿਸ ਦਾ ਨ ਦਿਸੈ ਉਰਵਾਰੁ ਨ ਪਾਰੁ ॥

Māiā moh gubār hai tis dā na disai urvār na pār.

Attachment to Maya is an ocean of darkness; neither this shore nor the other can be seen.

ਮਨਮੁਖ ਅਗਿਆਨੀ ਮਹਾ ਦੁਖੁ ਪਾਇਦੇ ਡੁਬੇ ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਵਿਸਾਰਿ ॥

Manmukh agiānī mahā dukh pāide dube har nām visār.

The ignorant *manmukh* suffer great pain; forgetting the Divine Name, they drown. (89)

¹⁹ For this understanding of *lobh*, as well as the other vices, I have drawn upon the *Mahan Kosh*, which is the definitive Punjabi-language encyclopedia of Sikh terminology.

The message of such passages that use the phrase *māiā moh* is that emotional attachment to the illusion of duality keeps one in ignorance. This helps to make sense of various other passages in SGGS where the object of *moh* is not *māiā* itself, but things like household and family. Taken in isolation, such passages may seem to be in conflict with what I have claimed is Sikhism's rejection of asceticism (a claim I will later substantiate). However, if we understand the problematic kind of attachment to things like household and family as attachment under the aspect of *māiā*, the apparent conflict vanishes. What is vicious is not caring about one's family, but rather being emotionally attached to them as *things*, as objects. This shows how *moh*, in creating a false duality between oneself as subject and the world as one of mere objects, manifests *haumai*.

Finally, *ahankār*, which I have translated as 'arrogance.' It is sometimes translated as 'ego' or 'egotism' as well, but this seems to me too general. *Ahankār* is considered in Sikhism to be plainly and closely related to *haumai*. It does not require much explanation to see how an inflated sense of self-importance, and a tendency to view things in terms of one's own status and recognition, manifest a false conception of one standing apart from the rest of the world, both ethically and metaphysically. So, it will not be necessary to say much in defense of the claim that arrogance manifests *haumai*.

Thus far, I have presented a unified picture of vice in Sikh ethics, according to which the five primary vices are unified in manifesting *haumai*. The *manmukh*, the vicious person, can only see the world around him through the lens of his own selfish concerns and desires; he cannot accord anything significance that does not reduce to the significance he accords himself. In this way, he gets things exactly backwards, for it is only in virtue of the significance of the whole, of the One he is part of, that he himself has any sort of significance. Thus, according to Sikh ethics, the vicious person is for the very same reasons morally evil, metaphysically ignorant, and spiritually impoverished.

3. The Path to Virtue in Sikhism

Having reconstructed an account of vice in Sikhism, I will now turn to virtue and how to achieve it. From what I have written so far, it is clear that the *gurmukh*, the virtuous person, centers not herself in her consciousness, but the whole, the One of which everyone and

everything is part.²⁰ In doing this, she eradicates *haumai*, the false sense of separation between herself and others. But how does the virtuous person eradicate *haumai*? How does she come to inhabit the world in a way that recognizes all as part of One, instead of recognizing only herself as subject in a world of mere objects? One major aspect of achieving this in Sikhism is meditating on, contemplating, and vocalizing the Divine Name. But Sikhism does not preach retreat from the external world into one's own private world of contemplation – this would arguably constitute its own form of *haumai*. To cultivate virtue, one must also recognize the significance of the rest of the world by living virtuously in the world, through good deeds and care for others.

This differs dramatically, then, from the kind of ascetic conception of virtue and enlightenment that is often seen as a hallmark of Eastern traditions.^{21,22} It might be thought, upon learning that Sikhism cautions against passions like lust, wrath, greed, attachment, and arrogance, that it also preaches an ideal of pulling back from the world, including human relations and human concerns, to privately contemplate the Divine. However, the ascetic lifestyle is explicitly criticized throughout Sikh scripture, and the writings in SGGS clearly view such practices in certain Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist sects of the time as self-indulgent and misguided:

ਕਬਿਤ ਪੜੇ ਪੜਿ ਕਬਿਤਾ ਮੁਏ ਕਪੜ ਕੇਦਾਰੈ ਜਾਈ ॥

Kabit̥ paṛe paṛ kabitā mūe kapaṛ keḍārai jāī.

Reciting their poems, the poets die; the ascetics die journeying to Kedarnath.²³

ਜਟਾ ਧਾਰਿ ਧਾਰਿ ਜੋਗੀ ਮੁਏ ਤੇਰੀ ਗਤਿ ਇਨਹਿ ਨ ਪਾਈ ॥੨॥

Jatā dhār dhār jogī mūe ṭerī gaṭ inēh na pāī. ||2||

The Yogis die with matted hair; even then, they do not find Your nature. ||2|| (654)

This and many other passages criticize ascetics for performing rituals and pilgrimages that are ultimately meaningless. Practices of self-mortification, ritual bathing, and so on, that are meant to annihilate the embodied self, or somehow transcend the flesh, are the subject of harsh

²⁰ For a discussion of the particular virtues in Sikhism, see Bal (2017).

²¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to address how accurate such characterizations are with regard to other Eastern philosophical systems. Moreover, such a task is better left to scholars of those traditions.

²² This is perhaps because the extent to which the world is illusory is less extreme according to the Sikh worldview. *Māiā*, according to Sikhism, is not the illusion that the world exists, but the illusion that there is a fundamental separation among its constituents (or that the individual is more fundamental than the whole).

²³ A Hindu temple and pilgrimage site.

condemnation throughout SGGGS. In fact, it is explicitly stated that such rituals do nothing to cultivate virtue:

ਮਲੁ ਹਉਮੈ ਧੋਤੀ ਕਿਵੈ ਨ ਉਤਰੈ ਜੇ ਸਉ ਤੀਰਥ ਨਾਇ ॥

Mal haumai dhotī kivai na utrai je sao tīrath nāe.

The filth of *haumai* cannot be removed by washing, even by bathing at a hundred sacred shrines.

ਬਹੁ ਬਿਧਿ ਕਰਮ ਕਮਾਵਦੇ ਦੁਣੀ ਮਲੁ ਲਾਗੀ ਆਇ ॥

Baho bidh karam kamāvde dūṇī mal lāgī āe.

Performing all sorts of rituals, twice as much filth sticks to them. (39)

So, not only do these sorts of rituals *not* cultivate virtue, they are said to actually cultivate vice. This is because through self-indulgent attempts to cleanse and mortify themselves, the ascetics continue to act in a self-regarding, inward-facing manner.

The Sikh picture of the cultivation of virtue looks very different from such asceticism and self-denial. Instead, to cultivate virtue, one is enjoined to recognize the Divine in others by doing good deeds for the sake of others:

ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਮਜਨੁ ਚਜੁ ਅਚਾਰੁ ॥

Gurmukhī majan chaj achār.

The *gurmukh*'s cleansing bath is the performance of good deeds. (932)

The way one cleanses oneself of *haumai* and becomes virtuous is not through literal ablution, but through good deeds. Moreover, it is made clear in various places that good deeds done for selfish reasons, such as the desire for recognition, are done out of *haumai*, and have no value:

ਮਨਮੁਖ ਕਰਮ ਕਰੇ ਅਹੰਕਾਰੀ ਸਭੁ ਦੁਖੇ ਦੁਖੁ ਕਮਾਇ ॥

Manmukh karam kare ahankārī sabh dukho dukh kamāe.

The *manmukh* does his deeds proudly; he earns only pain and more pain. (87)

Without doing good deeds for the sake of others, one cannot come to understand one of the central features of ultimate reality – the universal ethical significance of all as part of One:

ਜਹ ਕਰਣੀ ਤਹ ਪੂਰੀ ਮਤਿ ॥

Jah karṇī tah pūrī mat.

Through right action, one's understanding is complete.

ਕਰਣੀ ਬਾਝਹੁ ਘਟੇ ਘਟਿ ॥੩॥

Karṇī bājhahu ghate ghat. ||3||

Without right action, it lessens and lessens. ||3|| (25)

The picture that emerges is one on which one must achieve virtue by acquainting oneself with the ethical *realness* of others, through being out in the world and doing good in it. One cannot simply eradicate vice from oneself by removing one's desires and attachments and becoming stoic or ascetic. In the familiar sense, one becomes good by practicing goodness.

Moreover, not only can one *not* cultivate virtue by doing good deeds out of selfishness, one also cannot cultivate virtue out of concern only for people who share one's caste or other social groups:

ਜਾਣਹੁ ਜੋਤਿ ਨ ਪੁਛਹੁ ਜਾਤੀ ਆਗੈ ਜਾਤਿ ਨ ਹੇ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

Jāṅhu jot na pūchhahu jāṭī āgai jāṭ na he. ||1|| rahāo.

Recognize the Divine Light within all, and do not consider caste; there are no castes in the next world. ||1||Pause|| (349)

Instead, the *gurmukh* treats all as equal:

ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਏਕ ਦ੍ਰਿਸਟਿ ਕਰਿ ਦੇਖਹੁ ਘਟਿ ਘਟਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਸਮੇਈ ਜੀਉ ॥੨॥

Gurmukh ek darisat kar dekhhu ghat ghat jot samoī jīo. ||2||

As *gurmukh*, look upon all with equality; the Divine Light resides in everyone. ||2|| (599)

So, in Sikh ethics, treating everyone as having equal moral standing, regardless of social standing, is baked into the understanding of virtue. Because virtue itself consists in a kind of practiced recognition of universal moral significance, one cannot be virtuous without having concern for the equality of all people.

This conception of virtue, aside from emerging through scriptural analysis, is deeply ingrained in Sikh communal understanding of virtuous conduct. This can be seen in what are often referred to in the communal understanding as the 'three pillars' of virtuous conduct in Sikhism: *nām japnā* (contemplate the Divine Name), *kirat karnā* (live and work honestly), and *vand chhakknā* (share your wealth with others and take care of the needy). As Kaur (2013) has persuasively argued, all of these pillars of virtuous conduct have as their source a recognition of the universal worth and equality of all, and following them requires egalitarian action on both the individual and societal levels. Moreover, Kaur (forthcoming, 2) argues that the Sikh practice of "*sabad kīrtan* (collective singing) and *langar* (communal dining) negates social hierarchies and exclusion, and thus entails the transcending of social boundaries, thereby encouraging a habit of

equal treatment of all human beings.” Like many scholars of Sikhism, Kaur emphasizes that the root of these ethical obligations in Sikhism is the ultimate unity or Oneness of all.

In sum, on the Sikh conception of virtue, virtue cannot be cultivated solely or even primarily through inward-looking attempts to extinguish one’s vicious desires and passions. Such an endeavor would be self-defeating, because to be inwardly-oriented is necessarily to be *manmukh* – to be acting out of *haumai*. Self-annihilation, according to Sikhism, is just another form of self-indulgence. The only way to transcend the baseness of the self is to recognize it as part of a larger unity and act out of this recognition. Thus, the cultivation of virtue must involve a lived commitment to the equal worth of all through good deeds motivated by altruism and egalitarianism – in other words, not just doing the right things, but doing them for the right reasons. The *gurmukh* not only intellectually recognizes the Oneness of all, but lives it through treating others as having the very same ethical significance she has.

4. Comparative and Concluding Remarks

My goal so far has been to reconstruct the Sikh theory of vice and virtue through careful reading of Sikh scripture. The picture that emerges is, I think, strikingly systematic. In this final section, I will argue that the Sikh theory not only holds up to Western theories, but can even compare favorably to them along some dimensions. Moreover, I will suggest that the Sikh ethical theory prefigures some important developments in modern Western philosophy, particularly some aspects of Kantian ethics.

Because of the focus on virtue, it may be tempting for Western readers to view Sikh ethics through the lens of Ancient Greek ethics, especially those of Aristotle. And indeed, there are some similarities. Aristotle too saw practice as essential for the cultivation of virtue. And for Aristotle, virtue and human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) are intimately connected. This is true in Sikhism too, in the sense that it is only through the cultivation of virtue that one recognizes ultimate reality, thereby achieving enlightenment and merging with the Divine. However, the connection between virtue and flourishing ends up looking very different in Sikhism, because of the underlying metaphysics and ethics of Oneness. One of the most common critiques of Aristotelian *eudaimonism* is that it is objectionably self-regarding. For example, Kant, in the

Metaphysics of Morals, criticizes the identification of virtue with prudence on the grounds that being virtuous is about far more than what is to one's own advantage. The worry with the Aristotelian conception of virtue, then, is that it reduces virtue to a kind of personal excellence, leaving the intrinsic importance of others out of the picture.²⁴

There is, of course, plenty of work pushing back on this interpretation of Aristotelian ethics.²⁵ But the point is that the Aristotelian theory of virtue at least lends itself to the worry that it is self-regarding, but virtue must be at least partly other-regarding. The Sikh theory of virtue, by contrast, makes clear that virtue is not self-regarding, because self-regard is the source of all vice. By understanding virtue in terms of a lived recognition of the ethical significance of others, and vice in terms of solipsistic self-regard, the Sikh theory of virtue screens off any objection that it makes virtue objectionably self-regarding. Of course, it still ends up being the case, according to Sikhism, that the virtuous person is flourishing and the vicious person is not. But this is because human flourishing consists in connection with ultimate reality, which is only possible through recognition of the worth of others. And because virtue must be cultivated in part by acting from altruistic, egalitarian motives, it turns out to be impossible to cultivate virtue in a self-regarding way – say, by aiming solely at cultivating one's own excellence. To aim solely at cultivating one's own excellence would be *haumai*. So, the Sikh theory of virtue connects virtue to flourishing without raising worries about being objectionably self-regarding, as the Aristotelian theory does.

There is another, related locus of both similarity and difference between Sikh and Ancient Greek theories of virtue: that of unity. It has been claimed by scholars of both Plato and Aristotle that the virtues are unified.²⁶ But how exactly they are supposed to be unified is a fraught subject, so much so that for a long time, the idea that they were unified was not taken seriously among scholars of Ancient Greek ethics (though it has recently regained popularity). Those who find a unity of the virtues in Aristotle find it in *phronesis* – practical wisdom. But unifying the virtues in

²⁴ See also Pritchard (1912) and Nagel (1986).

²⁵ See, for example, Annas (1995, 2008) and McKerlie (1998).

²⁶ For discussion of the unity of the virtues in Plato, see Penner (1973) and Woodruff (1976). For discussion of the unity of the virtues in Aristotle, see Telfer (1989) and Badhwar (1996).

terms of *phronesis*, which seems to be a personal excellence, makes it difficult to see how a persuasive response could be given to the worry that virtue is objectionably self-regarding.

Unlike Ancient Greek ethical theories, the primary unity according to the Sikh ethical theory is a unity of the vices. This is not to say that virtue is not unified, since arguably virtue just consists in the negation of *haumai* through recognition of the Oneness of all. But the point is that the explanatory picture in Sikhism is one where the particular vices are all grounded in *haumai*. This is a different, and perhaps more promising approach. Something like *phronesis*, in being on its face a kind of personal-excellence or realization of one's individual capacities, does not essentially implicate the world outside oneself. *Haumai* and its negation, by contrast, are inextricably bound up with a world of other people, a world of significance that is prior to the significance of the individual. As I have already argued, on the Sikh conception, it is not possible for each individual to cultivate virtue by atomistically pursuing their own excellence. The importance of others is built into the very idea of virtue and vice.

In these ways, despite some formal similarities, the Sikh theory of vice and virtue ends up looking very different from Ancient Greek eudaimonism as it is standardly understood. And it seems to sidestep many of the problems to which scholars of Plato and Aristotle have struggled to find solutions. Of course, this brief discussion does not establish that the Sikh theory of virtue is overall superior to the most sophisticated interpretations of Ancient Greek theories. But at the very least, the Sikh theory holds up to this prominent family of Western theories in plausibility and systematicity. This alone should be reason enough to pay it more attention.

There is another Western ethical system worth mentioning here: Kantianism. In some ways, the Sikh ethical approach, with its focus on universality and other-regarding motivation, looks much more like Kant than Aristotle. As I have interpreted the ethical system that can be gleaned from SGGS, there is substantial affinity with Kant's ethics, though the underlying metaphysics is, of course, deeply different. Both systems hold that all people, in virtue of shared features, are of equal worth and deserving of equal concern. Both systems hold that good deeds done from selfish motives are wholly lacking in virtue. And both systems hold that virtuous

actions must be motivated by a regard for others that is universal and not parochial.²⁷ Finally, both systems hold that vice consists in failing to recognize the worth of others by treating them as mere objects. Though, again, the metaphysics are quite different, there is considerable congeniality between the Sikh idea what we are all One and the Kantian idea that we are all part of the Kingdom of Ends. As a matter of autobiography as a Sikh, this is a connection I only recently noticed, and one that perhaps partly explains my attraction to Kantianism.

I mention the congeniality with Kantianism not because I think that the Sikh ethical system somehow needs validation from a Western system. Part of what I have aimed to demonstrate by laying out the Sikh theory of vice and virtue in the first three-quarters of this paper with scant reference to Western theories is that no such validation from Western theories is needed to show the Sikh tradition to be philosophically worthy. Of course, I have used the tools of analytic philosophy in reconstructing what I take to be the Sikh theory, and analytic philosophy is in a sense a Western tradition. But I think it is of great importance that we distinguish between using a methodology developed in the West to understand non-Western theories on their own terms, and understanding non-Western theories only in terms of their relation to Western theories. I endorse the former while rejecting the latter.

My purpose in raising these comparisons with Western theories is instead to show that, despite being completely ignored by analytic philosophers, the Sikh philosophical tradition yields an interesting and systematic ethical theory that is worth taking seriously as a compliment to and/or competitor with Western theories. Furthermore, part of my purpose in raising the comparison with Kantianism in particular is to show that Sikh philosophy, whose inception precedes Kant by some two to three centuries, has been in many ways ahead of the curve. Many of its ideas prefigure those in Kant, and indeed prefigure some of the crowning ideas of Western Enlightenment thought, such as egalitarianism and ethical universalism. Indeed, while modern philosophers in the West failed over and over again to understand the anti-racist and anti-sexist

²⁷ Of course, Kant himself was notoriously bad at drawing out the implications of his own system, as is notable from his racist views. The Sikh Gurus, by contrast, recognized as a consequence of their ethical system the deep moral bankruptcy of casteism, and fought tirelessly against it.

implications of their ethical theories, the Sikh *gurus* recognized them from the start. When things are put this way, it is unfortunate that Sikh philosophy is not only *not* engaged with in Western analytic philosophy (even by those who are committed to diversifying the canon), but more generally does not receive credit in the history of ideas for making much of the same ideological progress as the Western Enlightenment on its own terms. My hope is that this paper takes a step toward rectifying both of these omissions.

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