

**International Conference on "'Traditional Hindu/Indian Virtue Ethics in Today's Perspective: Sharing Ideas between East and West' at IIAS (17-19 October 2019)**

Concept Note:

There are two goals this seminar/symposium intends to achieve:

(1) To arrive at a structure of Hindu/Indian Ethics, keeping broadly Vedanta in perspective, using the analytical tools of modern Western philosophy, especially virtue ethics. The virtue *samatva*, *harmony within*, translated by Gandhi as *even-mindedness*, is the base for the ethical structure, cultivation of which leads on to the other requisite ethical virtues such as courage, benevolence, sympathy or empathy. Harmony being *intentional*, accumulation of the virtue *harmony within* in character leads on to building harmony around if missing, and maintaining it where it is already in place. According to the Indian point of view, the ethical base is thus naturalistic, as pertaining to the psychological nature of humans centering around harmony being intentional. It is at this point that Hindu ethics ties with spirituality, in so far as we humans involve ourselves in instilling the virtue *harmony within* in character to be able to pursue ethical acts geared to sustainability both at micro as well as macro levels. (cf., *Samatvam Yoga uchchate* (The Gita, 2/48); *Yogah Karmasu Kaushalam* (Ibid, 2/50)). Here emerges the ethico-spiritual concept of the ideal leader *Rajarshi* who has imbued the virtue *harmony within* well enough to discharge his/her social functions satisfactorily, -- a concept that comes near to the *philosopher king*, and yet goes beyond. Spirituality here is not tied to a specific faith, but is ontologically secular in being naturalistic, and is accommodative across the board, reflecting the inclusive spirit of Hinduism, which goes with pluralism. The ethical thrust found in the Indian way of looking at things prompts Balbir Sihag, the economist from UMass, Lowell, to characterize the economics of Kautilya (whom he demonstrates as the true founder of modern economics, not Adam Smith) as 'ethiconomics'. To sum up the ideas above, harmony has a threefold aspect: (a) the *harmony within*, which is the virtue; (b) the harmony amongst human beings – in one's own society and the whole social world – that the virtue is meant to, and helps promote; and (c) the harmony of the individual and every society with the natural world, which also the humans look for and delight in promoting on the basis of the virtue. Certainly Indian ethics goes beyond Aristotle. Philosophically relevant email comments from Rosalind Hursthouse in response to Chakravarti's paper on Virtue Ethics explicating the Indian position may be worth quoting here:

... I feel perfectly at home and found particularly interesting ... the way in which the virtue of harmony provides a very un-Aristotelian account of the *unity* of the virtues. Of course Plato talks of virtue

as bringing the human psyche into harmony, but it's nothing more than the thin notion of the (dubious) tripartite division of the psyche being harmonious. And Aristotle has a hint of it, but one might say, his is even thinner because it's just getting the desiderative and the rational parts into harmony. But yours displays all the traditional virtues as *subsumed* under harmony, and thereby gives one a significant, content-rich, concept which can more fruitfully be used ...

(2) To contribute to the Virtue Ethics of today with age-old visions from the Hindu/Indian perspective. Michael Slote supports Virtue Ethics, while pursuing the sentimentalist variety as he considers emotion as the building block of ethics. The virtue *harmony within*, needless to say, has an aesthetic dimension pronouncedly present in the spiritual pursuit of the Hindu. Thus sentimentalism is very much a part and parcel of Indian Virtue Ethics with spirituality as its base. Tagore in modern times has taken this secular ethico-spiritual dimension of Hinduism to a new height. (E.g., *The King of the Dark Chamber*, *The Cycle of Spring*.) No wonder, Wittgenstein was extremely fascinated of the first of the two plays by the poet. Unveiling the innate *Ananda*, or *Joy* in and through establishing the inner freedom, where freedom is not the antithesis of subjugation of the physical and mental by external, primarily political, force is the secular spirituality involved in the process. The national anthems of the prominent democracies today, American, British and Canadian for example, sing in the praise of political freedom for nation states. India's national anthem, composed by Tagore, sings, not the virtue of national freedom, but the virtue of living together, in harmony, imbibing the virtue *harmony within*, which goes beyond political freedom. Slote makes no secret of the fact that modern day Virtue Ethics has a lot to learn from the traditional Chinese variety while the impetus for the former came from the ancient wisdom of Greece. In the Indian tradition as explicated above, there might be a lot more that the conference hopefully can share with Slote for the benefit of the human kind, while at the same time learning from him. We are lucky he is willing and interested in taking part in a symposium arranged in India, as he often does in China.

Both Hursthouse and Ronald Sandler look for a naturalistic end appropriate in the evolutionary stage for humans as we emerge as rational animals in the evolutionary process, an end 'appropriate to us [human beings] in virtue of our rationality' (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 218). From the Hindu perspective, it is the joy of freedom in attaining *harmony within* that leads on to building and maintaining harmony without, signifying the meaning of existence, that may be taken as such an end. However, this is not a *rational* end in so far as it is not an outcome of a strictly rational process, although reason is very much

involved here as a guiding principle, as the Gita points out when mentioning *Buddhi Yoga*, translated by Sri Aurobindo as 'The Yoga of the Intelligent will'. Being established in *harmony within* and operating off the virtue is a sentimental process, *harmony within* being a sentimental virtue that justifies, and regulates in the right direction, the operation of the virtue *empathy* that is the cornerstone of the sentimentalist Virtue Ethics of Slote. The Indian way to be deliberated upon in the proposed symposium leads to proper acts appropriate for occasions, not necessarily via the activist route. The deliberation is not a part of the decolonization process in the wake of a movement gaining grounds lately in the West for acceptance of the 'other philosophies' in the Western academic curricula, but rather is a look into the live past of a prominent non-Western culture, following the style of Virtue Ethics in the West in modern times, in order to have a direction in life for today. The pluralistic approach is, however, not geared to accommodating relativism in ethics. The broad principles of morality being a priori accounts for their universality across the cultures, while their contingency explains their vulnerability in being questioned and often flouted. They are, thus, examples of the Kripkean concept of the contingent a priori.

Today's world with pervasive bullying at schools, rampant, unprovoked shootings on gatherings of innocent people in frequent succession, and a pandemic opioid crisis, associated with a widespread, deeply entrenched boredom crystallized in depressive suffering across societies calls for ethico-spiritual measures appropriate for us when the traditional ones have failed. The conference hopefully paves the way to reclaiming the lost ground for humanity through building of a theoretically sound virtue ethics that leads on to a practical ethics that works. The proposed symposium is intended to usher in a direction to this end in India to the benefit of all.

Michel Slote, Philosophy, University of Miami, a leading Virtue Ethicist, who has shown the relevance of accommodating points of view of another ancient culture, viz., the Chinese, in his work, has expressed a keen interest in attending an academic meet in India. Attempts will be made to accommodate Hindu/Indian perspectives at our end toward a fruitful dialogue. The area of administration where the concept of Rajarshi fits in will be covered. The economic ideas in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* will hopefully be covered as well from virtue ethical perspective. There will be presentation on Tagore's philosophical observation on Ethics as connected with his various involvements in life on top of his pursuit of the muse. Ideas of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo will be dealt with along

with those present in the Mahabharata, the Gita and the Vedas. In today's business world, the ideas of Dominic Barton, former Director of McKinsey, who places a pronounced value on character in business leadership while making a special mention of the Eastern ways of doing business will be touched upon from the point of view of Virtue Ethics.

The proposed symposium is an attempt at sharing the thoughts of ancient India with the modern Western thinkers on the platform of Virtue Ethics, which is historically a revolt of the West against itself in modern times. The symposium is a venture at the East and the West learning from each other. Since Virtue Ethics is not widely pursued academically in India yet, in choosing the presenters excellence has been the deciding factor, rather than distribution of possible speakers across the length and the breadth of the country. While we accommodate spirituality in its secular mode as the basis for the Hindu/Indian version of Virtue Ethics, we look into the area of the intimate relation holding between spirituality and science, to the sustenance of both, as Professor Kumar Murty of the University of Toronto is expected to bring to the fore in his presentation.

An International conference on *'Traditional Hindu/Indian Virtue Ethics in Today's Perspective: Sharing Ideas between East and West'* was organized at IAS from 17-19 October, 2019. Professor Sitansu Chakravarti, Affiliated Scholar, New College, University of Toronto and Professor Nirmalya Narayan Chakraborty, Department of Philosophy, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata were the conveners of the conference. The Welcome address delivered by Professor Makarand R. Paranjape, Director, IAS. Professor Sitansu Chakravarti, Convener gave introductory remarks and present Professor A. Chatterjee's view on the theme. Vote of thanks was proposed by Col. Vijay K. Tiwari, Secretary, IAS.

### **Participants:**

- Professor Rupa Bandyopadhyay, Department of Philosophy, Jadavpur University, Kolkata
- Professor V Kumar Murty, Mathematics, University of Toronto
- Professor Indrani Sanyal, Retired Professor, Philosophy, Jadavpur University, Kolkata
- Professor Sanjoy Mukherjee, Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Shillong
- Professor Shefali Moitra, Retired Professor, Philosophy, Jadavpur University, Kolkata

- Ayon Maharaj, Chair, Philosophy, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur
- Shri Ananda Roop Chakravarti, Director, KPMG International, London
- Professor Balbir Sihag, Professor Emeritus, Economics, UMass, Lowell
- Mr. Ajay Jaiswal, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Center for Philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
- Dr. Lisa Widdison, Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, University of Hawaii
- Professor Sharad Deshpande, 13, Khagol Vaigynik Co-Op Hsg Society, 38/1, Pachwati, Pashan, Pune
- Professor M.P. Singh, National Fellow, IIAS
- Professor R.C. Pradhan, National Fellow, IIAS