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RESEARCH PAPER

Moral evolution as development: an unfinished task

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Abstract
Development has to be essentially in moral terms, not just material and technological. Mahatma Gandhi defined civilisation in moral terms. His disciple economist, Kumarappa, believed in a long-term tendency of humans towards reduced violence. This may be doubted in the present context of nuclear brinkmanship and environmental crisis. It only indicates that our moral evolution is an unfinished task. However, there are indications of long-term moral progress, like significantly reduced world poverty, improvement in gender justice, and reduced child labour, mainly due to moral pressures on the governments. There is evidence of a long-term broad-basing process succeeding, due to measures like abolition of slavery and untouchability and adult suffrage. However, even before the battle against inequality is won, we have a new challenge of artificial intelligence with a potential for massive unemployment and concentration of power. Moral evolution does not occur automatically; we have to strive for it consciously and continuously, overcoming many challenges. In doing this, we face questions like whether ethics is universal or relative, bias-free, and how to deal with ethical dilemmas. The article stresses not only the need to enhance moral sensitivity among all, but also of developing professional ethical expertise.

Keywords Moral evolution · Ethics · Development · Ethical dilemmas · Adam Smith · Gandhi · Kumarappa · Artificial intelligence

Ethics and human evolution

The topic of my lecture is 'moral evolution as development—an unfinished task'. I am arguing that for the very survival of human species henceforth, development will have to be essentially in moral terms, not just material or technological. The role of ethics in human progress often goes unnoticed, science and technology credited with being the main forces behind it. Ethics is what supports or holds the society and makes long-term development in human welfare possible. More than rationality, what distinguishes humans from animals is ethics. It is morality which makes human beings human. Ironically, humans themselves have become the greatest threats to their own survival. Nuclear brinkmanship

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and environmental crisis are human creations. The survival of human species will depend on the success of their moral evolution.

Mere intellectual superiority may not ensure human survival. Moral wisdom of seeing long-term and wider consequences of human actions, and avoiding the harmful ones, is also necessary. Humans have this wisdom potentially. More than rationality and intelligence, morality is a crucial feature of humans. In the era of computers and artificial intelligence, even machines may have more intelligence than humans. Intelligence can be used for an immoral purpose, but morality guides us to good ends. Machines are amoral, though they may have intelligence. Ethics can be programmed into them by humans alone. Robert Wright calls the human as a moral animal (Wright 1994). Capacity to feel guilty, and a sense of justice are common to all humans across the globe. Conscience, or what Mahatma Gandhi called as the Inner Voice, is common to all, though supressed often. The presence of conscience in human beings may be a pointer to a biologically evolved moral instinct, as claimed by Marc Hauser (2006). A question arises here as to why there are rapists, murderers and evil humans, if conscience exists in all. The same question arises in the case of rationality. If humans are rational animals, why is there so much irrationality in society and polity? Conscience may take some years to mature, as in the case of the sex instinct. It may also conflict with other biologically stronger instincts like self-interest and sex. But it is nevertheless there, and is also cultivated and strengthened in most, keeping animal instincts in check. Moral sentiments like affection, compassion, altruism, are also common to all, which though often confined within narrow circles like family or community, or compatriots, are capable of being extended to all humans and even to all beings. We all have an urge for social approval and esteem, which also makes us moral. Quoting Paul MacLean (1983), Wright refers to an evolutionary trajectory, whereby our minds ascend from the basic drives like hunger and sex to a higher level of affection for the offspring and relatives, and then still higher to affection and generosity for people outside the family (Wright 1994:321). The base instincts do not disappear but are repressed in the interest of social approval. This repression is a product of thousands of years of civilisational progress. Richard Dawkins famously declared that humans 'are born selfish' like other animals (1976:3). However, moral evolution controls selfishness. The moral instinct is nurtured and developed by parents, schooling, and community customs and action. Such deliberate efforts further the cause of moral evolution. Moral evolution is not only necessary, but it has also been taking place over a long term, though the process in unfinished.

For the moral evolution, we do not derive our values from the natural physical evolution based on 'the survival of the fittest'. A few like Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) developed a theory of Social Darwinism, believing that human races were subject to the same laws of natural selection as Charles Darwin perceived in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871).[1] Adolf Hitler believed in this doctrine and in the superiority of certain races which only were considered fit for survival. This idea has been dismissed for good since long. G E Moore denounced the idea of drawing values from natural evolution as 'naturalistic fallacy' (quoted in Wright 1994: 330).

We draw values instead from the fact of humans being social animals—from the principle of 'Live and let live'. Quite a few animals are also social, like elephants, monkeys, ants, and honey bees. The norms governing animal societies, however, cannot be called as moral. They are adaptations to nature, because only as members of collective societies they

[1] Herbert Spencer developed this idea as applied to human groups in an article, 'The Social Organism', first published in 1860 in the *Westminister Review*, included later in Spencer (1892).

can survive as species. The individuals in animal societies have no status as individuals and no equality. They largely behave on instinct. A highly dictatorial human regime comes close to animal societies. It is only in human societies that individuals can enjoy dignity, freedom, and equality, and realise their highest distinct human potential. Unlike animal societies, mere subsistence or survival is not the goal of human societies and its members; they aim much higher, and that is what triggers their progress. I quote from *Mānava-dharma śatakam* (verses 13 & 14) in this context:

> 'The development of individuals takes place really when they are moved by a lofty ideal clearly.
> Filling the belly only is not for human beings surely; they are also in pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty.' (Nadkarni 2022: p. 208).

Moreover, a community or society of animals is much smaller than that of humans, and spatially much more restricted. A human society can extend to the whole world. The enlargement of the human society is a part of moral evolution. The human society emerged and enlarges because the process benefits humans both individually and collectively. Moral codes developed to ensure these benefits. A human society on the global scale, based on mutual respect and cooperation, will promote peace and happiness as never before. Our goal is: '*Sarve janah sukhino bhavantu'*—Let all people be happy, not the fittest alone.

In meeting biological needs, humans need not fight a competitive battle with others. As Mahatma Gandhi observed, the earth has enough to meet the needs of all, but not greed. In spite of the importance of individuals in human societies, the moral evolution has to work at the level of communities or societies. It is not enough if a few individuals are moral. All individuals have to learn to cooperate and work with others, and that is how moral and civilisational progress takes place. In his book on the *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Mahatma Gandhi defined civilisation as 'that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty'; he added immediately that 'performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms' (Parel ed. 2010:65). Thus, by definition, civilisation means moral progress, not progress just in material goods and technology, though the latter may also be a part of it. Civilisation consists in ever increasing mutual care and concern.

Adam Smith is famous for his book—*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776), regarded as foundational to economics. Earlier, he had published another seminal book on ethics—*The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* in 1759. He thought that justice and beneficence are two most basic virtues. Justice is avoiding hurt or injury to others and violation of others' personal rights including their right to property and possessions. This is a negative virtue and can be enforced by law. Without justice, a society cannot just function. Beneficence is doing what is good, and includes fellow feeling, generosity, charity, and friendship. This is a positive virtue but cannot be enforced by law. However, it is through this virtue that a society or country advances, and human evolution makes progress. Both the virtues are necessary (Smith 1976: 79–82). However, we also speak of distributive or social justice, which has to be actively promoted by the state for the good of particularly those sections of the society who may be marginalised otherwise. It cannot be left only to the good sense of individuals. The state can and should expedite human evolution and moral progress.

Amartya Sen has argued that development is essentially a process of raising human *capabilities* and not just *commodities* (Sen 1985). He has also emphasised that development meant freedom, and freedom was necessary for improving both individual and collective welfare (Sen 2000). He felt that we should not waste time and effort on determining what is ideally a just society or state, but concentrate on ending manifest cases of injustice,

like poverty, illiteracy, and gross inequality. Development should not only eradicate poverty, but also achieve greater justice and equality.

This reminds us of J C Kumarappa's insightful observation about the long-term central tendency of development to ahimsa or nonviolence. JC Kumarappa (1892–1960) was a close disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and referred to as 'Gandhi's Economist'. He brought out two seminal books, among others, on *Economy of Permanence* in 1945 with a foreword by Gandhi himself, and *Gandhian Economic Thought* in 1951. He gave a systematic expression to Gandhian thought on socio-economic issues. Kumarappa conceived socio-economic development in different stages of ethical progress. The first is Parasitic Economy, where one grew only at the expense of others, involving violence and exploitation. The second stage is Predatory Economy, which involved cheating in an innocuous garb and siphoning off economic surplus of one class or country by another, creating poverty. So, the second stage was also violent, though less so than the first. The third is an Enterprise stage, where the size of the cake is not given but enlarged through a development process, making it possible for all to be better off than before, and one need not impoverish another to enrich himself. There may be some inequality in sharing the increase in the size of the cake, but this stage is less violent than the second. The fourth is a Gregarious Economy, which is a collective economy like a honeybee colony, each working for a common good. In such an economy or commune, however, individuals do not have to lose their individuality and freedom. Its success depends on how equitable the relations are between its members. However, several such groups may emerge in the world, competing for scarce resources. With proper mutual understanding, the competition can lead to reconciliation and mutual satisfaction. The fifth is a Service (*Seva*) Economy,[2] which runs on the basis of altruism providing mutual care and help for the greater good of all. This is morally the most advanced stage.[3] There is no clear demarcation between different stages. Altruism can manifest early in quite a few if not all and need not wait till the end stage. It need not be confined to individuals and can exist at the state level and NGOs in a well-organised and more effective form. The crux of Kumarappa's thesis is that economic development goes together with human and moral development, with reduced violence and increasing harmony, even between countries.

Quite a few may legitimately question if there is really less violence today in the world than in the historical past. The world seems to be at the edge of a nuclear catastrophe now, becoming more vulnerable than ever—more due to human failure than natural factors. Limitless greed of man has also led to unprecedented environmental crises. It may be asked if there is any concrete evidence of moral progress in human beings. Mahatma Gandhi disagreed that economic growth after the industrial revolution has led to any moral progress. In fact, he claimed that it has led to a fall in the economic status of the mass of workers and moral decline in general.[4] However, he did not disagree with Kumarappa's thesis of a long-term decline in the incidence of violence. His emphasis was on a structural break from the past after the industrial revolution.

This led Bhanoji Rao to term the moral decline as an evolutionary failure (Rao 2017). This failure is at both the individual and the societal or national levels. It consists in 'giving a go by to the conscious pursuit of truth and nonviolence'. Instead of a moral evolution

[2] This is not a Service economy in the narrow sense of having a dominant service sector. Service here means *Seva* or altruistic help to others.

[3] This paragraph draws from the author's summary of Kumarappa's thoughts as in Nadkarni (2014:95–96).

[4] See Chapter VI on 'Civilisation' in his *Hind Swaraj* (Parel Ed. 2010).

in terms of mutual care, the evolution now seems to be reverting to the Darwinian form of subjugation of the weak by the strong and survival of the fittest, not only between nations but also between the rich and the poor, and between businesses within countries, evident from increasing inequality (Ibid: 88). Morals are meant essentially for happiness of all, but is this happiness increasing or on the decline?

In terms of a few criteria of moral progress

There is no doubt that the world has now become more vulnerable than ever before to both nuclear and environmental catastrophes, and economic inequality has also significantly increased as pointed out by Piketty (2017) and others. It may also be justifiable to interpret this as evidence of failure of moral evolution. Nonetheless, there is also a bright side to the emerging human situation. The immediate aftermath of the industrial revolution was negative and lasted for a long time. The condition of the working class under its immediate impact has been touchingly described in the novels of Charles Dickens and others. However, it started improving in the long term as a result of increasing growth of national income. Research has shown that 'for 135 years since 1820, more than half of the global population lived in extreme poverty. It took another forty years to cut this rate in half, which only happened as recently as in 2001. After this the reduction in poverty accelerated rapidly. In 13 more years, global poverty has halved again.'[5] Regrettably, however, India has been slower than the world as a whole in reducing poverty. In 2011–12, the head-count poverty ratio in India stood at 22%, while the world average was less than half of this. The reduction of poverty in India accelerated only after the Economic Reforms in 1991, which was much later than in China. Poverty was as high as 45.3% even as recently as in 1993–94. There took place an absolute decline in the number of people below poverty line from 404 million in 1993–94 to 270 million in 2011–12 in India.

The long-term reduction in global poverty, in spite of a phenomenal increase in the world population, was made possible by the increase in GDP. However, this was not the only factor. The governments of most countries took unprecedented steps with public support towards poverty reduction in many ways like the programmes to provide employment directly to the poor, providing food security through public distribution systems, health care, and primary education through the state, and stepping up public health programmes reducing mortality rates. Social scientists, political leaders of all parties, and social workers were unanimous in raising an outcry against poverty, and pressurising governments to reduce it. Thus, it was not only an increase in GDP, but moral forces and concern for others also acted significantly to achieve poverty reduction. If poverty is considered as a form of violence against humans, this violence can be said to have considerably declined.

Another important criterion of assessing the level of development of civilisation is the way women are treated. In general, patriarchy has dominated the world, which meant dominance of man over woman. India is no exception to this. The state, particularly after Independence, has been encouraging girls' enrolment in schools and also in higher educational institutions. There has certainly been a considerable improvement in the educational status of women as a result. In India, female literacy was as low as 8.9,

[5] This quotation is from Michail Moatsos: 'Global extreme poverty—Present and past since 1820' (oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/e20f2f1a-en/index.html?itemld=/content/component/e20f2f1a-en downloaded on 6 July, 2022).

and male literacy was 21.2 in 1951. In 2011, these rates rose, respectively, to 65.5 and 82.1%. Female literacy has significantly improved, but the gap is still there. Another poignant point is the adverse gender-ratio, which already low in 1951 at 946, further fell to 927 by 1991, but has been improving thereafter, rising to 943 in 2011—still lower than in 1951. The girl child is relatively neglected, not only in education but even in health care. This reflects rather badly on the status of moral evolution in India.

Historically, women were confined to their homes and were much less educated than men, though there were also glorious exceptions to this. At a time when the conservative *Manusmriti* dominated India, there is an instance of a very learned woman being the referee in the famous debate between Adi Shankaracharya and Mandanamishra in the eighth century CE. It was the former who suggested that the wife of the latter be the final judge about who won the debate. She was not only very learned, but very impartial too, and after days of debate, she finally declared Adi Shankaracharya as the winner—not her husband. In the Bhakti movements of India during the medieval period, there were several eminent women saint-cum-poets like Andal in Tamil Nadu, Akka Mahadevi in Karnataka, Janabai in Maharashtra, Meerabai in Rajasthan, and Lalla (also known as Lal Ded) and Rupa Bhavani in Kashmir. Even in the political arena, several queens became famous for their valour and public good during the medieval period, like Chand Bibi of Bijapur, and Rani Abbakka Chowta of Ullal, both in Karnataka, Ahilyabai Holkar of Malwa, Razia Sultana of Delhi Sultanate, Rani Durgavati of Gondawana, the Kakatiya queen Rani Rudrama Devi, and Tarabai Bhosle who defended the Maratha empire against the Mughals. Many more shining stars emerged from among women during the British period and the freedom struggle, and still more after independence in various public fields of activity. The 'glass ceiling' appears to have been broken, though much remains to be achieved in securing gender equality. Spheres which were traditionally a male prerogative, are open to women now, both in India and the world. The discrimination against women in rights to immoveable property has also been removed. The significant progress in women's situation during the twentieth century can be seen from the fact that though the British Parliament dates back to 1265 CE, it was only in 1918 that British women won the right to vote, after a struggle by them courting imprisonments. Though the fathers of the US Constitution declared in 1776 that 'all men are equal', women won suffrage only in 1920 after fighting for it (Altekar 1999: 178,192). Moral evolution has not been smooth, and whatever equality and rights have been obtained, they have been the result of hard struggles for them.

The manner in which children are raised to reach their full human potential is an important measure of civilisational progress and human evolution. It is the duty of the state to help the children overcome the limitations faced by their parents. Child labour is a major obstacle in reaching their full human potential. As per the World Report on Child Labour 2013, globally, 17% of the children were engaged in child labour. Due to the state banning child labour and encouraging enrolment of children in schools, this proportion declined to 10% at the beginning of 2020, according to the UNICEF Report 2021. However, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closing down of many schools, and the situation deteriorated. India has taken up several effective measures to curb child labour and encourage their schooling. The Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986, as amended in 2016, prohibits employment of children below the age of 14 years even as domestic help, and of adolescents (between 14 and 18 years) in any hazardous occupation including mining. To encourage the schooling of children even from poor households, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 was passed, under which even a private school has to admit neighbourhood children from poor families, and their

fees will be paid by the government. As a further incentive, free lunches are given to children at government schools. Even then, according to the 2011 Census, 10 million children in the age group of 5–14 years out of 260 million children (or 3.8%) in India were engaged in child labour. The actual proportion may be higher because child labour is often hidden. It is still an unfinished task, as in the case of ending poverty and gender inequality.

An important measure of civilisational progress is the success of what may be referred to as broad-basing. It is the opposite of marginalisation. Broad-basing takes place when more and more social groups that were formerly marginalised or oppressed enter the mainstream social, political, and economic life to derive the same advantage as the groups already in the mainstream. Under broad-basing, the powerless also tend to become empowered. There can be two types of broad-basing: moderate and the real. Under moderate broad-basing, the lower half of the population becomes significantly better off than in the past in absolute terms, overcoming poverty and deprivation, but they are relatively still at a lower level in various dimensions of human development than the upper half. Under real broad-basing, even the relative disparities are drastically reduced and there is a significant progress in equality of opportunities, there being no marginalised groups any longer. The society then becomes less polarised and more democratic. The broad-basing process often occurs alongside and in response to the opposite process of marginalisation. The task of a student of socio-economic change is to know which of the two opposite processes—broad-basing and marginalisation—is dominating, and if the society is becoming only moderately broad-based or really so.

If we take a long-term view of moral progress towards broad-basing during the last century or more, it has been considerable. I may mention a few important developments: shift to universal suffrage from the one based on wealth, gender, or race; shift to progressive taxation, adoption of welfare state measures in many countries, abolition of slavery and untouchability, and dismantling of colonialism. India has been very much part of this process. In his latest book, Thomas Piketty has observed that 'no western country has ever implemented social or racial quotas in a way comparable to what has been done in India' (2022:194), and that in India, 'the inequalities separating scheduled castes from the rest of the population remain very strong, but they have been reduced significantly since 1950—more significantly for example, than the inequalities between Blacks and Whites in the United States' (ibid: 191).

I had written about this broad-basing process mainly in relation to Dalits in India earlier (Nadkarni 1997) and took up the theme again in a much broader perspective recently, taking into account the other marginalised groups too (Nadkarni Ed. 2020). The conclusion was that the marginalised groups have gained significantly in absolute terms, but relatively the task of bridging the gap between them and those in the mainstream power structure is still unfinished.[6] Moral progress achieved so far, though considerable, is inadequate.

[6] The latest finding, however, is that during 2014–2019, the bottom 5% of the rural households experienced a decline in real incomes by 5.5% per annum, though all urban households gained in real income. In relative terms, the bottom deciles *both* in rural and urban areas suffered a decline in their income shares. (Sahasranaman and Kumar 2022: 26).

The challenge of artificial intelligence

Even before the goal of equality is achieved and poverty totally eradicated, we will be facing a new challenge—even a new threat—of rendering a large number of humans useless and mass unemployment, and even concentration of power in the hands of a few. This is due to a steadily increasing dominance of artificial intelligence (AI) machines, taking over many human activities. Tedious, repetitive, and risky jobs will be given to such machines to begin with; but soon, more and more human jobs may be handed over to them, as these machines can handle them more cost-effectively and efficiently. It may be similar to what the industrial revolution (IR) did, but while the IR mechanised body labour, AI is mechanising intelligence itself. Following IR, the service sector based on intelligence/information developed, which created more jobs than those displaced by IR, but when intelligence itself is mechanised, how will people get jobs? AI is already present in our lives significantly in the form of smart phones, transport, marketing, security, face recognition, medical diagnosis, education, and even in office work and personal assistance. So far, they may have shown a benign face, such as their use in artificial limbs for those who have lost their limbs. Nonetheless, what makes them a potential threat is the possibility of their being more intelligent than humans, with their intelligence devoid of moral instinct. That AI can outsmart the most intelligent humans was proved long back in 1996, when the Chess Grand Master Gary Kasparov lost to Machine Deep Blue (Coeckelberg 2020:1). Yuval Noah Harari has warned that a widespread use of AI can make vast number of people not only unemployed but also unemployable (2017:379). He further says that since we do not know what the job market will look like in 2030 or 2040, 'we have no idea of what we have to teach our kids, and most of what they currently learn at school will probably be irrelevant' (ibid:380). We may not need huge armies in future. Even in many other spheres, robots may be employed. Countries may compete with each other in increasing the deployment of AI as being cheaper, safer, and more efficient, even if it makes many humans jobless.

AI may not of course make all humans redundant. Machines may never match human creativity, vision, and perspective. Even if machines can be used to create more sophisticated machines, creative human interventions may be indispensable. Moreover, morality, wisdom, kindness, and compassion are essentially human virtues, and if AI machines have to possess them, they can be programmed into the machines by humans alone. But who knows if kindness and moral wisdom will actually prevail over considerations of economy and efficiency? There is a distinct possibility of all power being concentrated in the hands of a few elites in charge of AI, and of large corporations in control of widespread AI dominating the economy, polity, and even society. This may create unprecedented inequality in the world, reversing the broad-basing that has taken place thus far. The famous scientist, Stephen Hawking is said to have warned in 2017, that the creation of AI could be the worst event in the history of civilisation (Coeckelbergh 2020: 21).

Can we control the onslaught of AI and limit it in such a way that it minimises the harm to humanity? If countries vie with each other for acquiring more power and efficiency through AI, it may not be possible to do so. Though it is desirable to suitably tax multinationals and billionaires to finance welfare programmes, countries have shown reluctance to do so due to the fear of capital flight. A similar reluctance may be shown in controlling AI. However, through international cooperation and agreements, it should be possible to limit the use of AI only to tedious and risky or dangerous jobs. Such attempts may only partially succeed, if at all, requiring compensatory measures to deal with mass unemployment. One of the first such steps can be to institute and provide a basic income to all people, which

must cover not only the bare basic needs of food, clothing and shelter, but also some surplus to pursue creative hobbies and have healthy entertainment, including sports and travel for meeting friends and relatives and see places of interest. Second, all education including higher education and health care should be provided free by the state. Third, to finance the first two measures, necessary taxes have to be imposed on big business enterprises and the wealthy, especially those who make profits from the use of AI. Fourth, the state has to reserve certain avenues of employment for humans—such as arts, music, and sports. Fifth, new avenues of employment for humans have to be found, promoted, and incentivised. Above all, there has to be a moral commitment at both the national and international levels that no humans will be sacrificed at the altar of AI, and all humans have equal opportunities to make their lives meaningful and happy.

Moral evolution does not take place automatically; we have to strive for it consciously and continuously, overcoming many challenges. In this human mission, in which all have to participate, we have to answer a few questions: Is ethics universal or relative? Is ethics only for the common good, or does the individual also matter? Is it bias-free or does it favour only a particular class or gender? How do we deal with ethical dilemmas? We now turn to these issues.

Is ethics universal or relative? Is it free from bias?

Goals of ethics, like being truthful, kind, and just are universal. Ethics is essentially meant for application. It tells how both individuals and institutions including governments have to act in different situations for both individual and common good. There may not be a full agreement on what constitutes good and what constitutes bad. Yet, 'there is more agreement regarding ethics than there is disagreement' (Dutt and Wilber 2010: 5). Ethics is not relative, because its values are accepted by and applicable to all. Cultural differences through practices like untouchability, apartheid, child marriage, and polygamy should not be confused as differences in moral values, since these are *not* moral values. Moral values are universal and hold in all societies, promoting welfare everywhere. In fact, cultural practices may be assessed through moral values.

Mahatma Gandhi considered Satya or commitment to truth, and Ahimsa or nonviolence as the fundamental ethical values meant for all. Between the two, he held Truth as more basic. Yet, each one has to find his or her own truth in the light of circumstances faced. He called his autobiography as *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*.[7] All life is a series of experiments with Truth. Truth or ethics is a set of values, not always mutually consistent under all circumstances. Truth requires that *both* the goal and means are moral, according to Gandhi. Ethics could be relative only in the sense that the context of the moral question and the facts or circumstances of the case are also relevant in ethical decision-making. For example, a few years back, a married woman of Indian origin in Ireland, had a medical problem which required the termination of her pregnancy. Without abortion, there was a danger to her life itself. However, the doctors there did not allow it as, in Ireland, abortion was illegal under any circumstance, and the woman died. The ethics behind the law was that even a foetus was a moral person with a right to life. In not allowing exceptions, it was

[7] For an exposition of Gandhi's approach to ethics, see Iyer(2000), Nadkarni (2014, esp. Ch.1, pp.35-60) and Nadkarni (2022:67-123).

forgotten that ethical choices are relative to the circumstances of the case. Just as holding a falling ball does not negate the law of gravity, choice of one value in a specific case does not negate other values. Nor does it make ethics subjective and whimsical. The point is that following a single ethical principle rigidly and mechanically can amount to fanaticism.

Though Dharma or ethics is for the common good, individual good is also relevant. If we follow ethics, it achieves both the common and the individual good. An individual is the basic unit of the society, and individual rights are also necessary for the common good. For example, without right to life, there would be anarchy and chaos, and no human evolution is possible. Right to freedom, education, work, and health care are necessary as they enable individuals to realise their full human potential, which is good for the society. The right to equal treatment and opportunities is also necessary for the same purpose, and also because without this right, there would be injustice, and justice is absolutely necessary for the common good. The right to property promotes efficiency and prosperity, which is good not only for individuals, but also for the country at large. Rights have a counterpart in duties; Gandhi considered rights and duties as the two faces of the same coin. A good society or state is one where individual rights and common good are mutually reconciled and promoted in harmonious balance with each other.

However, is ethics bias-free in the sense that it serves the interests of all, and not just the interests of a particular class or gender only. Is there, for example, bourgeois ethics or proletarian ethics? Or patriarchal ethics? We cannot rule this out. It is necessary therefore that moral values be subjected to scrutiny by professional ethicists on an objective basis, keeping in mind the interests of all. That is how the Golden Rules of ethics emerged in almost all religions, which are to the advantage of all without bias. The Bhagavad Gita, for example states: 'The one who judges others' pleasures and pain by the same standard which he (or she) applies to himself (or herself), such yogi is the highest' (Ch.6, verse 32). The Bible says: 'Do unto others as you would have them to do unto you'. The Tamil Classic, *Kural*, by Tiruvalluvar, says: 'Do not do to others what you know hurts yourself.' To arrive at what is just, John Rawls conducts a thought experiment by constructing an 'original position' in which all people come under a 'veil of ignorance', forgetting their socio-economic backgrounds and even gender, which differentiate human beings from one another. Under this situation, Rawls derives two principles of justice: '(a) Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of basic liberties, which is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all; and (b) social and economic inequalities should satisfy two conditions: first, they are attached to offices and positions open to all, under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle)'. (Rawls 2001:42–43).[8]

Some clarifications are needed here. Mere selflessness does not make a human ethical. Terrorists are terribly selfless, prepared to lay down their life. However, both their goal and means are wrong and immoral, while ethics requires both to be moral. Secondly, mere religiosity or piety is not ethics. Religious fanaticism is narrow-minded and potentially violent.

Owing to the complexity of ethics and its application, an ethicist should never think as having a monopoly of truth. An ethicist should have an open mind, and willingness to discuss differences in views and related circumstances. A majority is not necessarily a

[8] For selected further readings on ethics, see Brenkert and Beauchamp (Eds.) (2010), Cahn and Markie (Eds.)(1998), Gasper (2004), MacIntyre (2010), Nadkarni (2014), Nadkarni(2018), Nadkarni (2022), Rawls (2001), Richter (2008), Sandel (2009), Sen (1987), and Sen (2009).

criterion, since a majority view or even a consensus is not always correct. This is true even in science. The majority or even the consensus view in Europe at the time of Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) was that the earth was flat and the Sun circled round it.

Ethics applied to economics, environment, and politics

The ideal of justice, equity, or fairness guides all social sciences including economics. Unless there is ethics in economics, the latter is hardly useful. Economics is not just shoppers' guide to maximising utility or a business-person's guide to maximise profits. As Amartya Sen pointed out, 'distancing economics from ethics has impoverished welfare economics and weakened the very basis of a good deal of descriptive and predictive economics' (Sen 1987:78). The earliest attempt in recorded human history at integrating ethics into economics can be traced to the Rig Veda. The relevant verse (10.31.2) says:

Parichin marto dravinam mamanyād ṛtasya pathā namasā vivāset ।
Uta svena kratunā samvadeta shreyāmsam daksham manasā jagrabhyāt ॥

It means: Let a man (or woman) ponder well on wealth and earn it through the path of moral law or truth, and with humility take counsel with own conscience, and heartily enjoy justifiable prosperity. Wealth should be earned only in morally acceptable ways, and with humility, because it is earned in society with its cooperation. The Rigveda goes further in the verse (10.117.6) and says that the earnings should be shared with the needy; not doing so and enjoying the earnings exclusively alone, is a sin.[9] Much more recently, even before Amartya Sen, Mahatma Gandhi asserted in 1941: 'Economics which departs from or is opposed to ethics is no good and should be renounced' (CWMG Vol. 81:436). We cannot sacrifice ethics for the sake of economics, according to Gandhi.[10] Thanks to economists like Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq, the world has now been consciously moving from narrow economism to human development as its goal.

Ethics has much to do with environmental problems also. Modern economic growth has been destroying environment both by indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, and using it as a waste-bin pushing effluents and emissions into it on an unsustainable scale. This in turn has caused the problem of climate change, resulting in irregular rainfall, and increased incidence of floods and droughts. This is a conspicuous symptom of moral failure. It is also a symptom of gross irrationality, showing no concern for humankind's own future. I quote from *Parisara-nīti-śatakam* on environmental ethics (verses 2&3) (Nadkarni 2022: 3):

"The Earth is our only place, where we can live and flourish.
It is mankind's obligation to protect it and cherish.
This is a place filled with beauty, our charming home surely.
What right do humans have to vandalise and render it ugly?".

[9] Based on this principle, Mahatma Gandhi developed the idea of Trusteeship, whereby the wealthy hold their wealth as a trust for promoting societal welfare. He recommended taxing the excess wealth if the rich do not do so.

[10] For a more detailed analysis of why and how ethics is to be integrated into economics, see Nadkarni (2018), and of the relationship between ethics and economics in general, see Dutt and Wilber (2010), Hausman and McPherson (1996), and Sen (1987).

We have been trying various remedies for solving environmental problems, which are mainly technological in nature, like shifting to green fuel as far as possible, treatment of effluents and emissions, and recycling. These solutions though necessary, have not gone far enough in tackling the environmental crisis. The warming of the earth's climate is yet to be halted, let alone reversed. Gandhi suggested the more effective remedy of placing curbs on excessive consumerism, producing durable goods for a long life instead of use-and-throw goods, using labour-intensive instead of capital- and energy intensive goods, and producing more for local markets with local resources, thus reducing transport costs and promoting a decentralised and energy-saving economy.

Human beings live in a society and also in a polity. A set of human rights and duties guides human behaviour in it, not only for the individual good but also the common good. In fact, an important measure of the moral progress and human evolution lies in the extent to which human rights and duties are respected. Two types of rights are distinguished: Negative rights (right to life, liberty, property, equal treatment in law) and Positive rights (to education, food, clothing, shelter). The negative rights are more basic, but meaningless in the absence of positive rights. There needs to be no conflict between the two types of rights. One more point about the negative rights is that they are not absolute. When I exercise my rights, I have to see that others are not harmed in the process, however important I may be. However, these rights are also universal, all human beings enjoying them. They transcend differences in races, religions, and nationalities. In this sense, they are not relative.

Human rights are respected most in a democracy rather than in any other form of government, but it is not enough to be a procedural democracy. Democracy should be substantive too. Even dictatorial regimes may follow procedures of democracy formally, but do not do so in substance. Freedom is the essence of democracy. Since everyone is entitled to freedom, it is automatically everyone's duty to respect others' freedom too. Democracy is not jungle-raj where strong animals can freely prey upon the weak. In the very concept that *all* have freedom, there is both the concept of responsibility and of equality. Freedom is necessary to realise full human potential, but poverty and deprivation significantly restrict freedom. A good government has to ensure that all have adequate and inexpensive access to education, health care, and equal opportunities for them to realise their potential. This is possible only in a democracy. There arise differences in viewpoints and interests in a democracy, but to remain as a democracy, it has to arrive at decisions based on public discussion. There should be no recourse to violence to settle differences in a democracy. Actual working of a democracy may not conform to this ideal, but an ideal democracy is worth striving for, as it is morally the most evolved form of polity and society. I quote:

> 'An ideal king is obtained only through good fortune; but an ideal democracy is realised through effort alone.' (Nadkarni 2022: verse 26, p. 279).
> 'Goals of democracy may be difficult to realize, though raising happiness is their intent; but it is in their achievement that there is human fulfilment.' (Ibid: verse 108, p. 325).

Ethical Dilemmas and Decision Making.

Even when one is honestly committed to ethics, ethical dilemmas can often arise making decision-taking difficult. An ethical dilemma is not a conflict between the ethical and the unethical; the choice here is clear. It is also not just a conflict between self-interest and social or common good; even here the choice may be clear though difficult to implement with self-interest asserting more forcefully. An ethical dilemma arises when one set of ethical values conflicts with another, or one moral duty conflicts with another. Here, the choice

itself is not clear and straightforward, and thorough thinking and even professional analysis may be necessary to resolve the issue. An interesting example of an ethical dilemma is given by a story in the Mahābhārata. A rishi was sitting in front of his forest ashram, when a man came running, and said that he was being pursued by a robber who might even kill him. He requested the rishi to mislead the robber if he asked which way he went, and the robber would believe whatever the rishi said. Then, the man ran away in some direction. Soon the robber came there and asked the rishi which way the man went. The rishi was in an ethical dilemma. However, he thought truth should be told as he always did and told the robber the direction in which the man went. The robber caught hold of the man, killed him, and fled taking whatever valuables he had. The Mahabharata says that the rishi incurred the greater sin of causing the murder of an innocent man, more serious than the sin of lying. The moral of the story is not that telling truth is subject to expediency, but when an ethical dilemma is faced, one should try to assess which choice does greater harm and avoid it. Ethical dilemmas can arise at both the individual and the institutional or state level. They can cover economic, social, political, legal issues, and even medical treatment and science research. I will briefly mention a few of them here.

Often dilemmas are resolved not by accepting one value and abandoning another, or by preferring the interests of some and sacrificing those of others, but by reconciling both with each other. In a democracy, the interests of the majority may tend to be served, while those of the minority may be undermined. Hence the utilitarian principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' is problematic. Even in a democracy, every individual is important, having human rights. A development project may benefit many but displace and deprive a few. Just because it benefits a bigger number of people, the project cannot be accepted, unless all those deprived are duly compensated and rehabilitated so that they are not worse off and are enabled to share the benefits of the project. A token compensation cannot be acceptable, which does not prevent them from becoming worse off than before. If it is not possible for the project to meet this condition, it should be clearly abandoned.

Economists and environmentalists are well aware of the conflict between economic growth and protection of environment. There has been an effort to resolve this conflict through what is now popularly known as sustainable development. Environmental economists have developed various tools of evaluating environmental losses and benefits, on the basis of which projects can be selected or abandoned. Unfortunately, most political leaders are short-sighted, and gain from development projects. They try to influence or even avoid cost–benefit evaluation of projects, so that they are somehow accepted. Another difficulty is when a forest that is a hotspot of biodiversity is involved, it may not be possible to quantify its value, but if it is irreplaceable and valuable, the project should be abandoned for good. Such forests have as much intrinsic value as the Taj Mahal, or the Ajanta and Ellora caves, and cannot be sacrificed under pressure of development politics. Saving forests has assumed unprecedented urgency now because of the climate change.

Another example of a moral dilemma is the alleged conflict between reservation and open merit in admissions to colleges and employment. Marginalised social groups have suffered from deprivation of opportunities for centuries, which can be redressed only through reservation or positive discrimination. However, no country can progress if the bright and talented are ignored. The conflict was resolved by a Supreme Court decision to put a ceiling on the total reservation at 50%, so that the remaining 50% is open to merit-based selection. It should not be forgotten that the castes eligible for reservation can compete with the rest in the open merit pool also. The merit seats are open to all. So, the Supreme Court decision appears to be most reasonable.

Finally, though Mahatma Gandhi suggested listening to one's 'Inner Voice' to resolve ethical conflicts, it does not seem objective or scientific. We cannot leave the task to religious leaders alone, though religion has historically rendered a valuable service by spreading ethical consciousness. Let the spiritual and religious Gurus continue this noble work. However, the problem with religion is that it is sectarian, and ethics is universal. We cannot expect state leaders and corporate management in a secular state to seek the advice of religious leaders. Moreover, the world is becoming more and more complex, replete with ethical dilemmas, which are beyond traditional spiritual leaders. We need secular professionalism in ethics as a discipline. This requires developing a trained cadre of ethicists with expertise in ethical decision-making, as also research on ethical issues. I suggest therefore that ISEC may start a Centre for Ethics Studies. It will be a pioneering step. Ethics is a secular social discipline and can fit well into the ethos of ISEC. The centre can promote skills in making ethical decision-making, spread awareness even in general public about ethical questions in policy making, and promote informed debate. Its scope need not be confined to India. Within the country, it can conduct experiments to assess the state of ethical development. Ethical development constitutes a major part of personality and leadership development, to which the proposed centre can contribute. Human evolution is an unfinished task and needs assistance in advancing further through the spread of ethical consciousness and professionalism.

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