

Why Ethics ?

Prof. KMP Menon*

Why should we behave Ethically? This question which was put to his hearers by Socrates in ancient Greece has not yet been answered satisfactorily by Western Philosophy. In order to get at the right answer, there has been much thought and discussion. Plato was concerned with the question. He explained the need for the ethical conduct and the ill effects of doing wrong. Nichomacheaus, the son of Plato wrote down in the form of notes contributing his own thoughts to the discussions. Modern theorizing about public policy have their roots in 'Nicomachean Ethics'. Public Policy is such a vast area comprising all aspects of the society. Those in charge of making policy and of administration have implicitly or explicitly accepted norms laid down long ago.

The spread of Christianity and indeed Islam gave answers based on religion – to the old question of why we should behave ethically. Judaism of course had its own ethical norms. In short, the Hebraic Religions has answers which pre-empted independent enquiry into the need for ethics. Saying this is not to belittle their contributions to ethical

concerns and conduct; In fact, quite to the contrary. The so –called 'dark ages' of Europe would have been much darker without them. It was after the Renaissance, that the Ethics as the permeating solvent of Public Policy again became noticeable. The Equality of all Men(at birth anyway), the perfect ability of our earthly home, are some items that illustrate the resurgence of Plato's paradigm.

The Utilitarian's and incipient economists were motivated by the need to 'do good'. An ethical plank for Public Policy was their aim. Jeremy Bentham's ideal of the greatest good of the greatest number is often remembered as an ethical public policy goal. However, there is a difference of detail between Platos' ethical public policy goals and that of the utilitarians Plato considered Public Policy the fit instrument to make citizens happy and therefore better human beings; For the Englishmen goodness comprised happiness which meant material prosperity if not freedom from want. During the two thousand and odd years since Plato, the world had changed from the philosophic era to the commercial era of civilization.

* The author is a writer whose interests range over a variety of subjects. He is a Scholar of Philosophy, Fine Arts, History and Economics. He can be contacted at menonkmp@gmail.com

It was only in the twentieth century that European thinkers came to grips with the unanswered question of why ethics? One was Wittgenstein, the other, Schweitzer. Earlier, Immanuel Kant had also taken up ethics for examination. His ‘categorical imperative’ is a command which men get in various situations which requires them to behave ethically. Schweitzer was a musician and theologian, who had insights into ethics. His ‘reverence for life’ concept comes very close to Hindu ideals and concepts. Wittgenstein was an aeronautical engineer, school master and Linguist and a misfit generally. But his contribution to linguistics and philosophy is a great forward step in human thought.

The European philosophers came to realize that unlike other subjects such as liberal arts or science taught in the universities, the subject of ethics just could not be built up on the basis of empiricism or Cartesian logic. Ethics was to be understood only through ‘Intuition’ a human faculty albeit imperfectly explored. As to the question of why we should be ethical or moral remains unanswered. There was no Theoretical underpinning to be obtained from a morally neutral world whether natural, material or indeed the world of thought.

No wonder that one comes to feel like the aspirant in Fitzgerald’s poem,

*“Myself when young, did eagerly frequent
Doctor and saint and heard great argument
About it and about and evermore
Came out by that same door as in I went”*

The need for Ethics is not explainable outside religion. As the French Savant Bachelard pointed out in another context, progress seems to be blocked by an ‘epistemological obstacle’ Indian epistemology with its concept of all knowledge being part of either APARA VIDYA or PARAVIDYA can give us an answer to the old question of why we should act morally.

At this point let us pause to reflect on what we mean by the words, epistemology. Aparavidya and Paravidya.

Epistemology is our understanding of learning, of the nature of knowledge. Itself. It is our approach to knowledge.

Aparavidya is empirical knowledge which is objective. It is accessible to anyone. It is amenable to simple experimentation. It can be explained with the logicity of words.

Paravidya is knowledge of a higher order. It comes from above. It needs inspiration to receive it. Being subjective, it cannot be analysed with objectivity.

Ancient Indian Epistemology gives due credit to Paravidya TRUTH, BEAUTY and GOODNESS all important abstract qualities belong to it’s realm.

To be continued in the next issue.



Latin Phrase :

*“Ex Orient : Lux” A popular phrase meaning -
From the East comes light, that is
Knowledge.*