



## Tilak's Notion of Karma and Dharma

*Anupama Tripathy*

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy MSCB University, Baripada, Mayurbhanj, Odisha  
ID: anupamatripathy4444@gmail.com

### Abstract

The human being in the aboriginal condition behaved according to the particular frame of mind ruling at the time. But when he later on found out that such unrestricted behaviour was not beneficial on the whole, he came to the definite conclusion that it was in the best interests of everybody to lay down and observe certain restrictions on the self-inspired actions of the organs, and every human being began to observe these limitations, which have gained ground on account of general acceptance (sistacara). When such limitations grew in number, they formed themselves into a code. In defining the word 'dharma' as "codanulaksanarthodharmah", only the fact of such restrictions having been dictated by these law-givers has been taken into account. Tilak has referred to some western thinkers regarding this issue. Sidgwick decides questions of morality, where there are doubts as to what is doable and what not-doable, by the rule of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Tilak has given so many examples of ethical imperatives which are ethically sound as moral principles.

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Tilak has given so many examples of ethical imperatives which are ethically sound as moral principles but in practice these are not conducive to follow. Nararadasyas to Suka in the Santiparva on the authority of Sanatakumar, "Speaking the truth is the proper thing; but rather than truth, speak that which will lead to the welfare of all; because, that in which the highest welfare of all consists in my opinion the real Truth".<sup>2</sup> Hence Lokasangraha is the ethical paradigm for determining our duty and non-duty in a given situation. All the Sastras say that one who bears false witness on such or similar occasions, goes to hell personally, and also sends to the same place seven or more of his ancestors.<sup>3</sup> But what are we going to do when, as in the illustration of the highway robbers given above from the Karma-parva, speaking the truth will lead to innocent persons being unnecessarily killed? This puzzling question leads to moral dilemma and this is the cause of Arjuna's confusion in the battlefield as to fight or not to fight; and by the test of that principle he has ultimately laid down that "We do not think that truth ought always to be told to children, or madmen, or invalids, or by advocates; and we are not sure that we are bound to tell it to enemies or robbers, or even to persons who ask questions which they know they have no right to ask if a mere refusal to answer would practically reveal an important secret".<sup>4</sup> Green who has considered the subject of Ethics from the metaphysical point of view definitely says with reference to such occasions, that in these cases the principles of Ethics do not satisfy the doubts of men; and ultimately comes to the conclusion that: "A true moral Philosophy does not recognise any value in conformity to the universal rule, simply as such, but only in that which ordinarily issues in such conformity, viz., the readiness to sacrifice every lower inclination in the desire to do right for the sake of doing it."<sup>5</sup> It is true that our religious texts say that "There is no sin in speaking the untruth on the following five occasions, namely, if in joke or while speaking with women or at the time of marriage, or if your life is in anger, or for protecting your own property."<sup>6</sup> But that does not mean that one must always speak the untruth in speaking with women, and these exceptions are to be understood in the same way in the Mahabharata, as those mentioned by Sidgwick with reference to children or madmen or invalids. It is true that where there is a conflict between verbal truth and practical truth. Verbal truth is truthful speech and practical truth is the benefit of humanity. It is the practical situation that determines moral paradigm of telling truth or lie. Tilak has referred one instance from Mahabharata explaining the contextual applicability of moral paradigm. Arjuna had made a vow that he would immediately behead any person who asked him to surrender his Gandiva bow to another. Later on, when Karna had defeated Yudhisthira in the war, and Yudhisthira naturally said to Arjuna in despair: "what has been the use of your Gandiva bow to us? Throw it away from your hands", Arjuna rose, sword in hand, to behead Yudhisthira. But as Sri Krishna was near him at the time, he critically expounded to him the religion of Truth from the philosophical point of view and said to him: "You are a fool, you do not understand the subtle points of morality, and you must learn them from your elders. If you wish only to be true to your vow, then deprecate Yudhisthira, because for respectable persons, deprecation is as painful as death". Then Lord Krishna saved Arjuna from murdering Yudhisthira which he would have thoughtlessly committed as has been stated in the Karnaparva.<sup>7</sup> Hence it is difficult to explain how to recognise these subtle exceptions. In the Bhagavat Gita the warrior-religion has been pronounced to be superior to the law of fraternity. Manu says, "It is better to protect one's Self before protecting one's wife, children or property. Yet noble souls have willingly sacrificed their lives in the fire of duty, in order to obtain something much more permanent than this perishable human body, e.g. for their God or religion, or for the sake of truth, or for acting according to their avowed purpose or sacred vow, or their professed course of conduct, or for protecting their reputation, or for the sake of success, or for the benefit of the entire world. From this it is evident that the prescriptions and prohibitions made by the scriptures are not absolutely constant in a rigorous way. The Bhagavat Gita has given emphasis on dharma or the principle of righteousness. May he be a father or a preceptor or a friend or a son or a priest, may she be a mother, or a wife, if he or she has not behaved according to their own duties based on dharma, they must be punished irrespective of differences. Vyasa has stated in various stories in the Mahabharata, that the various virtues of valour, courage, kindness,

probity, friendship, impartiality etc., are, in addition to their mutual oppositions, also limited by considerations of time and place. Whatever the virtue may be, it is not equally appropriate in all circumstances. Bharthari says that “Courage is a virtue in days of misfortune, forgiveness in days of power, oratory in an assembly, and valour in warfare”. According to Tilak, the Bhagavat Gita is focal about the riddles about what should be done and what should not be done (karmakarma) and what is righteous and what unrighteous (dharma/dharmadharma). The conflict is not between bodily impulses and religious principles but there is an intr-conflict between two principles laid down in the Sastras themselves. The discrimination between the lawful and the unlawful or between the doable and the not-doable becomes an independent science by itself. Tilak has used the word ‘niti-sastra’ denoting the discussion of the questions of righteousness and unrighteousness or what ought to be done and what ought not to be done. In Mahabharata, it is said that “Arthasyapurudasadah, dasas tv arthonakasyacit” i.e. “Man is the servant of wealth [artha], wealth is the servant of nobody”<sup>8</sup> Bhisma and Drona justify their support to Dyuryodhana by enunciating this moral maxim. The Bhagavata Gita says, “Actions performed for the purpose of the yajna, do not create bondage; all other actions have a binding force”<sup>9</sup> is only a repetition of the opinion of the Mimamsa school. There are three types of actions such as, everyday action [nitya], occasional action (naimitika), and acts for a particular purpose (kama). Tilak describes Nitya karma kama as desire-prompted actions; e.g. sacrificial ritual for causing rain or for obtaining a son. Similarly, there are some actions which are objectionable [nisidha karma]. Which actions are everyday actions, which occasional, which desire-prompted and which objectionable has been laid down by our religious treatises. If any person versed in religion is asked whether a particular act performed by a particular person is sinful or virtuous, he will consider whether that particular action is yajnārtha or puruṣārtha or nitya or naimitika or kama or nisidha according to the directions of the Sastras and give his opinion accordingly. Tilak is speaking of the word ‘karma’ as applied to the activities of the moveable and immoveable world. Arjuna should not allow his mind to be disintegrated in this way. A karma yogi should not give up actions even after Self-realisation, but going on performing them while life lasts, in such a way that one does not thereby incur either sin or merit. A Yogi is one who performs action skilfully. When Brahmajñana is attained through self-realisation, the Self-realised man has two paths or paths open before him such as karma sanyasa and karma yoga. Karma sanyasa is the path of abandoning all worldly affairs or actions after Self-realisation, and living like an apathetic person. And the other path is the path of Karma Yoga. It is not advisable to renounce the worldly affairs but continuing to perform them in such a way that they do not create any difficulty in the matter of obtaining Release. Out of these two paths, the first one is also known as the ‘path of Self-realisation [jnana-nistha]. The word ‘dharma’ comes from the root dhr, i.e. to hold or uphold, and all human beings are held together by dharma. That by which the holding together [of all human beings] takes place is dharma”. Therefore, when this dharma ceases to be observed, the binding-ropes of society may be said to have become loose, and when these binding ropes are loosened, society will be in the same position as the planetary system consisting of the Sun and the planets would be in the sky without the binding force of gravitation or as a ship would be on the ocean without a rudder. Vyasa gives the advice that in order that society should not come to an end by reaching such a lamentable state, money (artha) if it has to be acquired, must be acquired by ‘dharma’, that is, without disturbing the arrangement of society; and if the desires, such as the sex impulses (kama) etc. have to be satisfied, that should also be done consistently with ‘dharma’. Tilak is asking the moot question about the possibility of objection that if dharma is accepted as ‘the maintenance of society’ (samaja-dhara) and ‘general welfare’ (sarva-bhuta-hitam), then this view is not different from the views of the materialists because both these principles are outwardly real, that is materialistic. But the response is that while focusing on the maintenance of society as being the chief outward use of dharma, yet we never lose sight of the redemption of the Atman [atma-kalyana] or release [moksa] which is the highest ideal according to the Vedic or all other religious and which is the special feature of our view-point. The maintenance of society and general welfare are not significant benefits of the redemption of the Atman. Tilak gives an example saying that if even our works on medicine maintain that the medical science is a useful science, because it serves as a means for obtaining Release [moksa], by protecting the body, then it is absolutely impossible that our religious writers would divorce the Karma-Yoga-Sastra, which considers the most important subject of the performance of various worldly actions, from the metaphysical philosophy of release. Action which is favourable to our metaphysical betterment as ‘punya’ (religious meritorious), ‘dharma’ (moral), or ‘subha’ (good) and that which is unfavourable to it, as ‘papa’ (sinful), ‘adharmā’ (immoral), or ‘asubha’ (bad). It is for this use that we use the words ‘dharma’ and ‘adharmā’ in place of the words ‘kartavya’ (duty) ‘akartavya’ (non-duty) and ‘karya’ (doable) and ‘akarya’ (non-doable). Even when the worldly affairs or activities in the external world are primarily to be considered, we consider whether or not these activities are conducive to Atmic benefit, simultaneously with considering their external effects. Even the ancient Greek philosophers were of the opinion that one has to take ‘the greatest benefit’ or ‘the climax of virtue’ as the highest ideal of mankind and dealt with the question of the doable and the not-doable from that point of view. Aristotle has said in his book ‘Ethics’ that all these things are included in the Atmic benefit. Yet, Aristotle has not given due importance to Atmic benefit. But that is not the case with our philosophers. Our philosophers laid down that Atmic benefit or metaphysical perfection is the first and the highest duty of every man; that the question of the doable and the not-doable must be considered on the basis that Atmic benefit is more important than any other benefit; and that, it is not proper to consider that question without reference to metaphysical philosophy. Tilak has pointed out that western philosopher Kant has dealt with the question of doable and not-doable. For instance, the German philosopher Kant first wrote the metaphysical book Critique of Pure Reason, that is, of vyavasayatmika (pure) ‘buddhi’ (reason), and subsequently the book Critique of Practical Reason, that is, of vasanatmika (practical) ‘buddhi’ (reason). Tilak is emphasizing on the words ‘kuladharmā’ and ‘kulacara’ as synonymous. The Marathi poet, Moropant has used the word ‘dharma’ in this sense, in describing the incident in the Bharat war when Karna had got out of his chariot for raising the wheel of his chariot which had sunk into the earth, and Arjuna was on the point of killing him. Karna, then said, “it is not the ethics of warfare (yuddhadharma) to kill an enemy when he is unarmed,” and Sri Krishna retaliated by reminding him of the previous incidents of the attempted denuding of Draupadi, or the murder of Abhimanyu, when alone, by a number of persons, and asked him “where was then your dharma?” It is shown that it is morally right to give measure for measure to such immoral persons. The moral rules which have been laid down by revered people (sista) and which have become acceptable on all hands and are known as ‘respectable behaviour’ (sistacara), are, from this point of view, the root of morality (dharma). We find the relevant expressions in Mahabharata and Smṛti treatises such as ‘acaraprabhavadharmah’, i.e. ‘morality springs from custom’ or ‘acarah paramo dharmah’, i.e. ‘rules of custom are the highest morality’ (Manu. 1. 108) The organs of a man urge him to behave like a beast, and his intelligence pulls him in the opposite direction. Those persons who redeem themselves by sacrificing the animal tendencies rampant in their bodies into the fire of this warfare are the true sacrificers, and are indeed blessed. The precept “mahajanayenagatahsapanthah” may be easy to follow for ordinary persons, yet it does not meet all possible contingencies; and thoughtful persons have ultimately to enter into the philosophy of the Atma [atma –jnana] and ascertain the true principle underlying the actions of the

venerable persons (mahajanah), however deep that principle may be. It is for this reason that the advice “nadevacaritam caret”, i.e., “one must not follow only the external actions of Gods” is given. Whatever virtue is taken, we must always take care against excess of it, for such excess turns a virtue into a vice. Charity is a virtue; but “atidanadbalirbaddhah”, i.e., “because of too much charity, Bali was undone.” The Greek philosopher Aristotle has in his book on Ethics prescribed the same test for distinguishing between the doable and the not-doable; and he has clearly shown how every virtue, in excess, is the cause of one’s undoing. If a man speaks too much, he is talkative, if he speaks too little, he is reserved; if he spends too much, he is a spendthrift, if he spends too little, he is a miser; if he is too advanced, he is wayward, and if he lags behind, he is a laggard; if he insists on anything too much, he is obstinate, and if he insists too little, he is fickle; if he is too accommodating, he makes himself cheap, and if he remains stiff, then he is proud. So the balance is to be maintained between the extremes.

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