

Beliefs, Values, and Ethics

Sampat P Singh

Ethics has been a perennial human problem: the gap between action based on reality 'as it is' and ideals 'as it ought to be.' Sometimes, the gap has been more and sometimes less, It has also differed with cultural differences. Presently, all over the world, the problem is considered serious. Earlier, the balance was in favour of collective responsibility: more reliance on norms laid down by religion, laws, and codes of conduct. Now, the emphasis is shifting towards, individual responsibility: ethical choices, compromises, moral courage, transparency, accountability, and self-awareness. This demands education and understanding which is possible through exposure to selected masterpieces of literature and their creative interpretation.

Sampat P Singh was formerly a Professor at the National Institute of Bank Management, Pune, and is currently a Visiting Faculty at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

Leaders Shape Cultures

The contemporary environment displays both: civilizational growth and cultural decline, euphoria on the one hand and *angst* on the other. As growth has been rapid and competition has been turning more acute, cases of unethical practices and absence of values have become serious problems and threaten collapse of organizational life. Culture means beliefs, values, and norms of human conduct. They bind people together, prevent things from falling apart, make organized action possible, and provide stability to social systems.

Cultures may die; culture does not. Repetitions of declines and revivals of culture make history. In the contemporary corporate scenario, development of value statements and codes of conduct have proved more to be instruments of publicity and image building than of cultural revival. That demands change of mindset.

Two elements have proved critical for cultural revival and they are parts of leadership role. One aphorism in this context is: "leaders shape cultures by proving to be exemplars." Or, as Carl Jung put it: "leaders cast their psychological shadows on their followers." The other aphorism is: "leaders are best educators for their organizations." Moulding mindsets means developing certain ideals, beliefs, values, and norms through drum beating and communicating meaning.

Problem in Changing Context

There is at present renewed interest in values and ethics. The old approach was largely regulatory in nature: religious, legal, and political based on ideas of sin, crime, and corruption.

Panza could become its governor. For Don Quixote, all action is inspired action and is in itself the end. He feels he can do something that is appropriate and make his contribution towards development of a good society. He has imagination, he has courage, he is willing to take risks.

This is very well brought out in a dialogue between the two. They are moving forward an everting on a road. Suddenly, Sancho Panza asks: "Master, when do we reach an inn where we can get good food to eat for our dinner and some wine to wash it down the throat, and, then of course a soft bed to sleep in?" Don Quixote says: "Sancho Panza, the pleasure is not in the inn when we reach there; it is here when we are on the road." This contrast is important. In it underlies the philosophical conflict of life. The two mindsets are not opposites but coexistent. As the novel progresses, there is a lot of quixotization of Sancho Panza and panzaisation of Don Quixote.

Most of us are consequentialists. Our actions are motivated actions. But when Don Quixote is asked why he was doing what he was doing; his answer is short, but meaningful. He says: "I know who I am."

When Don Quixote says: "I know who I am," he means he knows the core of his mindset, his personality, his identity, his character. He knows what his beliefs are, what his values are, and what his ethical norms are. Krishna in *Gita* tells Arjuna: "You are Arjuna. If you do not fight, you will no longer remain Arjuna."

Modern times started with scientific discoveries. With the advent of science and technology, faith lost its dominance over human life and reason won the battle. As part of this process, Adam Smith glorified self-interest, Darwin the fight for survival, Bentham the philosophy of hedonism or pleasure and pain, and Freud, the primacy of the will to pleasure. Such developments heralded a cultural revolution. To start with, they inspired Nietzsche to write the most famous sentence of the 19th century: "God is dead." This led Dostoevsky to write in his novel *Karamazov Brothers*, "If God is dead, then everything is permitted."

It is interesting to find that a well-known psychiatrist, Sheldon B Kopp, wrote a few years ago titled: *If you Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him*. Its most interesting interpretation is that Buddha lives, Buddha cannot be killed. God is not dead. Forms may die, the substance does not. This is the spirit behind contemporary thinking, behind getting away from God and religion towards spiritualism.

For example, the *Times of India*, July 14, 1999, carried a write-up based on some interviews on the subject. One respondent said; "I do not believe in God, but I do want to reach out to some principle that can help make sense of life, lead it in a happier and more creative way." Another respondent echoed the same feeling: "the old dogmas and rituals have failed, but the need for direction persists. New forms of spirituality are perhaps replacing devotionalism and observance." And, as one sociologist said as respondent: "The accent shifts to the optimization of the inner resources which have been locked up in negative psychological and social transactions,"

Don Quixote symbolizes the optimization of the inner resources of a human being. Pablo Picasso painted these two famous characters from the world of fiction. It portrays the most popular adventure of Don Quixote when he tries to attack the windmills, which in his imagination were giants. It appears Sancho Panza is trying to argue: "Master, they are not giants, they are windmills." Don Quixote is not convinced. As the story goes, he attacks the windmills and in the process gets badly hurt. On reaching the scene, Sancho says: "Master I told you they are not giants." What is important in interpreting this incident is the fact that when Cervantes wrote this novel, science and technology were emerging as a new force of change and people in general were afraid of new inventions which threatened to conquer nature. That is why Don Quixote tells Sancho right in the beginning: "Sancho, you don't know what shapes the giants take."

However, it needs to be noted that Sancho is a realist, a pragmatist. He can see the

windmills as they are. The debatable point, however, is what is more important: the perception that they are windmills, or, the understanding that science and technology can be constructive as well as destructive; and, the courage to act as a hero and to have the will to fight against what is perhaps a potential threat. Moreover, illusions too are parts of life.

It is this inner feeling, this urge which is bottled up in the human heart like champagne in a bottle waiting to burst out at the slightest push which is important. All great adventurers, entrepreneurs, writers, poets, and artists succeed only because of this extra inner urge to do something meaningful to express themselves, and to defy fatalistic determinism.

In this context, it is interesting to read Sanyukta Panigrahi, the famous Odissi dancer's interview with a journalist abroad towards the end of her life: "You can have knowledge and master the technique and through practice acquire the perfection in dancing including gestures and movements, but to communicate the feeling underlying an *ashtapadi* of Jayadev's *Gita Govinda*, you have to feel it, live it, be it, and then only you can achieve the highest degree of emotional empathy with the audience." It is possible to learn the skill of writing prose, good prose. Is it possible to teach writing poetry, good poetry? In creative work, emotion makes the difference.

The foundation of the inner life of an individual is a set of beliefs. Of course, the concept of belief can be extended to organizations, societies, and to the humanity at large. Generally, beliefs mean one's philosophy of life, which determines, to a large extent, knowingly or unknowingly, the mindset. Is it not interesting to note that it is generally said that human being is a rational animal, but the truth is that we act most of the time emotionally? The fact remains that the human being is most of the time busy rationalizing *post facto* irrational acts. Beliefs are, in most cases, based on myths and not on truths. That is why belief is largely an emotive concept.

Beliefs and Values

Once, when a teacher was talking to his students in the class on the concept of beliefs, a student questioned: "why should one depend on beliefs in this modern age of science? Science proves and establishes truths. Where is the need to believe in myths?" The teacher responded: "do you not believe in anything if it is based on a myth, particularly, if it cannot be proved either way: true or false? Do you know who your father is? And if you know, are you sure he is your father, can it be proved that he is really your father? Or, do you believe in it because you simply believe what your mother says?" How does husband know wife loves him, or, vice versa; or, that someone has really forgiven us? It all depends on belief. Is it easy to imagine what life would be like if we had no beliefs? At the same time, it has to be realized that yesterday's proven truths of science are today's falsehoods. If that were not so, science would not have progressed. Most of the time, we are able to live our lives because our beliefs provide us with inner strength, even when they are based on myths. Even if yesterday's myths were demolished, the human being would need and would invent new myths to maintain sanity. It appears the idea of the family is dying. In the United States, people have already started talking seriously: back to family ties!

We have to believe in many things. All issues in life have two sides. Every idea has its opposite. We are supposed to choose. Clear choice is not always possible. It is not this 'or' that. It is this 'and' that. Life is based on compromises. Our knowledge may assure us what is right and what is wrong, but we can do only what we understand to be good based on a good compromise. Machiavelli called it *virtu* and contrasted it with virtue. We call it wisdom. All this is based on beliefs only.

On this theme, there is a very popular mythological story in ancient literature of India. It is known as the story of *Amruthmanthan*. Based on it, many people believe that life is a churning process. It is this churning process which brings out both the poison and the nectar. It is poison

first and nectar next. It is the two together that make life complete. Humanity needs heroes who have the courage to hold the poison in their throats. Heroism demands courage, courage to go beyond the goals in life, and work for the ideals.

Ideals is also a tricky concept. People generally ask: why talk of ideals? Can they be achieved? The simple answer can be: goals are achieved; ideals are pursued. When ideals are achieved, they no longer remain ideals. The human being cannot be comfortable without some beliefs and some ideals. Therefore, the process of self-development is dominated by a continuous search for a set of beliefs and a set of ideals to live with and live for. It needs to be clearly understood that human needs are not confined to materialistic needs only. Materialistic needs are necessary, not sufficient to make good life possible. Human needs also include ethical needs, aesthetic needs, spiritual needs, and so on.

Ibsen is generally considered the father of modern drama and his most famous play is *A Doll's House*. In the end, when the heroine Nora decides to leave her husband's house and walk into the world outside, there are some interesting dialogues. The husband asks: "Haven't you been happy here?" Nora replies: "No, I have never always happy ... No, only merry. And you have always been so kind to me. But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was father's doll-child; and here the children have been my dolls." Later, the husband says: "Before all else, you are a wife and a mother." Nora replies: "I don't believe that any longer, I believe that, before all else, I am a reasonable human being just as you are or, at all events, that I must try and become one." Beliefs and ideals give meaning to life and make it worth living. Without authentic beliefs and ideals, one begins developing a sense of helplessness and powerlessness and purposelessness.

In the 40s of the 20th century, the ideas of beliefs and ideals were still very popular. Nehru in his *Discovery of India* published in the

40s wrote a separate and full section on 'My Philosophy of Life.' It was almost at the same time that Mulk Raj Anand published *An Apology for Heroism*. And, a few years earlier, Gandhi had written *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. But later, with the explosion of electronic technology and based on that mass media, mass marketing, consumerism, and the entertainment industry, people in general became indifferent towards traditional culture and were getting inclined to take a permissive attitude towards life. Cultural rebellion of the 60s has by now petered out. Life is dialectic. Once again, the ideas of beliefs and ideals are returning with a bang.

Beliefs and values are closely inter-related. We can now talk about values or as they are sometimes called human values. In order to clearly understand the concept of values, we might as well start with its opposite interests.

Modern life is generally understood to be engineered by Pavlovian motivation. All action is based on stimulus from the environment and the human response to it. The Pavlovian dog salivates seeing the bone and later habit also plays its part. What a change! Before science emerged, religion declared that God created man in his own image. It appears some of the modern experimental psychologists have succeeded in transforming the image of God into the image of dog. All human action is considered as means to serve self-interest, organizational interest, societal interest or global interest.

Henry Ford once said that a business that makes nothing but money is a poor kind of business. There is an interesting anecdote cited by another great industrialist of 20th century: Matsushita. One day, as he was standing in his office and looking outside through his window, he saw a street urchin in ragged clothes walking in the street and then stopping at the municipal water tap. After he had washed his face and gulped down enough water, he sat down to relax on the pavement with his face showing a deep sense of contentment. Matsushita writes in his autobiography that this scene made him think for long and then suddenly arrive at his purpose

in life as an industrialist. The boy could get water, and enough of it, because water was easily available to quench his thirst. As a result, he felt satisfied and happy. Life is full of suffering. Industry's purpose is to produce in plenty so that human suffering can be minimized. That day Matsushita decided that whatever he manufactures, he would try to ensure that his product] reaches every home in Japan. Of course, later, he extended his vision to the global market.

Interests play an important part in life. They are necessary to make comfortable living possible. But, they are not sufficient. There is the vital distinction between success and satisfaction. The former relates to the outer or physical aspects of life, whereas the latter relates 'to inner aspects of life. There is something called sublimation in life: movement from empirical to transcendental. From self-interest, the human being wants to move on to self-esteem and from self-esteem to self-fulfillment. One could even use spiritual vocabulary to extend the idea to self-realization. There is an interesting story published in *Katha Stries-2* written by Milind Bokil titled 'Thirsting for Water' in which the lives of two sisters are compared to bring out the distinction between success and satisfaction. But, it must also be noted that the two are not total opposites and, therefore, not mutually exclusive. Of course, one may be constrained by the other.

Ibsen in *A Doll's House* also introduces the distinction very successfully. When the husband says: "Nora, don't you have everything in this house that you need?" She says: "I am not interested in having. I am interested in being, in being myself, in my identity, as a person." She values self-esteem more than self-interest. Values are not mere economic values. There are emotional values too. The latter include compassion, courage, freedom, creativity, justice, and other emotive aspects of life. As against individualism, collective life is also valuable. Concern for others, for nature, for environment, for progress, for peace and order are some other examples of values of life.

Some of the emotional feelings such as patriotism, loyalty, passions, and inner urges of the poets, artists, and scientists are not really dead. Historical path is cyclical. Of course, values and ideals can be eclipsed for sometime, but there is no reason to believe that eclipses can be permanent. Already, 'emotional intelligence' is emerging as a new concept and is becoming popular. The newest is 'spiritual intelligence.' So we now have: IQ, EQ, and SQ. In life, we need balance between imperatives of self and imperatives of environment, self respect and self-interest, sanity of identity and sanity of reality, logic of appropriateness and logic of consequences. All this is very well illustrated in the character of Don Quixote. Commenting on it, James March wrote: he reminds us that "if we trust only when trust is warranted, love only when love is returned, learn only when learning is valuable, we abandon an essential feature of our humanness — our willingness to act in the name of our conception of ourselves regardless of its consequences.*

People in general turn away from the ideas of beliefs and values because oftentimes they are pushed to the extremes. Irawati Karve commenting on the character of Bhishma in *Mahabharata* in her book titled *Yuganta* writes: "He was famed as a man completely unselfish, wise, true to his word — as a man who lived for the good of the clan, and not for himself. And Bhishma was trying his utmost to live up to this role. When a man does something for himself, his actions are performed within certain limits — limits set by the jealous scrutiny of others. But let a man set out to sacrifice himself and do good to others, the normal limits vanish. He can become completely ruthless in carrying out his objectives. The injustices done by the idealists, patriots, saints, and crusaders are far greater than those done by the worst tyrants. Had Bhishma, too, become intoxicated by his own public image? No, we cannot say that he ever got so earned away that he forgot what he was. But having publicly assumed his difficult role and unnecessarily undertaken great responsibilities, he had to play his part to the end."

Beliefs, Values, and Ethics

The bases of all these are: more of emotion and less of reason. Without beliefs, values have no base, and similarly, without beliefs and values, ethics too would have no base. They are all parts of the culture of a society.

Ethics is a very old concept and its meaning has been changing. In simplest terms it means moral conduct for living a 'good' life in a 'good' society. But, it needs to be noted that ethics is a highly elusive, enigmatic, complex, and sensitive concept. In broad terms, it is focused on what we ought to do as compared to what we actually do. In history, we find its first important beginning in the Ten Commandments of Moses and later in *Dhammapada* and *Jataka 'Sitas* of the Buddhists. They, like the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus, focused on the emotional elements: love and compassion, to lay down moral values, concern for others in addition to concern for oneself. The early attempts to fill the human need for the ethical conduct of life were provided by religion. Moses laid down do's and don't's for good conduct in general. Manu laid down more specifically duties and responsibilities of different hierarchical *varnas* in the ancient Indian society with a view to provide order, stability, and continuity; but at the cost of change and progress.

As faith started losing its influence and reason gained supremacy, philosophers started searching for rational justification for morality and to search for the basic principles of ethics, which were independent of religion, culture, and individual beliefs. The earliest famous attempt made by Aristotle argued for individual judgment based on four great virtues: courage, justice, prudence, and temperance; or what we in modern language may call it: ethical autonomy. Acceding to him, ethics demands individual responsibility and moral courage to solve its dilemmas. Later, Mill advocated utilitarian ethics and Kant advocated moral duty. All in all, all these and other philosophical efforts resulted *only* to -disagreements and an objective and humanistic approach to ethics has by now become a 'non-issue.

It may be interesting to also note that as a result of philosophical studies, ethics became a subject of study at the start of modern times in the universities all over the world. This continued right up to the end of the Second World War. After this period, all universities stopped teaching ethics because it did not meet tests of objectivity and absolutism. But, interest in ethics, particularly in business, has once again started picking up.

The Principles and the Practice

We have to first understand that a basic need of the human being is to dream of a society in which justice and fair play are encouraged and suffering is minimized. That demands moral values. There are many levels at which ethics can be understood. One is personal level.

Recently, a very interesting story 'Satyadas' written by Bimal Kar was published in *Katha Series-2*. In the story, a character named Raghunath, running a small shop in a small town, is contented with earning his frugal living. He is religious in outlook and compassionate towards others. One afternoon, when it is raining, an old man, poor vendor of herbs named Satyadas comes to his shop. He is running high temperature. Raghunath provides him food and shelter. In the morning, the visitor is again provided hospitality. He then leaves for another destination leaving behind (may be inadvertently) a pouch containing six gold coins and a ring studded with gems.

Raghunath waits for him for several months to return and then on the persuasion of his wife Jamuna, he sells the contents of the pouch one by one, sets up a bigger shop and builds a comfortable house for himself to live in. He starts life with dignity in the society. One fine day, suddenly, Satyadas makes his appearance. Raghunath is shocked. He is not as hospitable as before. On the contrary, he thinks as if a devil has turned up and wishes that he would leave at the earliest. As Satyadas is about to leave, conscientious Raghunath asks; "did you leave behind something here when you visited last time?" Satyadas says: "I don't know. But God knows everything."

The story ends here leaving Raghunath with a deep sense of guilt and remorse. Where did he go wrong? The sense of guilt is one interpretation. Another is: Satyadas, Raghunath, and Jamuna are all three purely imaginary characters created by the author to portray the three conflicting aspects of a single mind: morality, guilt, and greed. Ethics cannot provide unambiguous principles. In it there are only the conflicts, the paradoxes, and the dilemmas. Solutions lie in individual judgments based on moral clarity and realistic and situational compromises. If the individuals have a high sense of awareness, they can see more clearly what is right and what is wrong and find responsible pragmatic solutions to their ethical dilemmas. For example, turning back to Raghunath, why could he not have the moral courage' to practice transparency and tell Satyadas: "on your previous visit, you left behind some gold coins and a ring. I waited for long for you to return. Only then I sold them to invest in my business and building a house. I want to repay you. Let us work out a repayment schedule."

Jhurnpa Lahiri has become the first Asian to win the most prestigious American literary award for fiction: Pulitzer Prize for the year 2000 for her first collection of short stories: *Interpreter of Maladies*. The title story is very meaningful and demands serious interpretation. Its main character is Mina. She, her husband, and three children, an expatriate family, visit India as tourists. They go to Konark temple and nearby ewes vHth a driver-cum-guide, who also serves a doctor as an interpreter translating the maladies narrated by patients in their local language into the language that the doctor understands.

Mina develops rapport with this triple-role player. As her husband and three children go up the hill to visit the caves, she stays behind; sitting in the car, she inadvertently shares a secret of her life with the interpreter: the second Child, a son, is her son, not her husband's son. Neither her husband nor the child's father knows this fact. She is pained to see her husband treat the child in ignorance as his own son and continue to love her as usual. She asks the

interpreter (translator) of medical maladies to interpret (the hidden meaning of) her ethical malady. Initially he feels lost. Yet, being emotional, he wants to help. Using the easiest route, he thinks of honesty and confession, and, asks her: "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?". Mina is not emotional. She breaks off the rapport and totally withdraws herself to herself.

Mina's case can be compared to that of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Anna had thought and then willfully violated marriage; Mina had acted 'instinctively,' her act of violating marriage was perhaps more because of lapse of 'awareness.' Anna has moral 'clarity' and moral 'courage,' and can, therefore, later say: "vengeance is mine, and I will repay." Though perhaps she had not foreseen that the "eternal error people make is imagining that happiness is the realisation of desires." She is prepared for the consequence and repays pitifully with her life. Mina has already suffered the pain for eight years and may continue to suffer. She never imagined the consequence. She is now confused and morally weak. Human being wants to feel free to 'act' and escape consequential *angst*. She is not prepared to feel responsible and face the 'consequence.' Mina does not have the courage to face the facts. Can she be 'transparent?' This makes her suffer more and more. Her 'secret' is her burden.

For comparison, the third, interesting case of violation of 'marriage' and 'family' is Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House*. Interpretations cannot be unique and final. Generally, Anna Karenina has been interpreted in terms of ethics of 'duty,' and Nora in terms of ethics of 'being.' Mina can be interpreted appropriately in terms of ethics of 'living in bad faith;' she is trying to escape her responsibility. Further, ethics based . on personal and universal values may come in conflict with organizational values and societal values. Is it expected that an individual should leave behind his personal values at home when going out to work, or, ignore societal values in order to work for his organizational values? It is not easy to resolve these conflicts. This theme is very powerfully covered in the 1989

Booker Prize winner novel: Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*.

There is an interesting play titled *Dirty Hands* written by Jean-Paul Sartre. In the play, an old communist leader, defending his action to an accusing young man, says: "How do you cling to your purity, young man? How afraid are you to soil your hands? All right, stay pure! What good will it do? Why did you join us? Purity is an idea for a *yogi* or a monk: to do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at one's sides, wearing kid gloves. Well, - I have dirty hands right up | to the elbow. I plunge them in filth and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can, govern innocently?" There is a difference between moral and amoral pragmatists.

The famous author Machiavelli who advocated exclusive self-interest, duplicity, and craftiness" in certain situations, stated the same idea much earlier. He wanted practical people W' See the world as it is: full of uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity, and competition. He wrote; "How one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live ... for a man who wishes to act, entirely upon his profession of virtue soon meet with what destroys him among so much mat is evil." However, it needs to be added that he did not in general endorse amoral behaviour, nor praise timidity, short-sightedness or 'business-as-usual attitudes. On the contrary, he admired boldness provided it was guided by shrewdness. Trickery or cleverness need not be the first or the last choice; only in some rare situations it becomes the necessary choice.

Elaborating further, he compared lions and foxes. He writes: "the lion cannot defend himself against wares and the fox cannot defend himself against the wolves. Foxes are better equipped to survive and prosper, whereas lions are better equipped for courage and bold action."

Ethical Choices and Compromises

It is really difficult to combine integrity and conflicting responsibilities. We can grasp the concept and have better understanding of it by comparing two famous characters in history and literature.

A few years ago, Girish Karnad wrote the play *Tughlaq*. This king had a grand vision for the future. He wanted to make history. He is often described as 'the wisest fool' only because he failed to achieve anything. He tried many projects, all failed. This is because he lacked moral courage: no beliefs, no values, and no ethics. His personality was without integrity. He said something and did something different. He lacked legitimacy. He always wore a mask. There was total lack of trust between him and his followers. On the other hand, there is the famous old play: Vishakhadatta's *Mudraraksha*&a. In this play, the main character Chanakya too has a grand vision of the future and he succeeds in making history. He used all trickery, deceit, spying, poison girls, and murders. Tughlaq used similar means, but he is despised, whereas Chanakya attracts. The situation demanded and Chanakya dirtied his hands. But, he is even today admired. He had certain values including sacrifice of some of his self-interest for a bigger cause. There was no difference between what he believed, what he said, and what he did. Despite his ruthlessness, people loved him because his personality was authentic, not false. He was a man of character. He used moral courage. In his case, ethical ends justified the dubious means.

Machiavelli is not alone in advocating trickery, deceit, and murders in some situations as means to achieve ends. In ancient China, Sun Tzu covered the same ground in his book: *The Art of War*. In India, we had Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. In modern times, Pareto also used metaphors of the lion and the fox. But, what needs to be noted is that all these writers did not take the extreme stand. Ends justify means sometimes, may be even oftentimes, but not at all times. To say that if one wants to pluck fruits from a tree, what difference does it make whether he uses a straight stick or a crooked stick is at best an expression of gross cynicism. Everything is not fair even in war, love, or business. All that is legal is not necessarily ethically licit. Also, one can, in exceptional cases, be ethically illicit and yet remain trustworthy.

If we go to traditional literature in India, it is difficult to find much purely on ethics. *Dharmashastras* like the Ten Commandments are too authoritarian, prescriptive, and rigid. Buddha's *shila* like Christ's morality is too emotional. Both involve most of the time some amount of suppression and, therefore, come in the way of creativity and boldness. Moreover, they are not substitutes for ethics. That takes us back to beliefs and values. As ethics is understood today and as it was long back defined by the Greeks, right or wrong and good or bad in human conduct is judged by the criteria of contribution towards the development of a 'good life' and a 'good society.' Even famous storybooks like *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesa* are basically treatises on *neetishastra*, illustrating policies for shrewd action to achieve success in life. '*Shanti Pawa*' of *Mahabharata* and *Nitishataka* of Bhritrihari cover good governance.

Ethics does not go very far with laws or codes of conduct. These are bureaucratic approaches. One cannot assert "that which is legal is ethical" and so on. They result more in bypassing than in observance. They fail in implementation. Ethics cannot be prescribed; it can only be practised. And, that demands knowledge, understanding, and ability to 'live it.' But, above all, these are 'development of awareness,' and, 'the art of pragmatic but responsible compromises between ideals and realities of life.' Moreover, ideals also work only when they go with necessary deviations. Ideas such as guilt, connoption or vigilance rob human beings of their moral fibre.

At the same time, it is not possible to justify ethical lapses in terms of day-to-day pressures of life, passing on the buck cannot succeed. The problem is that even after one wins the rat race he still remains a rat. The critical way to work through realities of life is to change oneself and be individually responsible to oneself and to others. Pursuing moral values demands blending three perspectives: character, accountability, and compromise. We play simultaneously more than one role involving conflicting obligations or duties. Compromise is not mere tactics; it is responsibility. The key concepts in organiza-

tional life are transparency and accountability. They are not mere means to achieve some ends but in essence ends in themselves.

The richest source of knowledge and understanding of ethics even today is *Mahabharata*. V S Sukthankar in his lectures *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* writes: "No decalogue has half the influence on human conduct that is exercised by a single drama or a page of narrative." Or, as Ved Vyas himself puts it in the end of *Mahabharata*: "what is found in this epic may be elsewhere; what is not in this epic is nowhere else." Of course, its popularity today is global. Characters like Bhishma, Kama, Draupadi, and Shakuni can be analysed for better understanding of ethics. For example, was Bhishma fair and just to Amba? Was Shakuni justified in resorting to deceit to defeat Yudhisthir in the gambling match? Was Draupadi really lost in the gambling match? There are no unambiguous answers to these questions even today.

After reading the entire *Mahabharata*, one is likely to wonder whether ethical issues are really clear-cut. Are Pandavas fully justified in putting up their claim to rule? Are Kauravas fully unjustified in staking their claim to rule? To some extent both are right, and for the rest both are wrong. In ethics, there are only dilemmas and no clear-cut answers.

The richness of *Mahabharata* in fact lies in its two specialties. First, it contains a large number of very imaginatively developed varied characters. And, the most significant aspect of these characters in the epic is that none of them — from Krishna to Ashwatthama is a perfect hero or a perfect villain. They are all imperfect heroes. Only the degrees of imperfection differ. This unique piece of world literature is, it appears, focused on portrayal of realities of life as a picture of imperfection. Of course, it covers for comparison the perfection too: the *dharma*, a picture of ideals.

Second, the whole story is full of ethical dilemmas. All through, *dharma* is emphasized. Despite this, human beings face ethical choices. Vidura has to choose between right and wrong

when he cautions Pandavas against loss of their lives in the planned fire. Arjuna chooses between wrong and wrong when he decides to fight the war. Krishna chooses between right and right when he decides to support both Pandavas and Kauravas in the war.

Perhaps, the most powerful character in *Mahabharata* is Krishna. In practicing ethics, he represents a unique case. He does not practice self-sacrifice like Bhishma, nor does he show self-righteous obstinacy of Duryodhana. He is a strong proponent of ideals and at the same time a good practitioner of deviations. He commands highest respect. His greatest strength lies in the fact that in certain situations he violates commonly accepted rules of good conduct and he is willing to compromise, not out of weakness, but because of his high moral courage. "

The most important debate on this character has always been on his attitude towards war. In His English translation of the *Bhagavadgita*, Christopher Isherwood, the famous poet writes: "To understand the *Gita* we must first consider what it is, and what it is not. We must consider its setting. When Jesus spoke the words, which are recorded as the Sermon on the Mount, he was talking to a group of followers in the most peaceful atmosphere imaginable and expressing the highest truth of which man's mind is capable, in general terms, without reference to any immediate crisis or problem. On the other hand, Krishna and Arjuna are on a battlefield. Arjuna is a warrior by birth and profession. Krishna is not a hawk; he tries first to avoid the war. If it is not; an escapist either. His view is: 'those who are not prepared to fight and win a war cannot achieve peace.' Krishna convinces Arjuna that if one has to go forward, he must accept the sum of his actions up to that moment and the sum is his *swadharma*. Therefore, Arjuna must fight the war. If he does not, he ceases to be Arjuna. In other words, ethics is basically personal, on the one hand, and situational, on the other. Absolutism in ethics plays a limited role. Of course, if one has no idea of a straight line, it will be difficult for him to understand the crooked line or even the difference between

more crooked or less crooked. In practice, relativism is the key to solve ethical dilemmas. Ethical choices are rarely between right and wrong. Oftentimes, they are between right and right; both Pandavas and Kauravas to a large extent, right. Sometimes, the choice can also be between wrong and wrong. Brecht in his play *The Life of Galileo* writes: "Taking obstacles into account, the shortest line between two points may be a crooked one." Sometimes the choice is between bad and bad. All means to escape are justified in case of a prisoner of war.

It is reported that Nietzsche once said: 'if the human being knows 'why,' he will do the thing 'somehow' even if he does not have the 'knowhow.' Ethical choices are oftentimes complicated and urgent and involve the painful issue of personal integrity and moral identity: Who am I? In an organization, one has to consider what it stands for, what values guide it, how people work together, and how they define themselves as a human organization. Also, there are problems of network of relationships and network of managerial responsibilities, and, conflicts between responsibilities and personal and organizational obligations.

There is the interesting example of 'the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. He was a successful king having a strong sense of his inner self and at the same time pragmatic enough to face the big problems of his empire. He looked both at the urgent tasks of the moment and at the larger context of life which he wanted to live. He had his own image of 'a good person' and 'a good life.'

Balance and compromise are difficult to practise. The general tendency is to fall victim to the tyranny of "either/or." Genius lies in practicing the wisdom of "and." In other words, pragmatic idealism. Collins and Porras in their book *Built to Last* comparing Ford and GM write: "Ford has been much more ideologically guided. In fact, GM presents a case of how a clock-building orientation alone is not enough ... Sloan's clock had no soul ... it was a cold, impersonal, inhuman pure business." GM could touch great heights of efficiency but it never

cared for people inside and outside. It neglected human feelings. Practising ethics demands high sensitivity, wisdom, and judgement. Such a process of development is continuous. It begins with and U nurtured by self-awareness of the individual.

Individual Responsibility and Self Awareness

Only self-awareness can promote individual responsibility. On this here is a powerful story. Nagarjuna was a great Buddhist monk and philosopher. One queen was very much devoted to him. Having invited him to come to her palace, she got a golden begging bowl studded with diamonds, filled it with food, and then planned to present it to the Master as alms. When the Master arrived, she took his ordinary bowl and replaced it by the precious bowl filled with delicious food. He took it and was going back to his monastery when a thief saw him carrying the bowl and wondered: "how long is he going to keep it? Somebody is going to take it away so why not I?" He followed the monk at some distance.

Nagarjuna went inside his hut, ate his food, threw the bowl out of the window and it fell where the thief was sitting. The thief was shocked, picked up the bowl, and went into the hut and asked the Master: "May I ask you one question?" Nagarjuna said: "To bring you in I had to throw the bowl out. The bowl is yours; take it as a gift. You will not be a thief. I can now sleep and you can go satisfied." The thief said, "You are a strange man, don't you know how costly the bowl is?" Nagarjuna replied: "Since I have known myself, nothing is more precious than that." The thief said: "Then give me one more present: how can I know myself?" He replied: "whatever you are doing, continue doing it. But do one thing more. When you are stealing, be aware, be alert, be watchful of what you are doing. If you lose your watchfulness,

then don't steal." For weeks the thief tried but found it difficult to practise stealing. Whenever he tried to take something, he lost his awareness. He was sincere and would leave the thing. And, when he was aware, there was no desire to take the thing. Finally, he came empty-handed to the Master and said: "You have disturbed my whole life. Now I cannot steal." Nagarjuna said: "That is not my problem. If you want to steal forget all about awareness." The thief said: "Those few moments when I was aware were so valuable that I never felt so much of joy in my whole life before. I can't stop practising awareness, will you allow me to be your disciple?" Nagarjuna said: "I had initiated you already when you followed me. You were thinking how you were going to steal that begging bowl, and, I was thinking how to steal you. We are both in the same business."

Epilogue

Through knowing, understanding, and thus experiencing relevant thoughts and feelings one is inspired to live them. Indian conception of good and evil is different. It does not treat them as ultimate irreconcilables. Our outer self drives us to one side and our inner self to the other. Both emerge from and merge into one reality. The two opposites combine to form a whole. We have to, of course, make choices to solve ethical dilemmas. This demands developing linkage between the outer self and the inner self. "We ourselves are parts of one totality, descended from that power from which everything emanates, we must contain within ourselves some of the inspiration sufficient for our individual needs; *could we only become aware* by turning inwards." For this, reading selected literature helps. As readers we must provide curiosity, imagination, and empathy. It involves interpreting, making sense, and connecting a story to one's own life and concerns. Highest is reached when one, for example, falls in love with 'entering' the mindsets of favourite characters from literature and learns.