

RIGHTNESS OF ACTION AND JAINA ETHICS

He who lives in society inevitably asks himself and others on many occasions in life, 'what shall I do in a particular situation? or whether I ought to do or ought not to do certain actions? Many a time we have been told, "What you have done is wrong." "You ought not to have done this." Sometimes in answer to such questions and such statements, judgments or evaluations, it may be said that an action is wrong if it does not conform to the moral code in question. Particular actions are to be performed in a particular situation, inasmuch as they are enjoined by a particular moral code of the community. An impartial reflective mind cannot be satisfied with such kinds of decisions, regarding the rightness or wrongness of doing certain actions. Besides, moral codes may conflict and what is considered right according to one moral code, may be regarded as wrong according to the other moral code. For instance, in accordance with one moral code untouchability is right, whereas in accordance with the other moral code untouchability is wrong. In one moral code meat-eating is forbidden, while in the other it is enjoined. The situation is worsened when two parts of the moral code of community prescribe contradictory performances to be right or wrong. All this means that moral codes cannot be relied upon as a sure guide to the rightness of an action. Of course, I do not wish to deny that there may be moral codes which prescribe universal rules of conduct, but even then it cannot be said that 'right' and 'wrong' could be defined in terms of conformity or otherwise to the moral code of a particular society. The reflective mind is not convinced of the reason for an action's being right or wrong in terms of a moral code. In fact, he is concerned with the criterion of the rightness of actions. He wishes to enquire the ground on which the rightness of actions depends. In Jaina terminology it may be asked: How do we regard an action as Samyak? By what standard is an action judged to be Samyak? It will not be out of place to point out here that the terms Samyak action in Jaina Ethics is not equivalent to the term right action in modern ethics,¹ but it implies that the action has a good motive in addition. It is, therefore, called good action. The other

term in Jaina Ethics for good action is Śubha action. But for our purpose we shall treat Samyak-action or Śubha action as right action without any inconsistency. In the present paper I propose to discuss the theories of the criterion or standard by which we can determine whether an action is right or wrong. Further, I shall endeavour to point out the stand of the Jaina Ethics regarding the issue under consideration.

In order to judge the rightness or wrongness of an action or rule, if the goodness or badness of its consequences is taken into consideration, we have the theory known as the teleological theory of right or wrong. For instance, gambling is wrong, because it leads to many bad consequences and helping others in distress is right, because it leads to good consequences. In other words, the teleologist contends that an action or rule is right, if it is conducive to the greatest balance of good over evil, for the agent or for the society. The former position is taken by an ethical egoist, whereas the latter one, by the utilitarian. Since ethical egoism cannot be consistently maintained as a moral theory, we set it aside without going into the arguments for its rejection. What concerns us now is to discuss utilitarianism as a teleological theory of the rightness or wrongness of an action or rule.

The other theory regarding the rightness or wrongness of an action or rule is styled deontological theory of right or wrong, according to which rightness or wrongness of an action or rule is not the function of consequences, but is decided by the nature of certain characteristics of the action or rule itself. In other words, the deontologist holds that an action or rule is right even if it does not bring about any good to self or society. For instance, promise or conformity in mind, body and speech ought to be kept even if bad consequences are brought into being.

Thus the difference between the teleologist and the deontologist consists in the fact that the former regards the rightness or wrongness of an action or a rule as a function of good or bad consequences alone, while the latter regards rightness or wrongness as depending on factors other than the goodness or badness of consequences. For the teleologist there is no way of determining the right apart from the good, while for the deontologists right owes nothing to the good. Both of them

may regard certain actions as right or wrong, but the reason or justification given by each is different. If I say that I ought to do actions of gratitude to my benefactor and then suppose I am asked the reason for holding it. In reply, I may say, if I hold teleological point of view, that I ought to do actions of gratitude to my benefactor if they contribute to the productiveness of good, and if they do not, the 'ought' loses its significance; but if I hold deontological point of view, I may say that I ought to do actions of gratitude to my benefactor, even if they lead to bad consequence, i.e. 'ought' on this theory is to be followed under all circumstances regardless of the consideration of any effect. To be more clear, suppose I have borrowed a sword from my friend for self-defence, shall I return it to him at a time when my friend is planning to kill his 'parents owing to some discord? The teleological reply is 'no', the deontological reply seems to me, to be 'yes'. Thus the teleologist believes in hypothetical imperatives and the deontologist, in categorical ones.

Having explained the two general types of tests or criteria of rightness of actions or rules, I propose first, to examine the forms of deontological positions upheld by moral philosophers and *secondly, shall go on to the utilitarian positions regarding the issue under consideration. While examining these theories, I shall endeavour to bring out the contribution of the Jaina ethics to the problem of the rightness of actions.

(i) The deontologist may take two positions, (a) act-deontology and (b) rule-deontology. (a) For the act-deontologist, *particular* actions are in themselves intrinsically 'right or wrong without regard to the goodness or badness of their consequences. The moral judgement that in this situation, I ought to do so and so is a function of the immediate intuitive knowledge of the rightness or wrongness of an action in a particular situation.

In other words, the rightness or wrongness of actions is ascertained by simply looking at the actions themselves without considering their consequences, i.e. it is cognisable apart from the goodness or badness produced by them, either for oneself or for the society. It may be noted here that the act-deontologist may hold without contradicting himself that the general rule can be

formed indirectly by making use of perceptions regarding the rightness or wrongness of particular acts. But this general rule cannot outweigh the particular judgement considering the rightness or wrongness of particular action. (b) As distinguished from act-deontology, the rule-deontologist, holds that what is right or wrong is to be ascertained by appeal to general rules intuitively apprehended. The validity of these rules does not depend on the productivity of the goodness or badness of consequences, and they are not inductively arrived at, but rather given to us directly by intuitive apprehension. For example, the particular action of killing or stealing is wrong, because it violates the rule, 'Do not kill' or 'Do not steal' which is intrinsically right, and the particular action of fulfilling a promise is right, because it observes the intrinsically right rule 'keep your promise'. Thus the rule-deontologist asserts that there are certain rules which are *absolutely always right* and certain others which are *absolutely always wrong* regardless of the goodness or badness of consequences. In other words, there are certain actions, like telling the truth, keeping the promises, repaying the debts, doing acts of gratitude, which are our duties, and duties ought to be performed even when they do not promote any good whatsoever, that certain actions are our duties is a sufficient ground for our doing them and considering them as right.

According to Jaina Ācāryas, both act-deontology and rule-deontology are untenable theories of the criterion of rightness or wrongness. The weakness of act-deontology is that it regards human situations as extremely different from one another, and does not recognise the universal element inherent in them. No doubt each human situation has something of its own, but it is contrary to moral experience to say that it is not like other situations in morally relevant respects. In many human situations, because of their likeness in important respects, the general rule 'do not kill' can be applied without any incongruity. In practical life, according to Jaina ethics, moral rules cannot be dispensed with and each man's moral judgements cannot be relied upon. 'The fact is that when one makes a moral judgement in particular situations, one implicitly commits oneself to making the same judgement in any similar situations.'² The merit of act-deontology is that it takes into consideration the particularity of the

situation. It advises us to look into the act as such. Besides, the weakness of rule-deontology is that it occupies itself with the extreme rightness or wrongness of the rule without allowing any exception to it. In this case, fulfilment of duty may sometime become fanaticism. Truth ought to be spoken even if the society has to face bad consequences. The defect of this position in particular and deontology in general is that they do not take account of the specific situations and goodness or badness of the consequences following from such circumstances. Actions cannot be right or wrong in vacuum. They always produce certain effects either good or bad, and to be indifferent to effects is to ignore the verdict of moral experience which is deeply rooted in the goodness or badness of human situation. According to Jaina ethics does not condemn the action of telling a lie to enemies, robbers, and even to persons who ask questions when they have no right to ask. Under some circumstances it is right to break a promise, or to take something that belongs to another without his permission. Thus no rule can be *absolutely always* right or wrong as the rule-deontologist prescribed. Mill rightly remarks, "It is not the fault of any creed but of the complicated nature of human affairs that rules of conduct cannot be so framed as to require no exception, and that hardly any kind of action can safely be laid down as either always obligatory or always condemnable".³ The merit of rule-deontology is that it gives excessive importance to rules in moral life.

After critically examining the deontological position from the point of Jaina ethics, we now proceed to discuss the position taken by the teleologist. Since teleologists have often been called utilitarians, we shall be regarding teleological position as utilitarian position. (a) Act-utilitarians say that the rightness or wrongness of each action is to be determined by appealing to goodness or badness of its consequences and I ought to do an action in a situation which is likely to produce the maximum balance of good over evil in the universe. One ought not to tell the truth in a situation which is such as to cause maximum balance of evil over good by telling the truth. (b) Rule-utilitarians hold that moral rules like truth-telling etc., are significant in life and duty in a particular situations is to be decided by appeal to a rule. In this respect they are like rule-deontologists; but,

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unlike deontologists, they affirm that rules are to be framed on the basis of their effects on the society as a whole. Thus rules have utilitarian basis and they must be selected, maintained, revised and replaced on this basis. Once rules are so framed, they are to be followed even if it is known that they do not have the best possible consequences in certain particular cases.

It may be noted here that Jaina ethics subscribes to the utilitarian basis of the judgements of right or wrong. Do not kill, Do not tell a lie, Do not hoard, Do not steal and Do not commit adultery—all these rules have as their basis the productivity of good consequences to the society. However, Jaina Ācāryas maintain that sometimes it is not the following of the rule that produces maximum balance of good over evil, but its breaking. Though Jaina Ācāryas allow breaking of the moral rules in exceptional circumstances on utilitarian basis, yet they have warned us time and again that breaking of the rule should not be made common, since it may lead to the weakening of faith in rules which are in a way the basis of social order. The *Niśītha Sūtra* is a compendium of exceptions to moral rules. This work has very carefully laid down the principles of breaking the rules. This implies that Jaina ethics does not allow superstitious rule-worship, but at the same time holds that scrupulously conscientious caution is to be exercised in breaking the rules. Thus rule-utilitarianism like rule-deontologism does not find favour with Jaina ethics. Rules are merely guiding principles in common circumstances, but when the circumstances are exceptional we have not to look to rules for making any moral decision, but to situations and particular actions from the point of view of producing greater balance of good over evil. This goes to show that every time, as the act-utilitarian suggests, we have to calculate anew the effects of each and every action on the general welfare. The whole discussion brings us to the view that both acts and rules, specific situations and general principles, are to be taken into account for deciding the rightness or wrongness of actions. This may be called modified act-utilitarianism which cannot allow a rule to be followed in a particular situation, when, following it is regarded as not to have the best possible consequences. This means that Jaina ethics accepts the possibility that sometimes general moral principles may be inadequate

to the complexities of the situation, and in this case a direct consideration of the particular action without reference to general principles is necessary. Thus according to Jaina ethics acts are logically prior to rules and the rightness of the action is situational. The corollary of this view is that duty is not self-justifying, it is not an end in itself. It is good as a means. Its rightness is dependent on the fact of producing a greater balance of good over evil in the universe than any other alternative.

Here it may be said that rightness or wrongness of an action does not depend upon the goodness or badness of consequences, but upon the motive or motives from which it is done. We can find references in Jaina ethical texts wherein good motives are given prime importance for the performance of action producing good consequences. So long as good motives issue in right action productive of good consequences, there is nothing wrong in accepting the dependence of rightness of action on good motive. Jaina ethics seems to tie good motives with the rightness of actions producing good consequences. Its conviction is that if there is good motive, like kindness or charitable disposition, right actions are bound to occur. At one stage in man's moral evolution it may be possible; at ordinary man's level this may not happen. Since ethics, it seems to me, could not evenly face the problem arising from the fact that sometimes good dispositions are not able to produce right actions issuing in good consequences, it made rightness of action productive of good identical with good motive. But the point is that such actions are not so blameworthy as they would have been if they had been done from bad motives. No doubt the agent deserves praise for acting as he did, but the action is wrong. Jaina ethics seems to confuse 'that to call an action morally praiseworthy is the same thing as to say that it is right, and to call it morally blameworthy the same thing as to say that it is wrong.'⁴ In point of fact these two judgements are not identical. It so often happens that a man may act wrongly from a good motive, i.e. conscientiousness may lead to fanatical cruelty, mistaken asceticism etc., and he may act rightly from a bad motive, for instance, feeling of revenge may be able to check certain criminal actions. However, in the former case we regard the actions as wrong. whereas in the latter we regard them as right. This means that the consideration of motives

does not make any difference to the rightness or wrongness of actions. In other words, goodness or badness of disposition is to be distinguished from the rightness or wrongness of conduct. Thus if a right action is done from a good motive and the same action is done from a bad motive, though the goodness of the consequences will be the same, yet 'the presence of the good motive will mean the presence of an additional good in the one case which is absent in the other.'⁵

In conclusion, we may say that according to Jaina ethics the criterion of right or wrong is the goodness or badness of consequences. It rejects the view that certain rules ought absolutely always to be followed, whatever the consequences may be. No action is to be unconditionally done or avoided. No action can be our duty irrespective of the goodness of the consequences. The question whether an action is right or wrong does not depend on motive, and the presence of motive whether good or bad, constitutes an additional factor in the rightness or wrongness of actions.

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NOTES

1. In some of our moral judgements, we say that a certain action or kind of action is morally right, wrong, obligatory, a duty or ought or ought not to be done. In others we talk, not about actions or kinds of action, but about persons, motives, intentions, traits of character, and the like and we say of them that they are morally good, bad, virtuous, vicious, responsible, blameworthy, saintly, despicable, and so on. In these two kinds of judgement, the things talked about are different and what is said about them is different. (Frankena, *Ethics*) pp. 8-9 (Prentice-Hall, India).

2. Frankena, *Ethics*, p. 22 (Prentice-Hall).

3. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter II, P. 23 (Everyman's Library ed., New York).

4. Moore : *Ethics*, P. 116 (Oxford University Press, London).

5. Moore : *Ethics*, P. 115 (Oxford University Press, London).