

## BOOK REVIEW - II

**Prasad, Rajendra : *Varādhārma, Niskāma Karma and Practical Morality : A Critical Essay on Applied Ethics*, D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., New Delhi, in association with Dept. of Special Assistance in Philosophy, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, 1999, pp. xii + 292, Price Rs. 300/-**

Prof. Rajendra Prasad is a well-known thinker who has spent major part of his career in philosophising on morality as manifested in Indian Society, traditional and modern. The present volume, which contains a series of his lectures delivered at Utkal University in Oct-Nov.1998, makes a valuable contribution to the analysis of Indian moral thought in a meaningful but non-conventional manner. It is thought-provoking and would prove to be of seminal influence in shaping the future moral thinking of younger generations. Any moral philosophy, as it filters down into everyday practices of life where human relationships are concerned, has to be critical and cannot for long take for granted the ancient ideas to rest itself on. It has to be an on-going dialectic extending invitation to the future to have an ever-fresh but critical vision of the past. The book is therefore most welcome especially when the Indian Society and its philosophers are passing through a phase of intellectual renaissance during the post-independence period. In this mission of renaissance one has to bear in mind that, to quote Sartre, "you cannot with impunity form generations of men by imbibing them with successful but false ideas." Prasad does the job of self-searching and of forthrightly placing before us his reflections admirably well. His conceptual analysis sifts realities from appearances and truths from falsehoods with discerning scholarship of sources which he has studied carefully. It was necessary to do this because one cannot solve moral dilemmas in one's own life without reaching a rational solution by considering what is morally best in the given circumstances. One

can get guidance from moral theories provided they are logically coherent enough to function as normative theories.

The Book is divided in three parts. The First contains five lectures mainly dealing with some basics of Indian normative ethics. It deals mainly with the concepts of Varṇadharmā, Niṣkāma Karma, Jeevanmukti, Suṣupti and the Identity of the real with value. The second part deals with Ethics in practice, and contains four lectures on Secularism, General Dharma, Professional Ethics and Business Ethics-limits of applied ethics. The third part of the Book comprises only one lecture on the 'Background Conceptual Framework'. The book contains bibliography of Prasad's own writings but does not contain any general bibliography as such. The footnotes and the references given profusely in the book should be enough to indicate the works on which the author has relied for his own views and comments. There is no index to the book.

## I

The concept of Varṇadharmā is perhaps the single most pivotal concept in Indian Ethics which has affected the social structure of Hindu society in the most unjust and unfair way over hundreds of years. What is worse, it still continues to affect adversely life of this people in the process of reforming its consciousness and ethos and providing spiritual foundations of equality and justice. Prasad, in his bold analysis tries to show on logical grounds that varṇāshram cannot be both natural and obligatory. Prasad's main complaint that none of the prominent philosophers of ancient times as also thinkers like Tilak and Aurobindo in modern times has questioned the dogmatic account of the origin of four varnas is quite legitimate. While āśramwise duties were assigned to those who belonged to upper classes of the society, śūdras had only one āśrama - the lifelong āśrama of service to upper classes, which is not even remotely comparable to any one of the four āśramas enjoyed by the upper classes. In India, moral philosophy has never been an autonomous discipline like the one that we have in the West

especially after the rise of humanism and the Kantian call for the autonomy of morals. Prasad is therefore right when he says that "although many modern philosophers, Indian as well as non-Indian, have discussed this theory, they do not seem to have high-lighted those aspects of it which need to be highlighted in a *philosophical* treatment of it. (p.11) Such a treatment, Prasad believes and rightly so, will dispell the illusion which has held captive many a scholar that the theory of *varṇāshramdharma* 'almost paradigmatic of an ethical theory or of a general theory of human values.' Breaking the hold of such illusions is indeed the task of philosophical analysis and Prasad, I must admire, does it painstakingly. The most important point which he makes is that although we grant for the sake of argument that, according to *Bhagwatgita*, duty is nature-born (*svabhāvajāta*), the nature-bornness cannot be the duty-making property of an action. 'Swabhāvajāta' cannot function as a criterion for separating actions that are obligatory from those that are non-obligatory. It is obvious, as Prasad himself hints at one place, that if duty is defined as nature-born it would amount to a naturalistic fallacy. He drives the same point home by showing that 'svabhāvajāta', though a necessary condition, can never be a sufficient condition of any action being duty or obligatory. Prasad comments finely on the notion of *swadharma* as well. He notes that howsoever we may try to understand its superiority, the basic question as to why the natural be made the determiner of *dharmatā* remains unanswered. The Indian tradition surely does not deny the possibility of human nature getting morally corrupt. If that is so, it surely leads to an open question argument. One cannot but notice here Moore's influence on Prasad's line of thinking. Prasad further shows that argument from natural necessitation won't help, as it would amount to denying agent his freedom. This is a kind of determinism and fatalism that would render all moral reasoning, argument and even rhetoric, if any, unnecessary. Prasad pushes his threadbare analysis to expose the utilitarian or consequentialistic character of morality built around the concept of *varṇadharmā* and *swadharma*. He points out specifically that "calling any *swadharma* or *varṇadharmā* a categorical imperative would be unfair to the spirit of the general classical Indian theory of values." (p.20) These reflections might upset all those who look upon *Bhagvatgītā* as a

## Kartavyaśāstra.

Prasad carries his analysis a bit further to the observation that “it is a logically interesting fact.... That the very concept of *svabhāvaja varṇadharmā* rules out the possibility of its being categorical.” (p.24) “Duties cannot be the effect of one’s own nature because they are not the effects of anything.” (p.25) If any external agency, whether divine or earthly (like society or state) makes assignment of duties, they cannot be categorical. A duty, if it is to be categorical, must have its ground or reason in itself and not in any external agency. He pertinently draws attention to the prevalence of considerations other than moral in the treatment meted out to lower classes. Prasad is outspoken and gets indignant at moral insensitivity showed by the leaders of ancient Hindu society. Last but not least, Prasad points out how the theory of *varṇadharmata*, though intended to be a normative ethical theory, fails to satisfy the criterion of consistent application to all cases that are relevant to it and of inviting consequences that are morally optimistic.

In the second chapter, Prasad examines thoroughly the concept of *niṣkāmatā* or *nishkama karma* around, which is built on another basic normative structure of classical Indian Ethics. Again it’s the arguments of Krishna in *Bhagvatgītā* that receive Prasad’s logical and therapeutic treatment, free from what he calls *ṛṣi* bias. For him, and very rightly, it is the arguments that matter the most; not who it is that has put them forth. Outlining formally in clear terms the arguments of Arjuna in the given situation on the battlefield Prasad has shown how Krishna’s counter argument does not have enough probative force to prove that its conclusion is true, nor does it have anything to show that conclusion of Arjuna’s argument, is false. What is instrumental in procuring Arjuna’s willingness to fight is not Krishna’s water-tight logic but his use of exhortative language and personal influence. In order to show this Prasad asks his readers first to get rid of *ṛṣi* bias, which is his name for the fallacy of *argumentum ad verecundiam*, and which could be and, usually, is a great hindrance to creative philosophising. Secondly, he asks them to look at *Bhagvatgītā* as a human work. For anyone who is interested in philosophical argumentation, this surely would be the correct approach to any work, which

claims to expound a certain philosophy of life. Arjuna's arguments, which are certainly moral, are then presented, in all four in number. It should be noted that the situation in which Arjuna finds himself is dilemmatic which no overly general argument can resolve. The assumptions of such an overly general argument presented by Krishna, are (I) the thesis that *caturvarṇa* or *caturvarga* are created by God and (ii) the thesis that the entire living world is governed by the Law of Karma. Both these theses stand exposed to bear the consequence, severally or collectively, that moral reasoning becomes a worthless exercise in the life of an individual. It is rather surprising that Indian community, by and large, has resigned itself to fatalistic consequence of both these theses. Prasad further presents ingenuously analysis of intentionality of human actions and leads us to the most important point that if the *niṣkāma* theory of Indian Ethics" allows us to have only desires for actions and recommends abnegation of desires for their results, we cannot, in point of logic, do that." (p.63) Prasad's treatment of that famous stanza of *Bhagvatgītā* (II.47) viz., *Karmaṇyevādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu ...* etc. which is oft-quoted in the lay as well as academic circles as presenting the central thesis of *Niṣkāma* Karmayoga is noteworthy. Because of its mandatory character, one may wonder whether the said stanza contains any argument as such. But even granting that it contained an argument, towing Prasad's line of reasoning, one is easily convinced to see that the premisses of the argument are as a matter of fact indeed false. They are overgeneralizations and hence make the argument unsound. The argument is also not innocent because if we really believe that we have absolutely no control over the consequences of an action we would turn out to be stark pessimists. (p.64) In fact, as Prasad points out, the great and insuperable difficulty that exists in reading out the intentions of at least some human actions renders the whole theory implausible and untenable. Cases are not wanting where the contentions of selflessness are a sham or pretense. Again in the context of the doctrine of *Puruṣārthas*, selflessness or *naiṣkāmyatā* of agent's actions would be a matter of self-conceit. Prasad does well in showing that ultimately "justification for the prescription of leading one's life in a *niṣkāma* manner for doing whatever he does desirelessly has to be teleological or consequential." (p.67)

The third chapter examines the ideal of *Jivanmukti*, yet another landmark in the Indian moral philosophy. It is usually thought to be salvation or self-realization attainable by an individual while he is alive. It is, so to say, a life of devotion and dedication to doing desirelessly whatever he does. It is thus supposed to be a moral ideal not beyond the reach of any human being. Prasad wants to examine if such a conception is normatively flawless and conceptually non-vacuous. He opens his discussion with a caution not to allow any *īśi* bias to stand in the way of fair philosophic inquiry, offers some clarifications about his use of certain key-terms and proceeds to examine chiefly two important claims made in behalf of *Jivanmukta*. Firstly, *jivanmukta* is necessarily free from the liability to be reborn and secondly, he is a morally perfect individual. As against the first claim, Prasad argues that the claim is simply false for the simple reason that "this feature cannot be predicated by anyone of anyone including himself and that concept of *jivanmukta* or of being *jivanmukta* is uninstantiable or inapplicable to any individual. He reasonably argues to show how the concept of suffering, its inextericable bond with body and hence soul's struggle to seek emancipation from suffering provide the context of significance for the concept of *jivanmukta*. The context is certainly embedded in the theory of birth-cycle and the theory of Karma, which are two sides of the same coin. The concept of *jivanmukta* receives its significance provided one accepts that everyone who is a *jeeva* is a bonded individual, the bond consists in its possession of a body which is the sole cause of suffering. Only then there is a point in getting rid of the body once for all to avoid the liability of getting reborn. Prasad very rightly points out that "*mumukṣā* is not just the desire to get rid of suffering or even all sufferings one has or can possibly have ... it is the desire for *mokṣa* which is release from bondage - from the cycle of birth-death-rebirth running according to the provisions of the law of karma." (p.73) The concept of *jivanmukta* is thus overloaded with so many metaphysical intricacies that for a common man the ideal of *jivanmukta* would indeed be a meaningless ideal, and if meaningless, it would cease to have any normative force in his day-to-day normal life. A common man looks at sufferings, whether his own or of others, in the most natural way, and at least some sufferings, he is able to see

as not quite unnecessary and not bad. It is certain that philosopher's way of looking at suffering vastly differs from ordinary man's way of looking at suffering. Naturally, expressions connected with the phenomenon of suffering in life that are meaningful and intelligible become semantically intransparent when used by philosophers. Needless to say that '*mumukṣā*' is one such word. Commenting upon Indian philosophers way, he points out that for them (a) suffering is necessarily linked with life and (b) complete freedom from suffering is necessarily a feature of *mokṣa*. He frankly complains that this interpretation is reflected in academic circles so dominantly that questioning it will not get an unbiased reception. (p.76)

And yet, Prasad questions it on grounds of logic. Firstly, the link between suffering and living is non-symmetrical. It is not logical but only empirical. Secondly, complete freedom from suffering cannot be ensured because of the poor epistemic credentials of belief in the cycle of birth-death-rebirth etc. with which the notion of moral perfection is uncritically associated by Indian philosophers. Prasad believes and hopes that generation of new budding philosophers of India will be able to see as a result of critical inquiry that 'x is nonliable to be reborn' cannot be an empirical claim and that it cannot be also claimed to have a special status because it is a statement from '*sruti*'. Towards the end of the chapter, Prasad presents elaborately his reflections on the open-texture character of genuine morality. Concept of moral perfection is an open concept. Morality can never be a closed and predetermined phenomenon. (p.97) Prasad carefully argues for the concept of morality without its being linked with the notion of *jeevanmukta*. Morality is an earthly phenomenon and among its ideals, *jivanmukti* cannot have any place. "Morality is ... independent of *jivanmukti*. (p.101)

In the fourth chapter, Prasad manages to expose the last refuge of the concept of *jivanmukti* as a moral ideal and to shred it to pieces. In the earlier chapter, Prasad had argued that the concept of *jivanmukti* is uninstantiable, that it is impossible to say of any individual as being non-labile to be reborn. Moreover since morality is logically independent of *jivanmukti*, a *jivanmukta* need not be necessarily a morally perfect individual. But since Advaita

Vedantins have claimed that the state of *jivanmukti* is exemplified at least partially by the experience of deep or dreamless sleep, Prasad's argument developed in the first three chapters would remain incomplete. He has therefore to take Advaitin's argument from 'susupti' rather seriously and to show that his (Advaitin's) claim that '*susupti*' is an empirical analogue of Self-realization-ideal of individual's moral life-long endeavour is inappropriate. Although Prasad's argument is presented in the contextual setting of moral phenomenon in human life, it raises in my view, an hornet's nest for an Advaita metaphysician. First, he formulates Advaitin's argument for the reality of Witness Self or Consciousness very systematically and then examines its premises critically one by one. It is not necessary to restate the whole argument or again his criticism of its premises. His purpose is to show that the argument of the Advaitin is highly vulnerable. I shall, however, pass only two comments. One: Premise No.1 - '*Susupti* is a phenomenal (or empirical) reality' does not seem to differ vastly from Premise no.4 "*Susupti* is an experience'. Two: it is the fifth premise viz., 'An experience implies consciousness' that is the crux of the issue which needs fuller examination. I shall not expand on these comments for the fear of unwanted diversion. All that I shall say is that Prasad's argument against Advaitins is a real challenge. Readers should go through it and form their reactions. Towards end of the Chapter, Prasad hints at an important implication of Advaitic position that the highest reality is also the highest value. (P.120)

In the fifth and the final chapter of part I, therefore Prasad proceeds to examine this identity of reality and value. He does this in the context of Aurobindo's philosophical reflexions. Aurobindo is an Idealist of a high reputation and respected in a very wide circle of academicians and intellectuals whose philosophy shows identity of the real and the value *par excellence*. Examples of thinkers who have effected such an identification in their systems are available in legion both in the East and in the West. Theologians who think of God as omniscient and omnipotent have also thought of Him as benevolent and ultimate governor of human destiny. This identification is in need of explanation if one has to explain true nature of our moral life. Prasad



thinks that there is some confusion involved in effecting such an identification. Irrespective of the metaphysical claims which philosophers make with regard to the nature of ultimate reality, the doctrine of 'mokṣa' which is regarded by them as the highest *puruṣārtha* is certainly in the need of logical explanation as to why 'self' which is ultimate reality is also an ultimate value. Prasad's complaint is that none of the Indian philosophers seems to have addressed this issue. This is basically the question of autonomy of morals. In the West also, this issue has been on the anvil since David Hume and Kant should be regarded as an apostle of moral autonomy. In the 20th century Moore however gave a theoretical boost to this issue on meta-ethical plane in his *Principia Ethica* (1903). Prasad is obviously launching a similar kind of investigation in respect of a nearly unanimous view of Indian philosophers that which is ultimately real is also that which constitutes ultimate value for human life.

Prasad first criticizes Aurobindo's idea of dynamising philosophy with religion, which is considered by some even now as a fundamental principle of the ancient wisdom. The followers of Aurobindo however forget that the chasm between fact and value, between 'is' and 'ought' and between real and ideal is unbridgeable. The recent discussions on 'naturalistic fallacy and 'non-inferentiability of 'ought' from 'is' are pointer to the difficulties involved in bridging the gap between the real and the ideal. Prasad comments that "Aurobindo seems to think that if something is a basic truth of all existence, then it is obvious that it ought to be made a guiding principle of our existence. But the logical consequence of calling any 'p' a basic truth of all existence is that we cannot speak of making it a guiding principle of our existence." (p.125). The whole discussion of this point is incisive and full of insights for all those who are interested in logical nature of our moral discourse and of moral life which reflects it. Prasad does want us to undertake such an exercise to overcome 'prides' and prejudices' about the moral dimension of human life. The objection to this kind of exercise very often stems from undue or misplaced pride for the wisdom of the East. His view is that we must get over it for a fair and reasonable philosophical

debate. Prasad, out rightly rejects the instrumentality of mystic experience as being unauthentic and thoroughly unreliable. To know the Divine is, for Aurobindo, to become Divine. Such knowledge is possible only in the mystical way. For common people, this cannot be a normative ideal. Prasad's conclusion is obvious: "If there is a logical gap between being real and being a value, faith or even mystic experience cannot bridge it. Only logic can and if logic cannot, it cannot be bridged." (p.134) **(To be continued)**

**S.V.BOKIL**

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2. Bader, Jonathan : *Conquest of the Four Quarters*, New Delhi, 2000, Aditya Prakashan, pp.xvi + 392, Price Rs. 550/-
3. Bandiste, D.D. : *Beyond God and Religion*, Agra, 2000, H.P. Bhargava Book House, pp. x + 210, Price : Rs. 200/-
4. Barthakur, Jitendra Kumar : *Time*, New Delhi, 110070,1999, Kumud Books, pp. 350, Paper Back Price Rs. 340/-
5. Behera, Dr. Satrughna : *Rule Scepticism - A Study in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein and Kripke*, Meerut (India), 2000 Anu Books, pp.202, Price Rs. 395/-
6. Chapuis, Andre and Gupta, Anil (Editors) : *Circularity, Definition and Truth*, New Delhi, 2000, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, pp. vi + 402, Price Rs. 560/-
7. Gupta, R.K. : *A Dictionary of Moral Concepts in Gandhi*, New Delhi, 2000, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., pp.97, Price Rs. 180/-
8. Jain, Dr. N.L. : *Jaina Karmology* (Eng. Tr. with Notes of Chap. VIII of *Tattvārtha-Rāja Vārtika of Akalanka*), Varanasi, 1998, Parsvanath Vidyapeeth, pp.180; Price : Rs. 100/-
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12. Raghuramaraju, A. (ed) : *Existence, Experience and Ethics - Essays for S.A. Shaida*, New Delhi, 2000, D.K. Printworld (P), Ltd. pp.372.
13. Ramamurty, A. : *The Philosophical Foundations of Hinduism*, New Delhi, 2000, D.K. Printworld (P), Ltd., pp.viii + 216, Price : Rs. 360/-

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