ARE VIRTUES "RELATIVE" TO CULTURE?

KUMAR NEERAJ SACHDEV

Virtue ethics is a study of the virtuous conduct to live a good human life. The study involves a comprehensive treatment of the question, 'how should one live?' whereas the other normative stands, namely Utilitarianism and Kantianism treat the question, "what ought I do?"as the primary question, This difference of assigning the primacy of the question, in fact, reflects the primacy of character traits for virtue ethicists and of rules, judgements, and consequences for utilitarians and kantians. This has also become the reason for a certain group of moral philosophers to revive virtue ethics as an alternative to the latter normative stands.

An ethics of virtue, in its contemporary shape, has been largely based on Aristotelian framework of virtues. For it is generally agreed that Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethica*[i] provides the requisite insights for the contemporary virtue ethics. The classical or traditional standpoint is based on a rational account of a good human life. It identifies the good human life with the virtuous life. Virtue is conceived as human excellence. The good life, therefore, is the life of excellence.

For Greeks in general and Aristotle in particular, the attainment of the good life is the telos or purpose of human existence. It is 'eudaimonia', which is usually translated as 'happiness' or 'human flourishing'. However, happiness or human flourishing is not subjective feeling or satisfaction. Rather, it is an objective achievement of excellence.

However, there are various divergences in the contemporary formulations that, one may agree, result from the complexities of present day human life.

One of these pertains to the issue of whether virtues are relative to culture or there is a cross-cultural single norm of human flourishing, which serves as the grounding force to understand the meaning and purpose of virtues. In the following sections we shall focus upon this issue.

A Disagreement

In the contemporary virtue ethics there is a disagreement concerning the status of virtues: whether these are relative to cultures and traditions or they hold their own independent meaning having cross cultural application. That is to say, justice, for instance, represents a localized affair of distribution and sensitivity to the needs of the community and civil life or it can also represent the objective standard applicable cross culturally.

Thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams and Philippa Foot, in their own distinctive formulations, favour relativism of a sort. They claim that there cannot be a single criterion of ethical goodness, instead each and every criterion is internal to the tradition and practices of a particular society. To which, thinkers like Martha Nussbaum and Nancy Sherman oppose to re-establish the universality of the Aristotelian framework of virtues that gives rise to rationally justifiable single norm of flourishing for all human beings.

To state the opposition between the two standpoints in the words of Nussbaum :

> To many current defenders of an ethical approach based on the virtues, the return to the virtues is connected with a turn toward relativism - toward, that is, the view that the only appropriate criterion of ethical goodness are local ones, internal to the traditions and practices of each local society or group that asks itself questions about the good. The rejection of general algorithms and abstract rules in favour of an account of the good life based on specific modes of virtuous action is ... to be connected with the abandonment of the project of rationally justifying a single norm of flourishing life for and to all human beings and with a reliance, instead, on norms that are local both in origin and in application.[ii]

However, the defense of non-relative account consists of a direct appeal to the progress in understanding the nature of ethical conceptions. In the agent-based or virtue ethics one is not habituated to form virtuous dispositions. Instead one forms the dispositions by way of reflection, for instance, "Greeks used to think that courage was a matter of waving swords around, now they have (the Ethics informs us) a more inward and a more civic and communally attuned understanding of proper behaviour toward the possibility of death."[iii]

Thus the primary consideration is to look for the objective basis of ethical progress which may also support the rational criticism of local traditions. The need is to develop a coherent view of practical reason in order to look at the weaknesses and the strengths of local traditions and practices. To improve upon the position of women, to criticize the traditions of slave holding and racial inequality, the unequal norms of material distribution, what we require is a single objective account of the human good, or human flourishing. This account is supposed to be objective in the sense that it is justifiable with reference to the reasons that do not emerge merely from local traditions and practices but also from features of *humanness*. The features of humanness lie beneath all local traditions whether or not they are in fact acknowledged.

Aristotle for that matter criticizes certain common sensical beliefs as unjust or incompatible with human flourishing. And so does Socrates, who was concerned for the whole of his life to question the inadequacies in the existing conceptions of ethical goodness and for which he had to sacrifice his life. In the Indian tradition there are a number of examples, of course, which have become the part of the tradition itself. For instance, how could people in the Indian society criticize the *Satipratha*? The reason being they could identity an independent account of the human good which required all to be rational in human affairs. In other words, they could recognize the *contextual* importance of being human where the interests of all-living beings and nature gain equal footing.

However, Williams maintains that it is better to be habituated in being virtuous because reflection poisons the human mind. Williams is right to an extent but there is no need to be reflective to perform every practical activity.

Instead one needs to be reflective when there is a space for alternative choice for action. Otherwise, one can manage to be just or temperate, for that matter, in a habitual manner.

A Case for Relativism

MacIntyre in his paper, "Sophrosune: How a Virtue Can Become Socially Disruptive?"[iv] presents the varied accounts of the same virtue. He examines the historical background of 'Sophrosune' or 'temperateness' in order to point out the changing accounts of the same virtue. He contends that

> the virtuous person may be committed to overthrowing rather than sustaining the established forms of social life. sophrosune, so often thought of as a conformist virtue, for that very reason provides an excellent test case.[v]

He goes on to show the divergences in the accounts of the above-mentioned virtue in the writing of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Acquinas, and Hume. On the basis of divergent accounts found in these writings MachIntyre states that one may believe Acquinas's thomist account of Sophrosune which may not go well in his native social order wherein the prevailing situation may correspond to the Humean account. Hume finds virtuous qualities pleasant or useful. In this sequence, for Hume, temperance restrains over-indulgence in pleasure for the sake of utility. However, for Hume self-denial, humility, and the like are monkish virtues because they serve to no manner of purpose. But, "Acqinas's reply would have been that one can only rightly discern purposes if one acquires those qualities which Hume called 'monkish' qualities which are all aspects of or closely related to the virtue of temperance.[vi]

Thus, according to MacIntyre, one account can come into conflict with another depending on the prevalent social order. But here again the common theoretical understanding (or the conceptual one) may be identified in regard to the concept of temperance. That would be to restrain the over-indulgence of bodily pleasures which is common to all accounts of the virtue from Homer to Hume. The conflict may emerge due to lack of understanding the nature of virtue and the relation of virtue to human flourishing. Nevertheless the cultural

variation is not ruled out. All accounts represent particular traditions and practices. The representation does not, however, restrain us to recognize the underlying common assumptions, which confirm the shared fact of being human.

A Concluding Note

We have come round to the view that there can be a single norm of flourishing for all human beings which does not vary from culture to culture. However, we have to be cautious about the levels: at conceptual level we can have a unified framework of virtues that serves a single norm of flourishing and at the level of practice it admits of variation. So accordingly the contention against MacIntyre's view is that though he rightly points out the variation in respect of virtue-practice, he does not acknowledge the underlying conceptual uniformity. It is agreed that, temperance, for instance, differs in case of a ruler from that of the ruled but the core meaning for both remains the same. And of course, it is "not without sensitive awareness that we are speaking of something that in experienced differently in different contexts."[vii]

Further still there are certain features which indicate the common grounds of humanity. They include, we are mortal, we are embodied, we experience pleasure and pain, we are endowed with the potential to develop practical reason, we have cognitive capability, we feel a sense of affiliation, and lastly, we share a sense of humour[viii]. These are the indicators of shared human experiences which serve as the reasonable starting points of cross-cultural reflection. The cross cultural reflection enables us to comprehend the Core features of human flourishing.

In sum, there is an intrinsic connection between human nature and human flourishing. It requires the knowledge of the general capacitates and characteristics of human beings to discover how a good man will act. For the structure of human nature provides the basis and the direction to human flourishing. The understanding of the former enables a man to strive for the latter and cultivate virtues accordingly.

NOTES

I   'Translated by J.A.K. Thomson, Penguin, Revised edition, 1976

II   In *"Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach"*, p.33

Iii   *Ibid.,* p.38

Iv   *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 13, 1988, pp.1-11.

V   *Ibid.*, p.2

Vi   *ibid.*, p.10

Vii   Nussbaum, *op.cit.*, p.48

Viii   Discussed at length in Nussbaum, *op.cit.*

REFERENCES

1.   Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by J.A.K. Thomson, Revised edition, London:Penguin, 1976

2.   Baron,Marcia,"On De-Kantianizing the Perfectly Moral person", *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol.17,pp.281-83,1983

3.   Crisp, Roger (ed)., *How Should One Live?*, Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1996

4.   Crisp, Roger and Slote, Michael (eds.), *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997

5.   MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Second edition, London, Duckworth, 1985

6.   MacIntyre, Alasdair, "Sophrosune: How a Virtue Can Become Socially Disruptive", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 13, pp. 1-11, 1988

7.   Nussbaum, Martha, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol.13, pp.32-53, 1988

8.   Prior, William J., Virtue and Knowledge: *An Introduction to Ancient Greek Ethics*, London:Routledge, 1991.

9.   Sherman, Nancy, "Common Sense and Uncommon Virtue", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 13, pp.97-114, 1988.

10. Sherman, Nancy, "Wise Maxims /Wise Judging", *The Monist*, vol. 76, pp.41-65.

11. Williams, Bernard, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1985.

INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY
PUBLICATIONS

Daya Krishna and A. M. Ghose (eds) Contemporary Philosophical Problems : Some Classical Indian Perspectives, R.s 10/-

S. V. Bokil (Tran) Elements of Metaphysics Within the Reach of Everyone. Rs. 25/-

A. P. Rao, Three Lectures on John Rawls, Rs. 10/-

Ramchandra Gandhi (cd) Language, Tradition and Modern Civilization, Rs. 50/-

S. S. Barlingay, Beliefs, Reasons and Reflection, Rs. 70/-

Daya Krishna, A. M. Ghose and P. K. Srivastav (eds) The Philosophy of Kalidas Bhattacharyya, Rs. 60/-

M. P. Marathe, Meena A. Kelkar and P. P. Gokhale (eds) Studies in Jainism, Rs. 50/-

R. Sundara Rajan, Innovative Competence and Social Change, Rs. 25/-

S. S. Barlingay (ed), A. Critical Survey of Completed Research Work in Philosophy in Indian University (upto 1980), Part I, Rs. 50/-

R. K. Gupta, Exercises in Conceptual Understanding, Rs. 25/-

Vidyut Aklujkar, Primacy of Linguistic Units. R.s 30/-

Rajendra Prasad, Regularity, Normativity & Rules of Language Rs. 100/-

Contact :   The Editor,
Indian Philosophical quarterly,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Poona,
Pune 411 007.