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Examining virtue ethical foundations of non-dualistic Vedānta

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Abstract

Present paper inquires into two issues via comparative research methods; First, non-dualistic Vedanta undertakes any kind of ethical discourse in its philosophical investigations; second, what is the nature of that discourse? The paper demonstrates that the reproaches of life and world denial in the non-dualistic Vedanta are raised primarily from the point of view of normative ethics. As a conclusion, without the proposed understanding of the underpinned virtue ethics in the Non-dualistic Vedānta, the received understanding of the system is incomplete and sustains a misconception that there is no meaningful ethical discourse possible in its framework.

Key words: Vedānta, Virtue, ethics, Ignorance, Self-realization.

Examen de los fundamentos éticos de la virtud desde la Vedānta no dualista

Resumen

El presente documento investiga dos cuestiones a través de métodos de investigación comparativa; Primero, el Vedanta no dualista emprende cualquier tipo de discurso ético en sus investigaciones filosóficas; segundo, se pregunta cuál es la naturaleza de ese discurso. El documento demuestra que los reproches de la vida y la negación del mundo en el Vedanta no dualista se plantean principalmente desde el punto de vista de la ética normativa. Se concluye que sin la comprensión propuesta de la ética de la virtud apuntalada en el Vedānta no dualista, la comprensión recibida del sistema es incompleta y sostiene la idea errónea de que no existe un discurso ético significativo en su marco.

Palabras clave: Vedānta, Virtud, ética, Ignorancia, Autorrealización.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics, as it is generally understood, is an inquiry into the norms and principles governing human conduct. It is an examination of the value-world in which certain practices are recognized as commendable or deemed to be morally good. Such inquiry involves in its analysis of moral judgments, their nature and criteria, and also clarification of meanings of moral terms. It also delves into philosophical theorizing of

the same and to develop ideal patterns of behavior or rules of ethically sound praxis (e.g. virtues, principled action, practical reasoning, self-formation, care for the other) towards some greater end states (be that self-actualization, social integration, global harmony, or other-worldly salvation) (Sharma, 2008). In the field of human action, there has been a perennial question of *ought*, i.e., ‘what ought we to do?’ The question of *ought* does not exhaust the field of ethics as there is something more to this and that is ‘what one ought to be?’ The notion of ‘ought to be’ is fundamental to virtue ethics. The essence of virtue ethics lies not in abiding by the right course of action but in the cultivation of certain character traits. Virtue ethics, in the West dates back to Plato and Aristotle. Although, Plato talked about virtue, the first detailed and systematic discourse on virtue is found in Aristotle’s philosophy. Aristotle defines virtue as ‘the trait of mind or character that helps us achieve a good life’, which Aristotle argues is a life in accordance with reason (Lacewing, 2014). In Indian philosophy, virtues are defined in different ways and most of the Schools of Indian thought accept cultivation of certain dispositions, qualities, characteristics, and excellence that correspond to virtue. The focus of Indian Ethics, in general, has been upon the cultivation of virtues and it offers insights to address moral dilemmas through virtuous decision making.

In the light of the above, the research takes into consideration the Non-dualistic Vedānta and examines if the philosophy of cultivation of virtues is tenable in the framework of the Non-dualistic Vedānta. It is generally believed that Non-dualistic Vedānta does not entertain practical considerations of morality in its system. The

received understanding is that the metaphysical position of non-duality erodes independent existence of individual as a moral agent. Moreover, the principle of non-duality considers all otherness as false. The distinction between ‘I’ and ‘you’ is false, and therefore, the very framework of ethical action seems to be absent in the system of Non-dualistic Vedānta. All consideration of ethics is possible on the precondition of the distinction between ‘I’ and ‘You’ but if ‘other’ is a false appearance then there remains no scope of duties and obligations. It is the knowledge alone that removes the error of duality; consequently, knowledge alone becomes the goal of life. Non-dualistic Vedānta inquires the nature of reality and proclaims that the experience of the real is the goal of *jīva* – the individual self. The inquiry is termed as *Brahmajijñāsa*; which is quite different from inquiry into action or *dharma*. Knowledge (*jñāna*) is a search for ‘what is real’ or ‘what exists.’ Action, on the other hand, is concerned with what ‘should be sought for or discarded, what is good or bad. Since, the goal of Non-dualistic Vedānta is *mokṣa* – liberation, which is the experience of *Brahman* and this experience of *Brahman* is concerned with *what is* and not with what *ought* to be performed. Experience of *Brahman* is not a state to be attained or achieved; it is neither *heya* – reprehensible, nor *upādeya* - commendable, it is natural and unchangeable and no type of activity or devotional practice is needed to attain liberation (Antarkar, 2002).

Based upon the above metaphysical position, a criticism is leveled against Non-dualistic Vedānta that the system turns its back on all theoretical and practical considerations of morality. This is so

because the only aim of human life is liberation, which is a state of transcendence. *Jīva* is guided to seek his liberation and not to worry about its social and moral obligations. If *jīva* is exhorted to seek liberation then the quest for liberation demands total breaking away of the mind from the social world and needs to develop inquisition for the innermost reality of the self (Jhingran, 1999). The breaking of the mind from the social world implies that Non-dualistic Vedānta does not address ethics in its framework as ethics involves a rigorous inquiry into the problems of and the questions concerning the meaning of value, inquiry into the human conduct, classification of actions into right and wrong, and concrete existential modes of behavior of a social individual (Deutsch, 1973). Furthermore, if all that exists is *Brahman*, then there is no need for moral endeavor. One should aspire only for *Brahman* and leave all the worldly pursuits. Therefore, in the parlance of Non-dualistic Vedānta, ethics seems to be thrown out of the court. The present paper intends to examine and answer two important questions: (i) does Non-dualistic Vedānta have views on ethics? If the answer is negative then another question is raised, why so? And if the response is affirmative then (ii) what type of ethics does Non-dualistic Vedānta uphold? Is it deontological, consequentialist, or virtue ethics?

The first section of the paper examines if the Non-dualistic Vedānta has the scope of ethical discourse in its framework. Is ethics inherent in its metaphysics? The second section will substantiate that the charges leveled against the views of Non-dualistic Vedānta do not hold and that the system does not develop deontological or consequentialist ethical framework but it is inbuilt with virtue ethics.

2. OBJECTIONS EXAMINED

It is generally believed that Non-dualistic Vedānta does not address moral questions; the reason behind such an assertion is embedded in its metaphysical position that the world is empirically real but ontologically false and the goal of human life is to remove the falsity and realize the truth of one's being as non-different from *Brahman*. The empirical world is the mere appearance of the *Brahman*. *Brahman* is the ground (*adhithāna*) on which the superimposed (*āropita*) world appears with names and forms. The appearance is due to superimposition caused by Ignorance. The ignorance can be wiped out by intense meditational practice followed by the rigorous discipline which brings the realization of Non-duality. This realization of the true nature of self and the liberations are one and the same. The path of liberation is termed as *nivṛtti mārga* (renunciation) as contrasted to *pravṛtti mārga* (a life full of activity). *Pravṛtti* means inclination of the mind and senses towards the external world of pleasures. While *nivṛtti* means detaching the mind and senses from mundane pleasures and to direct the same towards the inward Self. Moral actions are possible only in *pravṛtti mārga*, while the search for liberation demands complete breaking away of the mind from the external world and its direction towards the innermost reality of the self (Jhingran, 1999). The pursuit of ethical actions and liberation is entirely unrelated. The way of knowledge leads us to the goal of liberation while the way of action is directed towards *abhudaya* – material accomplishment.

Moral actions signify the active involvement in the affairs of the world while liberation demands transcending such life and experiencing the blissful state of pure consciousness. The experience of the blissful state is transcendence from the moral considerations. This transcendence of the mundane life is interpreted by some thinkers as a negation of the life. In this context, Albert Schweitzer remarks that “Ethics is concerned with world and life affirmation while Indian thought is specially bound up with the world and life negation” (Ranganathan, 2007: 16). Ethics demands that men should involve themselves in the affairs of the world and make a judgment of the action being performed but if the active life is said to be renounced then how ethics can make a room? Daya Krishna, an Indian Philosopher, holds that action in the context of Non-dualistic Vedānta cannot contribute in attaining liberation since the action is the sign of one’s being in ignorance and hence in bondage (Krishna, 2007). Even if a person performs an ethically right action but he has to reap the consequences of that action either in this birth or in the rebirth. Moreover, in order to reap the fruits, one has to reborn. Thus, actions prove to be the cause of bondage and being the cause of bondage it cannot remove the fetters of bondage.

What follows from this, as Śāṅkara himself points out that action cannot be the instrument of liberation, in fact, he says: *brahmavidyā mokṣa sādhanam* - only knowledge can lead to liberation. Furthermore, he asserts *Na karmārabdho mokṣah* - liberation is not the result of *karma*. If action is not an instrument in a realization of the self, then ethical distinctions of good and bad action also lose its worth.

Since the ultimate goal of human life is not achieved through action; there remains no relevance of good or bad action in one's life. Why a person follows the path of truth since truth and falsity have no worth in attaining the goal of life? In such a situation one cannot establish that human action can have any relation with the highest good of life, and if the goal of life is not achieved through action then all action stands extraneous to the purpose of life. Now, let us examine if Śāṅkara negates the relevance of action altogether.

3. ETHICS OF NON-DUALISTIC VEDĀNTA

The charges that are leveled against Non-dualistic Vedanta are due to their metaphysical beliefs of Non-duality, ignorance etc. But, if one carefully examines the system then one can discover that the system presupposes a kind of ethical framework. Radhakrishnan proposes defensive arguments to establish that ethics is inherent in the metaphysical beliefs of the system. In Non-dualistic Vedānta metaphysics *Brahman* is the sole reality and individuals are a modification of *Brahman*. Non-dualistic Vedānta postulates absolute oneness of all the things. This metaphysical non-dualism requires us to look upon all the creation as one, upon all thinking beings and the objects of all thought as non-different. The individual is enjoined to cultivate a spirit of non-difference. If one *jīva* (individual self) is non-different from the other *jīva* then the sense of oneness should generate and this sense of oneness should cultivate the ethics of love and brotherhood. The main drive of ethical action is love and sense of

fraternity. Consequently, the metaphysics of Non-dualistic Vedānta naturally involves ethical considerations inherently. Radhakrishnan in one of his articles *The Ethics of the Vedānta* writes that charges against the Non-dualistic Vedānta rest upon a partial understanding of the system. In defense of the Non-dualistic Vedānta System Max Muller also claims that “Vedānta philosophy has not neglected the important sphere of ethics; but on the contrary, we find ethics in the beginning, ethics in the middle and ethics in the end” (Radhakrishnan, 1914: 19).

No doubt, the transcendence or renunciation from active life is prescribed, but only after the aspirant has reached a certain stage of meditation, not before that. As Gīta maintains,

If the aspirant finds that meditation has become spontaneous with him and he feels pleasure in withdrawing from the external world and retiring within, then it is beneficial for the aspirant not to engage himself in any outward action, because such action would interfere with the natural and easy flow of his meditation and thus would retard his progress. This transcendence from active life is temporary in order that the stage of *dhyāna* may attain maturity and consummation and thus lead to *jñāna* - realization (Brahma, 2007: 31).

Once *jñāna* is attained there remains no injunctions and prohibitions, the *jñānin* – one who has realized, performs an action but without any desire to attain the fruit of the action. Transcendence is mistaken as a negation of action and life (Radhakrishnan, 1999). Even a *jīvanmukta* – one who has realized the true nature of self in the same life, having realized truth remains in the phenomenal world of duality and performs an action without the sense of ‘doer’ or being an agent. The transcendence in Non-dualistic Vedānta simply means that the

realized person transcends the moral distinctions of ‘ought’ and ‘ought-not’. The moral code and *sāstric* injunctions are all inapplicable to the realized person. Since, he has inner appeal to the moral values; the moral actions come out spontaneously and automatically from the *jīvanmukta*.

The Indian *śāstras* prescribe four stages of life¹ which are insisted to be followed. To attain salvation one need not become a *sanyāsin* - a monk, but other orders of life like householder-ship etc. are equally required to be observed. Śāṅkara holds that after living the three stages of life one must become a *sanyāsin*. The three orders of life like *brahmacharya*, *gṛahastha* etc. ought to be observed before entering the fourth, i.e, *sanyāsa*, as scriptures prescribe so. A man must perform the rituals, sacrifices like *agnihotra* etc. in order to enter the fourth stage of life (Śāṅkaraċārya, 1960). It shows that Non-dualistic Vedānta never derogates the duties and other orders of life but gives them the equal importance as it gives to *sanyāsa*.²

Here, a question arises if action runs under the realm of superimposition, how can it lead one towards knowledge? To this, it can be said that actions persist so long as superimposition exists. Human beings are victims of the superimposed adjuncts and owing to these adjuncts they perform actions. Every action presupposes the

¹ In Hinduism Human life is believed to comprise four stages. These four stages are also known as ‘ashrama karmas’ These are : (a) Brahmacharya or the student stage, (b) Grihastha or the householder stage, (c) Vanaprastha or the hermit stage and (d) Sanyasa or the ascetic stage.

² However, there is an exception for that person who has already accomplished the virtues of all the early three stages of life, i.e., complete sense of detachment, can enter *sanyāsa* directly.

triode of mind, senses and body. But, when the affinity with these superimposed adjuncts gets abandoned then there remains no agent and no action and hence no talk of morality. The sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ provides meaning to morality; it reveals the fact that it is superimposition which gives our actions moral worth. Superimposition is the driving force of the universe as well as of morality. After the removal of superimposition, there remains no talk of agent and agency and there will be no distinction between good and bad and moreover there will be no talk of moral judgment. Thus, it can be said that ethical discourse is meaningful so long as superimposition exists. Action can be said to be the cause of bondage only when an action is performed with attachment to the fruit. Actions performed without any desire towards the fruit will not bind a person. Such desire-less actions do not bind us but positively helps us in attaining liberation (Mahapatra, 2009).

4. THE POSSIBLE RECONSTRUCTION

Moral action occupies a fundamental position in the parlance of Non-dualistic Vedānta. Ethics is mostly understood in this tradition in the context of liberation. Liberation, which is termed as *mokṣa* in this system is a state of being in which one has the realization of the identity of the *ātman* and *Brahman*. *Mokṣa* is a state which is free from ignorance and false projections (Anderson, 2012). The deep and persistent meditation on our innate self-results in the experience of *Brahman*; the experience of the non-duality which the individual has to

undergo is with the aid of mind. This experience is known as *brahmānubhava*. It is an ethico-spiritual experience which takes place in an empirical world with an ethical effort. Ethical actions prove to be an indirect aid to the attainment of the knowledge of the self; indirectly by directing the mind towards the experience of self.

As one knows one's pain and pleasure immediately through mind; it is claimed in the Vedantic tradition that to know or perceive the self is the nature of mind. Mind performs the function of immediate cognition. But the immediate cognition of self cannot take place unless the mind is purified by removal of its defilements through intense meditation. It is claimed that knowledge or experience of the *Brahman* depends on the *Brahman* and not on the will of the person. But one can experience the self only when the conditions required for such experience are fulfilled,³ just as one can know or experience that there is a pot on the table only when there is proper light, the perceiver is not suffering from any eye disease etc. Similarly, certain favorable conditions are to be fulfilled when one enters the path of liberation. The conditions include performance of certain actions which help in purification of mind. The mind can be kept calm and purified through performance of certain actions. Since, experience of self cannot take place unless mind is purified of all evil thoughts and selfish tendencies. So long as mind is filled with the impurities of selfishness, anger, miseries etc., it causes bondage and suffering. But when the same mind is purified through performance of actions like sacrifices, study of

³ The conditions like control of mind, senses and body, an intense desire to experience the absolute etc.

scriptures, sincerity, charity etc. it gets rid of certain impure tendencies and helps the practitioner in knowing the ever abiding bliss. Knowledge presupposes action and action in turn creates the suitable conditions for generation of higher knowledge. Ethics seems to be the first step in the ladder leading towards self-realization. The misunderstanding that since Śaṅkara speaks of the ultimate transcendence of the moral obligations, therefore, he disvalues the morality; does not hold. In his commentary on Gīta (*Gīta-bhāṣya*) he speaks of the performance of suitable actions leading to freedom from bondage. Nobody can attain perfection by renunciation of action (Śaṅkaracharya, 1897). The perfection for attaining the perfect stage of bliss can be achieved by actions alone. As in *Gīta-bhāṣya* Śaṅkara writes “*Brahmanas* seeks to know this self by the study of the Vedas, by *yajña* or worship” (Śaṅkaracharya, 1897: 14). Similarly, he also supports the performance of the *svadharma* or one’s own duties as advocated in Gīta. It leads to the opinion that the way to the transcendence lies in the ethical way of life. One does not have to renounce the action altogether, rather correct the attitude with which action is performed.

Actions performed with the desire for their fruit binds an individual to the cycle of birth and death. The sins arising out of the past actions act as a veil between the individual and the absolute. The impure tendencies arising from the past impressions or sins become a hurdle in attaining the liberation. When sins or the effects of *karmic* impressions are removed through the performance of certain actions; one becomes able to see things in right perspective, develop the sense

of discrimination between the eternal and non-eternal nature of things and thereby practice the discipline necessary for the attainment of the eternal entity. The discipline includes *śravana*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*.⁴ As per the prescribed discipline, it becomes important to remove the effect of past impressions by proper performance of rites and moral actions. *Smṛiti* also assert that “knowledge arises in those persons whose sins have been consumed through performance of rites” (Roodurmum, 2000: 9).

Apart from rites, inculcation of certain virtues is important for the perception of the self. In *Gīta-bhāṣya*, Śāṅkara asserts that “Knowledge springs in men on the destruction of the sinful *karma* when the self is seen in self as in a clean mirror” (Śāṅkaracharya, 1897: 12). Śāṅkara holds that without virtues the liberating knowledge cannot arise. In *Ātmabodha*, Śāṅkara makes it clear that highest degree of virtue is a prerequisite for receiving the doctrine of the self. This emphasis on virtue, the state of being purified from evil, is reiterated in *Upadeśasāhasrī*, where Śāṅkara writes that

knowledge of *Brahman* should be given to him whose mind has been purified who has control over his senses, and is free from all defects, who has practiced the duties enjoined by Vedas and is possessed of good qualities, who is always obedient to the teacher and aspires after liberation and nothing else (ShahKazemi, 2006: 12).

⁴ *Śravana* simply means study of the truth about the world, absolute and oneself being given in the Upāṇisadic texts with the aid of a *gūru*, *manana* is clearing the doubt about what one has studied and *nididhyāsana* or meditation is constant contemplation on the truth until one gets the insight of the everlasting truth.

The emphasis on the virtues leads to the view that Non-dualistic Vedānta presupposes a virtue-ethical model of morality. The ethics of self-transformation in order to achieve the highest Good of human life is therefore rooted in the inculcation of certain virtues. It leads to the view that the possibility of ethics in the system can be primarily a virtue ethics. The close look at the metaphysical and epistemological assertions of Non-dualistic Vedānta reveals that the criticism of various thinkers (both Eastern and Western) are based upon the deontological or consequentialist ethical outlook in which the worldly judgments of 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' are theorized, which obviously has little scope in the present system of thought. The questions of right, good, dutiful are relevant in the spatiotemporal world of names and forms; but if one has to realize the truth behind the spatiotemporal world then one has to set aside the temporal affairs or judgment and cultivate the virtues favorable for attaining the supreme knowledge. The cultivation of virtues is being emphasized by Śaṅkara in accordance with the ultimate aim of life. Ethics in this system is directed towards the realization of self and this realization cannot take place unless one transforms oneself up to the state which is favorable to the realization. This transformation can take place by the cultivation of certain virtues. Thus, one cannot find the normative model of ethics. In Gītā-bhāṣya, Śaṅkara holds that the possession of various virtues is necessary for the attainment of *Brahman*-knowledge. The virtues like humility, modesty, non-violence, patience, uprightness, self-restraint, dispassion, the absence of egoism, service to the teacher, steadfastness, non-attachment, equanimity, constancy in self-knowledge and

contemplation on *mokṣa* etc. are indispensable and direct means to liberation (Śaṅkaracharya, 1897).

Performance of moral actions are said to be the indirect but important means to liberation, but the cultivation of virtues are proximate and more direct means because the scriptures connect the virtues with *vidyā*. *Karma* is said to be indirect as they are helpful till the removal of ignorance and arousal of desire for acquiring knowledge after generation of desire for attaining knowledge the role of action ceases and knowledge leads to the immediate intuition of the absolute. In this context, Śaṅkara uses the horse simile – just as a horse is needed not for ploughing but only for drawing the chariot, so also *karma* is needed only for the emergence of *vidyā* and not for bringing about its result viz. liberation. Thus, *karma* drops on its own when inquisition – the desire for *vidyā*, is attained. Virtues, on the other hand, are close to liberation. Virtues like calmness, control of sense, mind and body etc. persist even after the emergence of *vidyā* or attainment of liberation (Sankaranarayanan, 2004). Śaṅkara attaches great value to wisdom which can be attained through the practice of virtue. From this, it can be asserted that the charges posed against non-dualistic Vedānta are based on the partial understanding of the system and these charges are leveled on the presumption of a deontological or consequentialist model of ethical discourse.

5. NATURE OF ETHICS IN CONTEXT OF NON-DUALISTIC VEDĀNTA

It becomes necessary to describe what the virtue ethics is and how the virtues are proposed in non-dualistic Vedānta. Generally, normative ethics (deontological and consequentialist) is concerned with the evaluation of action into good and bad, right and wrong on certain standards and lays emphasis on how one should act and what is the right course of action. It, more or less, develops theories of good and theories of right. But, virtue ethics focuses on the development of character, i.e., the behavior which shows high moral standards (Kraut, 2001). The character includes being kind, generous, honest, truthful, helpful, courageous etc. The opposite of virtue is vice, which simply implies the moral weakness or bad traits like greed, jealousy, selfishness etc. Virtue is a commendable character-trait which is well entrenched in its possessor. If a person practices charity for the sake of charity only (and not for any other petty intention) in order to help the poor and needy persons, only then a person can be recognized as virtuous. Each virtue generates an instruction- 'do what is charitable' 'do what is honest' and each vice a prohibition- 'do not steal,' 'do not tell a lie' etc. Thus individual character is the key element in virtue ethics (Hursthouse, 1999).

Virtue ethics originates from the ethics of Plato and Aristotle. Plato emphasizes four virtues in particular, which were later called cardinal (major) virtues; wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Other important virtues are fortitude, generosity, self-respect, good temper, sincerity etc. In addition, to advocate good character traits we should avoid bad character traits or vices such as cowardice, injustice, vanity, insensibility etc. Following Plato, Aristotle also recognizes

virtues a character-trait that human beings need for attaining the ultimate *Good* of human life, i.e., *Eudaimonia* or ‘living well.’ The goal of human life is happiness or living well and this goal can be achieved by using reason well in course of life and performing virtuous activities (Kraut 2001). The virtues help an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* and lack of virtue hinders the way toward *eudaimonia*. In Non-dualistic Vedānta, the development of individual character is emphasized but with a view to attain the highest good of human life, i.e., liberation. The *jīva* is a universal self-hidden behind a finite guise. The *jīva* has inner urge to go beyond the empirical, to act for something better and something higher. This keen desire to transcend the present state of existence is indicative of the fact that *jīva*’s real self is not individual self but the absolute or universal self. The real nature of *jīva* is not contradictory and relative, but non-contradictory and absolute. In other words, *jīva* is potentially *Brahman* and the aim of ethics is to convert the potentiality into actuality. In order to achieve the actual state of pure consciousness, *jīva* has to rise from the level of selfishness to that of self-transcendence, from narrow sensual satisfaction to the state of equipoise and equilibrium and from personal, individualized and egoistic attachment to the impersonal, universalized and absolute transcendence. The rise to the state of pure consciousness requires the modification in the behavior of man through the practice of various virtues. It is the practice of various virtues which are said to be the foundation stone in the realization of the self. This can be substantiated from the starting point of the Śāṅkara’s commentary on *Brahmasūtra*. The very first *sūtra* ‘*athātho brahma jñāsa*’, i.e., ‘now after (accomplishing) this, there arises the

desire to know the *Brahman*'. In the *sūtra*, 'after this' signifies that experience of *Brahman* is a consequent event, which ought to have been produced by some other preceding event. The other event includes a practice of four virtues. These virtues are to be practiced necessarily in order to enter the path of liberation. The virtues are:

1. *Nityānitya-vastu-viveka*: The ability to discriminate between eternal and non-eternal nature of things. When an aspirant knows the difference between transitory and non-transitory things then he aspires to find out the eternal element in life and detach himself from attaining the transitory things in the mundane world.
2. *Ihāmūrtartha-phala-bhoga-virāga*: This is the absence of desire for securing material happiness here or elsewhere. It is cultivating the spirit of non-attachment for all selfish ends.
3. *Samā-damādi-ṣaṭ-sampatti*: It refers to the control of mind and it involves six other virtues like calmness (*śama*), self-restraint, (*dama*), withdrawal from sense objects (*uparati*), forbearance or bearing all the vicissitudes of life with absolute indifference (*titikṣā*), faith in the teacher and scriptures (*śraddhā*), and constant concentration of the self on *Brahman* (*smādhāna*).
4. *Mumukṣuttva*: It is an intense desire for attaining liberation. Desire is the main drive for every activity, so in order to undertake the discipline that is required for self-realization, there must be a yearning to know the Real.

These pre-requisite virtues for attaining the supreme goal of human life establish that Śaṅkara never derogates ethics or morality from an empirical plain. He ascribes ethics as an unavoidable antecedent for the experience of *Brahman*. The very fact that discrimination between eternal and non-eternal, self-devotion, self-control and aspiration to attain *mokṣa* are accepted as pre-condition, as well as qualification of the inquirer, is enough to prove that how a virtuous life is necessary for *Brahman*-realization (Sharma, 1965). An objection is raised that the knowledge of *Brahman* is eternal and there is no need for action to produce Knowledge of Self. To this the Advaitins responds that in case of the transparent piece of crystal, when it is concealed by any colored object lying next to it, then one may need to remove the object before one can see the crystal in its true form. Similarly, the *Brahman* is like a transparent piece of the crystal being veiled by ignorance, past *karmic* impressions and bad dispositions of mind. Unless these impediments are removed one cannot realize the true self (Satchidananda, 1989, 283). So, actions are to be performed in order to remove the effect of ignorance and previous impressions. The mind which is the receiver of *Brahman*-intuition needs to be purified of all evil and selfish thoughts; intuition results from the spontaneous awakening of mind when it is purified from all evils.

The four cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage, temperance and justice) advocated by Plato correspond to the four fold aid given by Non-dualistic Vedānta. In the first aid '*nityānitya-vastu-viveka*', the word *viveka*, literally stands for discretion, is purposely used by

Śāṅkara because a person without discretion is not fit to attain the highest knowledge which is the ultimate goal. As per the second aid ‘*ihāmūtrārtha-phala-bhoga-virāga*’, when a person first realizes that the soul is permanent and the mind, sense and body are transitory; that the spiritual aspect of man is abiding and physical as well as mental aspect are non-abiding, only then he does realize that the sensual enjoyment though soothing and pleasing are temporary and ultimately painful. The intellect of the inspirer of liberation revolts against the satisfaction of the sensual desires, it compels the individual to do justice to himself by not being misled by the temporary pleasure of the mundane world. The virtue of justice is responsible for detachment and the spirit of renunciation and self-devotion. Thus, the second qualification of the aspirant is based on the virtue of ‘justice’, which means that neither the blind satisfaction of desires nor the suppression of desire, but the harmonization of desires should be taken as the ideal of an aspirant (Sharma, 1965).

The third prerequisite for an aspirant is the cultivation of the good habit of peace of mind, self-control, alertness, and faith can be taken as a virtue of ‘temperance’. There can be no peace of mind without proper toleration, forbearance and endurance; and all this is possible only when a person has self-control and leads the life of temperance and moderation. This attitude of balance brings ‘faith’ in the mind of the aspirant. This faith alone leads the individual to become courageous to sacrifice the transitory pleasures for the sake of eternal bliss and peace. Faith in the aspirant enables him to accomplish higher virtue, i.e., aspiration for liberation, which can be compared

with the virtue of ‘courage’ (Ibid). These four qualifications of the inquirer into *Brahman* are very much similar to the four virtues as given by Plato and Aristotle.

The way to act rightly, according to virtue ethics, is not simply to follow certain rules, or seek pleasant consequences, but first and foremost to become a certain kind of person. The Non-dualistic Vedānta proposes first and foremost a path of self-transformation that seeks the elimination of negative states of mind (vices) and their replacement by positive states (virtues). The positive state of mind in turns generates the desire to pursue the discipline of *śravana*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana* and the discipline leads to the realization of self.

Before entering the practice of discipline, i.e., *śravana*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana*, one has to attain the purity of character. One cannot understand the *mahāvākya* – the great statements of *Upaniṣads* - ‘tat tvam asi’ unless one knows its implication. Those whose intellects are impure cannot understand the validity of the identity asserted by the text ‘tat tvam asi’ or ‘thou art that.’ The identity between the *jīva* denoted by ‘thou’ whose nature is that of the agent, enjoyed and the supreme self, denoted by ‘that’ whose nature is eternal purity, intelligence and indifference. But those of pure intellects whose internal impurities have undergone attrition by means of charity, sacrifices, austerity, fasting, etc., those who are endowed with faith, having understood the compatibility of the terms ‘that’ and ‘thou’ will understand their identity without failure (Roodurmum, 2002). Mere understanding of identity is not enough unless it is realized.

Understanding of the identity, i.e., ‘thou art that’ is to be transformed into the realization of the truth of *aham-brahma-asmi*.⁵

Moreover, virtues play an important role for construction of an ideal society. A society tends to be harmonious if all the individuals develop certain moral traits. The acts lacking virtue will bring about severe consequence to both the individual and the society. Virtues are helpful for achieving *abhudayā*, i.e., material prosperity, and *niḥśreyas*, i.e., self-realization; which are the intent of the *dharma*. Virtues consist of eschewing falsehood, deceit, hypocrisy, pride and boastfulness. Non-deceit and non-crookedness in speech, body and mind constitute truthfulness. The practice of virtues facilitate the social well-being, for instance, the immoral actions like violence, theft etc. take place out of the desire or aversion against someone, which is a mark of lack of self-restraint. The control of senses and mind would control the desires and aversion which is the cause of social conflicts (Ranganatham, 2007). Similarly, the practice of celibacy destroys afflictions and purifies the mind of all evil thoughts. Virtues, therefore, are the means to improve the well-being of an individual and its society on the whole.

For the person who is in search of truth, the practice of virtues is a necessary precondition (Śaṅkaraçārya, 1960). Since, the virtues like calmness, control of senses etc. transform the man’s empirical self

⁵ Realization takes place after ignorance is removed. The removal of ignorance requires knowledge and generation of knowledge requires cultivation of virtues which leads to inner and outer control. The outer control means control of external senses for acquiring the transitory pleasure and inner control means the control of mind to wander here and there and pointing mind towards the permanent entity.

into the spiritual being. When the mind is purged of all impurities and attachment, aversion, delusion and other afflictions, it can acquire knowledge and intuition of *Brahman*. The virtues are said to supervene the sacrifices and rituals as it is said in the scriptures, “therefore, one who knows it to be so, sees the self, in the self itself, by becoming calm, subdued, satisfied, patient and collected” (Śaṅkaraçārya, 1960: 11). The performance of sacrifice may remove the sins and direct the mind or generate a desire to search for the inner being but mind may concentrate on the inner being only when the mind is kept calm, detached from all mundane desires and aversions etc. Moreover, the inner being which is of the nature of pure consciousness cannot be realized unless one becomes pure by character and nature. Various virtues are to be inculcated for the generation of knowledge and realization of self-thereof.

6. CONCLUSION

Based upon the above discussion, it can be said that the celebrated charges against Non-dualistic Vedānta, that it leaves no space for moral discourse, have been raised in want of a deontological or consequentialist framework of ethics, whereas the Non-dualistic Vedānta fulfils all the prerequisites of being seen as a virtue ethical system of moral philosophy. However, the distinctness of the system is that the virtues prescribed therein are not the final end of life; rather they serve as necessary traits for the attainment of a higher goal of life. They prescribe certain moral traits as penultimate value, not the

highest goal of life. The argument that the Non-dualistic Vedānta philosophy works on world and life denial principle, is quite a superficial observation about the system. It also follows from the above discussion that without the proposed understanding of the underpinned virtue ethics in the Non-dualistic Vedānta, the received understanding of the system is incomplete and sustains a misconception that there is no meaningful ethical discourse possible in its framework. However, a clear distinction has to be made between religious rights or Vedic sacrifices and moral actions *per se*, though virtues serve as the foundation for both of them.

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