



# ANALYSIS OF SPINOZA'S THEORY OF ETHICS

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## Abstract

Spinoza is generally known as a determinist in his philosophical system. We are aware that, traditionally speaking, a determinist is seen to deny any moral responsibility, because a person who is not free to act voluntarily cannot be held morally responsible for his actions. But a reading of Spinoza may reveal that such a conclusion should not be taken as an argument for pleading that it necessarily supports immorality and excludes the application of moral for the coherence of the human conduct. Both, the life of Spinoza, as well as his views, correctly understood and interpreted, will belie such an inference. It is, therefore, obvious that a re-appraisal of Spinoza's ethics is very necessary and relevant for arriving at a view which is satisfying, and is also maintainable in the context of the contemporary knowledge about the world and the man existing within this world.

**Keywords:** Argument, Appraisal, Distinction, Peculiar, epistemology and convictions.

## Explanation/Analysis

The study of what is right or good in conduct is known as Ethics or Moral Philosophy. It is the general theory of conduct and considers the actions of man in respect of their rightness or wrongness, or their tendency to help man to realize good or bad. Ethics is derived from the Greek language and conveys the meaning of character, custom, or habit.

In a similar manner, moral derived from the Latin *mores*, means habits or customs. Ethics, however, has come a long way from these earlier notions of customs and manners determining the normativeness of conduct or explicating the ideals which men were required to regard good for realization. Today, an ethical or moral statement may "assert that some particular action is right or wrong; or that actions of certain kinds are so; it may offer a distinction between good and bad characters or dispositions; or it may propound some broad principle from which many more detailed judgements of these sorts might be inferred.....".<sup>1</sup> The ethicists, in recent times, have occupied themselves either with the exposition of these general principles or attempted a logical analysis of the moral predicates.

We also come across many other definitions of ethics offered by various thinkers. Most of these definitions express the emphasis which the thinkers want to make the central point of their ethical theory. The following definitions of Ethics illustrate this view. Ethics has been defined as the, “Practical normative science of the rightness or wrongness of human conduct as known by the natural reason”. According to another definition, Ethics is the art of directing man’s action to the production of the greatest quantity of happiness on the part

of those whose interest is involved in it. Yet another thinker defines Ethics as a science that deals with the Ideals, ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’, and ‘wrong’ as applied to human conduct.”<sup>1</sup>

These definitions raise various questions of importance for a critical study of standards for judging the rightness or wrongness of conduct. For example, we shall be interested in knowing how this term, that is, ‘conduct’ is to be understood. What kind of events may, and what may not, properly be called ‘conduct’. Similarly questions about many facts which are, or not, facts relevant for moral judgement are also important questions, for a proper definition of Ethics. We may in general say that Ethics deals with the values and with the ought. These constitute the contents of our moral judgements. As rightly pointed out by G.E.Moore, “in the vast majority of cases, where we make statement involving any of the term virtue, vice, duty, right, wrong, ought, good, bad, we are making ethical judgements; and if we wish to discuss the truth, we shall be discussing a point of Ethics.”<sup>2</sup>

So much is not disputed; but it ails very far short of defining the province of Ethics. That province may, indeed, be defined as the whole truth about that which is at the same time, common to all such judgements and peculiar to them. Moore seeks to answer the questions: “What is it that is thus common and peculiar?” According to G.B.Moore, we find that many ethical philosophers are disposed to accept as an adequate definition of ‘Ethics’ the statement that it deals with the question what is good or bad in human conduct. They hold that these inquiries are properly confined to ‘conduct’ or to ‘practice’; they hold that the name ‘Practical Philosophy’ covers all the matter with which it has to do. He uses the word ‘Ethics’ to cover an enquiry for which, at all events, there is no other word, the general enquiry into what is good.

The good is related with the German gut. A thing is generally said to be good when it is valuable for some end. Similarly when we speak of conduct is good, we may mean that it is serviceable for the end or ideal that we have in view. The term ‘Good’ is also used for something which is a means to an end. Thus the Summun Bonum or supreme good, means the supreme end at which we aim. Thus Ethics is the study of rightness or goodness of human conduct.”<sup>1</sup>

If men are mistaken in distinguishing right from wrong, we also want to know why, and how such wholesale error can be accounted for. Without prejudging the case in either way, Ethics is a necessary study with a large and legitimate field of inquiry. The subject matter of Ethics is human conduct, those actions which a man perform consciously and will-fully, and for which he is held accountable. The point of view from which ethics studies human conduct is that of its rightness or wrongness. The distinction of right and wrong extends to every topic of reflection and to all that human self-determination of act or attitude may

effect. Whatever is decidable or can be determined by deliberation is right and is wrong. This distinction extends to all that reflects the possible self-Governments of agents, like ourselves, but does not extend to what lies beyond our control. The significant words here are 'responsible', 'justified', or 'unjustified', 'correct', or 'incorrect'.

Rightness in concluding and believing is, perhaps, principally important to ourselves. Even if what we think should be finally significant only by affecting what we do, still the thinking is a separate activity often carried out at some other time than the doing to which it is pertinent, and we have come to attach to truth and to the rightness of our thinking an important distinction from that of my doing. It is the rightness of our doing, however, with which other people are directly concerned. Whatever a man thinks, if his thinking it never moves him to do anything, or to refrain from doing, it will cause no harm to others at least nor produce any good. Ethics, being pre-eminently concerned with right and wrong in relation to other, is primarily directed upon the question of rightness in what to do.

Rightness which is attributed to an act, if and only if, it is rightly judged that its consequences are such as it will be right to bring about, may be called objective rightness. The rightness of the judgement is a rightness of the kind which is ascribable to beliefs and judgements of facts. But a fact so judged is the property of the possible consequences of action-their being such as are right to bring about. What makes it right to bring about the consequences of an act, is one thing. What makes the judgement that a contemplated act is one having such consequences is another thing the same sort of thing that makes any judgement of fact right; namely the weight of the evidence and correctness in drawing the conclusion from that evidence. It takes both these things to make an act objectively right. That is, an act is objectively right if it is judged that its consequences are such as it will be right to bring about that judgment is correct.

The achievement of the good is desirable and conformity to the right is imperative. And second, nothing is strictly right or wrong except some possible activity or the manner of it, whereas in an equally strict sense anything under the sun may be good or bad. But what is significant to speak of the imperative, is none too clear. And the fact that good and bad are attributable to things of diverse categories includes the fact that, amongst other things, action and decisions may be good or bad as well as right or wrong. Added to this is the consideration that, language term applied originally and strictly to one class of things may come to extended to whatever else is commonly associated with things of that class, and difficulties of marking off the right from the good, the wrong from the bad, become extreme.

It does not help in this connection, but binds, that ethicists frequently speak as if moral rightness were the only category of the right, thus obscuring the question whether the essential relation we must seek is one which holds between moral rightness and moral good at large, or between the right in general and the good in general. Also it does not help, but hinders, that those who concern themselves with value theory sometimes take value as comprehending both the good and the right, thus construing judgement of the right as one type of valuations and making the term 'value' significant of the normative in general.

However, we may now return to the question, 'How the normative is known?' The problem of epistemology occupies an important place in ethics and has influenced the meaning in which the moral predicates are used and understood by ethicists. Sometime solutions of problems of moral epistemology have led to the development of different ethical theories. We may refer to an important development of one such moral theory which has sought a solution of various problems of ethics by pointing to a kind of institution which enables a man to know the normative. Although the more distinctive expression of the intuitive type of moral theory is for the most part of a modern development, the intuitive approach to ethics has strong roots in the thought of the Greek philosophers.

However, in various assessments of the contemporary Ethical theories the central problem of the ethical theories are produced to two areas of moral speculations. The first pertains to the meaning of such moral predicates as good, right, ought, duty, and other opposites. Of course, this does not mean that the problem of ethical theory is to state the arbitrary manner in which some people use this words in given language, nor any special manner in which any one may resolve to use these words. The meaning of moral predicates may loosely be said to include characteristics or relations which moral experiences commonly intends to attribute to objects, action, or characters when it say that are good or right or ought to be done or bad or wrong or ought not to be done. It is a well known fact that philosophers here differed widely among themselves in proposing the meanings of moral predicates in above respects. A student of Ethics will, therefore, be naturally interested in understanding the general treatment of the subjects as well as special contribution by different moral thinkers. The above question of the meanings of the moral predicates also leads to the fundamental problem of Ethics, namely 'what it is that makes a thing good or right or morally binding. It is obvious that the second question depends upon the answer to the first because unless we know what right actually means, we can hardly know what makes anything right.

The second problem is related to the characteristics that an object or act must have in order to possess, also the characteristics which moral experience intends in using the words good, right, and similar others expressions. Then where certain moral theories that there is some single element the possession of which making any objects or actions that have it good or right, the first and second positions may be dealt with simultaneously. This is possible because that which alone makes anything right or good may be treated as right or good. However, this may only be done for practical reasons without overlooking the distinctions between what moral terms means and what it is that makes it applicable. In addition to these, moral theories may also deal with questions pertaining to the nature the subjects of moral judgements, the character of moral standards the objectively or relatively of moral judgements, the nature of moral knowledge, the character of moral responsibility and merit, including some treatment of the problems relating to ethical motivation. 1

Spinoza, for instance, is also very acutely engaged in outlining a moral theory grounded in the concept of bondage and human freedom. Kant in a different but a related sense says that the questions of freedom takes the form of deep-seated anti-thesis between the interests of the scientific or intellectual consciousness on the one hand and the moral and religious convictions on the other hand. To raise, the question of freedom at all is to transcend the ground of Psychology, unless, indeed, we have got a psychology. Problem of freedom

may thus be said to be grounded in human nature. To discuss is to raise the validity of the moral consciousness. It is a philosophical and moral questions and not a question of physics or empirical psychology.

According to Spinoza freedom is made solely by our ideas becoming adequate. When our ideas are adequate, we are no longer moved by something external to us; what initiates our movements is within us, and by definition we are free. The view that we become free by understanding the causes of our actions required elucidation in two ways. First, Spinoza is not involved in denying the occurrence of the familiar experience of being able to identify the emotion which move one but of still being subject to them. To understand the cause of our actions is not to identify. An emotion in common-sense fashion, for such an emotion is a confused idea. It is to replace the son fused idea with an adequate idea. We are delivered from the bondage of passion by understanding because the mind has greater power over the passion and is less subject to them, in so far as it understands all things as necessary. It is crucial for Spinoza that rational understanding is not merely a means to something else. It is atonce means and end. The goal which understanding reveal a are the goals of freedom and rationality and these are one and the same. This freedom, which consists in knowing the causes which moves one, and thus making the causes internal and not external to agent, is of course not only compatible with but also requires complete determinism. Belief in free decision is among the illusion, the confused ideas, which the free man has discarded. From, this there follows consequences for the understanding the moral predicates.

## CONCLUSION

Philosophers have, for some time, been fascinated by the empirical methodology of verification and its extension to the solution of philosophical problems, which were, traditionally, sought to be resolved speculatively. The areas marked by metaphysics and Ethics were very seriously threatened by the supporters of physical and sensors verification theory of meaning. The empiricist, including the Logical Positivist, for a while was both helpful as well as menacing. He was helpful when he emphasised the need for a more strenuous sharpening and refinement of concepts, but he also declared as meaningless the ethical concepts with concepts with which he found himself helpless in its newly acquired zeal. A student of Ethics, however, can discern that a more philosophical cogitation is mow enabling the ethicises to have a second and a third look at their problem and its solution.

The contemporary freshness and relevance of Spinoza may also be seen by the interest taken by some Indian writers to suggest a comparative study of Samkars and Spinoza. It appears that an Indian mind used to the non-dualist tradition can greatly understand and appreciate the intellectual or “way of knowledge” approach to the nature of reality as well as to the realization of freedom from bondage. We have, in the present brief essay sought to restate some of the important aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy which have great bearing on a meaningful understanding of the moral problem. Our study constitutes an analysis as well as reiteration of his ethical theory.



We are told by Spinoza that everything has two fundamentally different but inseparably correlated aspects, a physical and psychical. He then proceeds to expound the theory of relation between the two inseparable aspects. According to him, knowledge is a spiritual state. But as our actions are dependent on what we are, and what we know is dependent on what we do, the knowledge we have is intertwined with our character. The type of life we live varies in accordance with knowledge.

A study of the ethical theory of Spinoza is also very edifying for man. It seeks to assure man of his spiritual possibilities. Contrary to certain current phrases describing knowledge as something 'produced', Spinoza was describing knowledge as something discovered or realized. It is not something external to man. Spinoza appears to be articulating a view which closely resembles the contentions of the Idealists, inspite of the fact that many of his interpreters prefer to call him a naturalist. Let us here recall what we have earlier cited in our present study. In Spinoza's own words, "human mind has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God." It may be easy to see that inspite of the different terminology adopted by Spinoza, he can be shown to, partly, agree with the great Idealist traditions of Plato in the West and non-dualist in India. We have called such a view as edifying for men because knowledge, in this view, is not something external and imposed on man, but his very essence. The man, therefore, can be assured of the certitude of his knowledge when he seeks to transcend his ignorance and confusion and the passive emotions connected therewith. The ethical doctrine of Spinoza is, therefore, very reassuring in the moral and cognitive, as well as affective possibilities for man. In this process new meanings emerge for the traditional notions of man regarding truth and beauty; the two are seen intertwined with ethical goodness. The universe now is not seen as a chaos but a well ordered cosmos, which displays its kindness for man not by responding arbitrarily to his pathetic prayers for granting exceptions from the laws of the universe, but promises much exalted freedom which comes from realizing the rational nature of the reality sought and realized by him. The happiness resulting from such a secured sense of freedom is more enduring the deeply satisfying. It also reveals the moral majesty of man as well as calls forth for a fresh understanding of the ethical predicates used to evaluate the conduct of man. Spinoza has sought to provide the key to the possible direction in which the new grammar of ethical predicates and the coherence of the ethical theories may find consummation. One need not agree with Spinoza in all that he has said but one may not deny him the credit for his great insight displayed in his ethical theory.

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