

## **The Priority of the Right or the Good and A Study of Prof. Kâmalakar Mishra's Concept of Moksa**

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### **Abstract**

*The concepts of the right and the good are two central concepts of moral philosophy. Right is concerned with the entitlement of performing or not performing certain actions or being or not being in certain states according to the rules and regulations. The approach to ethics which is centered on the concept of the right is called deontological ethics. On the other hand, the good is concerned with the achievement of goals, the end or consequence of an action. The approach to ethics which is centered on the concept of the good is called teleological ethics which is by and large consequentialist in its approach. In this paper I will be taking consequentialist approach for the understanding of the good as the issue of the priority of the right or the good can be understood more clearly by contrasting this approach with the deontological one.*

*In the Western moral philosophical tradition, the issue of the priority of the right or the good has been one of the prevalent issues of moral philosophy. This issue is very important in moral philosophy as it deals with the question: what ought we to do? What should guide our actions: the right or the good, rules or principles or the end or consequences of an action? In this paper I will primarily look into this issue and attempt to find out how Prof. Kâmalakar Mishra's concept of Moksha can give us insight in resolving it.*

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## **Introduction**

Deontological approach emphasizes on identification and application of moral rules. According to this approach, an action can only be considered to be an ethical act if it follows moral rules regardless of its consequences. The central concern is to identify moral rules which can guide our actions. It is our duty to perform actions in accordance with the moral rules. Now, the question is: how do we determine them? What can provide the rational ground for the determination of the moral rules? The divine command, the dictates of practical reason, intuitions have been admitted as some of the possible answers to this question. Immanuel Kant is one of the most significant deontological moral theorists. According to Kant, actions only done from a sense of duty, and not influenced by desires are moral acts. The right is determined by the rule of reason and not by feelings. Reason is not a slave of our inclinations and desires. Reason is autonomous and a priori. When man acts according to his own rational and autonomous will, without being influenced by his inclinations and desires, then only he does his 'duty'.

According to Kant, good or happiness should not be defined as the moral law because they cannot provide an objectively valid ground for the moral law. The moral principle is prior to and independent of the good. If the good defines the moral principle, we cannot explain the sense of unconditional internal universal obligation to follow the rule. According to Kant, moral principles should determine the good and not vice versa.

The moral worth of an action lies in the principle itself. Though the act may be good, desire to be good should not be the condition of morality. Happiness and creating goodness are important but these are different from the moral claims. It is our reason which tells us that something is right. Reason guides us and anybody guided by reason will achieve the good. Therefore, Kant says that the moral law determines the conception of the good and not vice versa.

Howard Williams clarifies this position of Kant by quoting this passage from Kant's text *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*:

An action done from duty had its moral worth, not in the purpose to be attained by it, *but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon*; it depends, therefore, not on the realization of the object of the action, but solely on the principle of volition in accordance with which, irrespective of all objects of the faculty of desire, the action has been performed. (31)

According to Kant, reason should not be the slave of emotions or desires and only then a man can exist as a free, rational and an enlightened being.

On the other hand, consequentialists hold that actions and intentions could only be assessed on the basis of the result they bring about. Alexander and Moore have argued, "Consequentialists thus must specify initially the states of affairs that are intrinsically valuable—often called, collectively, "the Good." They then are in a position to assert that whatever choices increase the Good, that is, bring about more of it, are the choices that it is morally right to make and to execute. The Good in that sense is said to be prior to "the Right."<sup>1</sup>

Consequentialists differ over what that Good is. Some say its self-realization, some say its pleasure or happiness. The essence of the consequentialist position is that an action would be right only insofar as it maximizes these good-making states of affairs being caused to exist and morally right actions are those which increase the Good. For the present paper, I have taken Mill's consequentialist position into consideration. According to Mill, actions should be assessed in terms of their effects and those actions should be performed which can maximize human happiness. He states:

The creed which accepts as the foundations of morals "utility" or the "greatest happiness principle" holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure. (Mill 1906, chapter 2)

Happiness, according to Mill, is desirable in itself. Hence, those actions are right which are inclined towards achieving the good, i.e. the maximization of happiness. He argues that a person does desire his own happiness for its own sake and that, therefore, happiness as such is desired by and desirable for its own sake for humanity as a whole ("The aggregate of all persons").

Now, on the one hand deontologists say that the right is prior to and independent of the good and on the other hand, consequentialists claim that the rightness of any action is dependent on how capable is that action to achieve the good, understood in the form of happiness in case of Mill. Therefore there is a conflict between these two moral principles: whether our actions should be guided by the right or the good? Whether the right has priority over the good or the good has priority over the right? Both concepts are concerned with questions what one should do and what should be guiding principle of our actions, the right or the good?

This issue of the priority of the right over the good has not been the matter of attention in Indian philosophical tradition. Generally, the clear distinction between the right and the good is not evident in this tradition. However, the primacy of performing duty in one's life regardless of the results of the action has been one of the fundamental principles of the Gita. In this paper I have attempted to locate this particular issue in the concept of purushartha in philosophy of Prof. Kamlakar Mishra. Purushartha is a key concept of ethics in Indian philosophy which holds that there are four objects of human pursuit or goals of human life: *Artha*, *Kâma*, *Dharma* and *Moksha*. In his article *Bhartiya Purushartha Siddhanta ka Rachanatmak Punarikshan*, Prof. Kamlakar Mishra has categorized these four values into *preya* and *shreya*. According to him, Material values, *artha* and *kâma* come under the category of *preya*, moral value *dharma* comes under the category of *shreya* and in spiritual value *moksha*, *preya* and *shreya* get harmonized. Before we look into this categorization, it is required to elaborate the concepts of *preya* and *shreya*.

These two concepts are found in *Katha Upanishad*, where Yama teaches Nachiketa that as a human being he can make choices and every moment, whether

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he sees it or not, he has to make a choice between two alternatives in what he does, what he thinks and what he says. These two alternatives are named as *preya* and *shreya*. *Preya* is the lure of pleasurable sensual enjoyment and temporary ego satisfaction, whereas *shreya* is generally understood in terms of the commitment to do that which is beneficial and good in the long run, that which will help us attain the lasting eternal fulfillment of self-realization. When our actions are controlled by desires and demands of our senses, and we are in ignorance we follow the path of *preya*, through which we cannot realize our true eternal nature. On the other hand, the path of *shreya* is based on *vidya*, knowledge. It means having right understanding about the true purpose and meaning of life, for that we need to discipline our mind and senses, and live a balanced lifestyle.

The concepts of *preya* and *shreya* have different implications in the philosophy of Prof. Kâmalakar Mishra. He has understood *preya* in the form of happiness which is associated with *artha* and *kâma*, and *shreya* in the form of the right and has been categorized with *dharma*, which according to him, is understood in terms of the right, truth, good, virtue, etc. Since he has taken *preya* and *shreya* both as an end-in-themselves as far as the values of a human life is concerned, we can understand *preya* as the good and *shreya* as the right. Now, the question is, in our practical behavior, how can we determine which one is more important, and whether one has priority over the other or have equal importance? How can we resolve the conflict between the right and the good?

According to Prof. Mishra, at practical level, *preya* is not always in conflict with *shreya*. There can be some pleasures which are in accordance with the right. Although, at one place he considers *preya* as end-in-itself, but later on clarifies that only those pleasures can be acceptable which are in accordance with the right. This does not mean that pleasure do not have any importance in themselves, but some forms of pleasures are so centered around the sensual pleasures that instead of becoming a means, they become a hindrance in our moral behavior. However, it is not wise to ignore the role they play in our moral behavior. Therefore, in order to make pleasure valuable, Prof. Mishra argues for the sublimation of pleasure. Through this sublimation, pleasure can be realized in the form of love and devotion. The benefit of the sublimation of pleasure is that the contradiction between the pleasure and the right, between *preya* and *shreya* fades out and they become one. It happens because pleasure is now more in accordance with the right. Hence, the value of pleasure is not independent of the right. On the other hand, although the right has been considered to be more valuable than pleasure, it is not independent of it. Sometimes the end achieved by any right action determines the rightness of that action. Prof. Mishra states: "Speaking the truth is *shreya* (the right), however saying something good is better than speaking the truth. Therefore, that, which is for the absolute good of all is, truth." (p. 128)

In this way, unlike Kant, Prof. Mishra accepts that right actions cannot be determined or interpreted independent of the goods they achieve. According to him, with the change in time and context, the parameters of morality change, the examples

of morality change.

One point is to be noted here, that pleasure or *kâma* is different from the concept of the good, which can also be understood in terms of the ultimate end of human life. The meaning of *kâma* is understood as the consequence of any particular action in the form of a particular good, such as pleasure or happiness. However, the conflict between *kâma* and *dharma* does not appear at the pleasures of lowest level but it comes out when the higher level of pleasure is under consideration. Although the right and the good are interdependent, in case of any conflict between them, following the right in action is given priority over the good. However, it does not mean that the good, such as pleasure should be undermined and suppressed in one's life because in that case it may end up in the disintegration of one's personality and may finally cause mental illness. So Kant's extreme position regarding the priority of the right over the good cannot be acceptable because the suppression of desires cannot diminish its effects, but the sublimation of desires can help one in performing one's duty.

The problem of the priority of the right over the good primarily comes because of the conflict between one's good with that of others. Generally, in the matter of one's own life a person's actions are controlled by his or her own pleasure or happiness, whereas, in the matter of others, the question of performing the right action comes into the question. This conflict can only be resolved by resolving the conflict of interests with regard to self and others.

In Prof. Mishra's philosophy this conflict gets resolved at the stage of *moksha* because at this stage the difference between the self and the other is not there. After the attainment of *moksha*, *preya* and *shreyas* synthesize with each other. It is the stage of synthesis between one's own interests and other's interests. This is the stage of 'love' and spirituality. In love, there is no difference between the self and the other. At this level, morality becomes spontaneous and natural. It is egoless and the actions are performed naturally, and not because of any exerted duty. In any moral action neither reason nor emotion can be the priority, the synthesis of both of them is indispensable. Actions guided by mere reason and hence by the sense of the priority of the right are devoid of any attachment with the other and thereby become abstract and rigorous (as has been the case in Kantian moral philosophy), on the other hand actions guided by mere emotions and hence by the sense of priority of happiness or good are devoid of rationality and thereby overlook the importance of moral rules. The concept of *moksha*, in the philosophy of Prof. Kâmalakar Mishra provide the platform to synthesize reason with emotions, right with good and the self with the other.

### References

- <sup>1</sup>Alexander, Larry and Moore, Michael, "Deontological Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/ethics-deontological/>>.