

Sri Aurobindo: A Guide to Spiritual Ethics

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo considered ethics to be a spiritual endeavor. In his renowned work, *The Life Divine*, the author emphasises the disciplined practice of spirituality. He holds that morality is independent of the consequences of actions, fundamentally adhering to a deontological perspective. This determination hinges on the evolution of consciousness and the extent to which human behaviour serves as a legitimate medium for self-expression. The primary reward for the ethical individual lies in their internal growth. He acts solely for this purpose and not for any other outcomes. He asserts that ethical behaviour is a path towards spiritual existence. The ultimate essence is spirit; he believes that our goal is to realise God. According to Sri Aurobindo, the determination of whether something is good or bad is contingent upon our understanding of God. He regarded humanity, the earth, and divinity as three manifestations of the same reality, existence, and realisation. Ethics has become intertwined with spirituality, and vice versa. Aurobindo's moral theory is readily distinguishable from others. He primarily engaged in spirituality, which would yield effective moral conduct.

Keywords: spirituality, morality, manifestations, reality

Introduction

Sri Aurobindo, a prominent figure among those who consider spirituality the foundation of their moral framework, asserts that our ultimate objective as human beings is to attain God. Conventional Indian beliefs emphasize the four purusharthas (purposes of self): righteousness, prosperity, indulgence, and emancipation. Sri Aurobindo posits that our perception of what is considered good or bad is influenced

by our understanding of God. He recognises that 'God is, subjectively, seeking for our highest, truest, fullest, and largest self.' Aurobindo's moral philosophy revolves around the concepts of goodness and evil. Consequently, morality has become intertwined with spirituality, and the reverse is also true. Aurobindo's moral philosophy is unique and sets itself apart from others. He engaged in spiritual practices that encouraged effective moral behaviour.

Sri Aurobindo articulates devotion to the omnipotent deity. He emphasised transvaluation since the divine transcends conventional morality in accordance with nature's rules. He believes that for the spiritual advancement of individuals, it is essential to cultivate our conscious capacities to establish a fresh spectrum of actions and standards for all entities. The transvaluation of all values entails the actualisation of the true self, necessitating self-sacrifice as a prerequisite. Moral development necessitates progression from a lower stage. This increase represents the ongoing evolution of the concept of the soul. Constant dedication is essential for the development of this notion. Sri Aurobindo refers to this dedication as 'the blossoming of mankind's ethical development.'

The concept of self-expands with spiritual development. The individual self, or Jiva Atma, evolves to encompass the welfare of the family, thereafter, expanding to recognise the broader community beyond familial ties. This illustrates the value of altruism, where the developing ethical individual realizes that the self must be expanded to encompass all of mankind. This realization is considered the fulfilment of self in ethical theories. Dedication doesn't negate lesser selves; instead, it affirms them positively. Dedication encompasses, combines, and fulfils all aspects related to the dedicator. Aurobindo advocates for organic development rather than suppression. He contends that moral development entails sincerity and continuous advancement.

Sri Aurobindo posits that morality is contingent upon motive rather than consequence. In *Synthesis of Yoga*, he stated, "Ethics must eventually perceive that the law of good which it seeks is the law of God and depends on the being and nature of the Master of the law" (34). The domain of ethics exclusively pertains to human personality and behaviour, prohibiting specific activities, desires, and impulses. It arises as an instinctual adherence to the law. Ethics finds fulfilment when human existence reaches the level of divine nature, bestowing worth upon the deeds undertaken by individuals. In this context, the author underscores the significance of spiritual transformation. The spirit transcends our brain and volition; it is beyond reason and is embedded inside the essence that constitutes the hidden seed of holiness.

Sri Aurobindo is a deontologist rather than a consequentialist; however, he advocates for maintaining our motives directed towards God. The Kantian maxim "Duty for the sake of duty" is entirely deontological, whereas Sri Aurobindo's maxim 'Duty for the sake of God' cannot be classified as wholly deontological, he stated, "To work impersonally, desireless and without attachment to the fruits of our work, for the sake of God and the world and the greater self and the fulfilment of the universal will, --this is the first step towards liberation and perfection" (43).

Sri Aurobindo posits that ethics is the realization of God, which inherently integrates spirituality. F.H. Bradley said, "it is to be a moral duty not to be moral but to religious" (13). Aurobindo sought to transcend morality through spiritual and religious avenues. In his view, morality is limited by ignorance. Sri Aurobindo stated:

It must therefore be emphasised that spirituality is not a high intellectuality, not idealism, not an ethical turn of mind or moral purity and austerity, not religiosity or an ardent and exalted emotional fervour, not even a compound of all these excellent things; a mental belief, creed or faith, an emotional aspiration, a regulation of conduct according to a religious or ethical formula are not spiritual achievement and experience. (73)

These elements hold significant value for the mind and life; they contribute to spiritual evolution by serving as preparatory actions that discipline, purify, or appropriately shape one's nature. However, they remain within the realm of mental evolution because true spiritual realisation, experience, and transformation have yet to occur. An awakening to the truth of our being, including a soul apart from our mind, being, and body, lies at the heart of spirituality. This essence embodies our deep desire to understand, feel, and connect with it, enabling us to access the universal and personal reality that permeates everything. Aspiration, connection, and unification propel us through this process, which involves a complete metamorphosis of our being and ultimately gives rise to a new existence, identity, and nature. Integrity flows naturally towards enlightenment.

Sri Aurobindo, whose real name is Aurobindo Ghosh, was an Indian liberation fighter and revolutionary in a previous incarnation. He favoured aggressive strategies, such as terrorism. Though his method differed from Gandhi's, in his later years he advocated nonviolence as Saint Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo perceives non-violence as a transient method in life, rather than a definitive objective. It may be discarded if it does not align with the promises. He stated that both violence and non-violence are essential. He stated, "Purification can be achieved through the transformation of violent impulses" (54). In that regard, the former system in India

was superior: the individual with a combative spirit ascended to the status of Kshatriya, so elevating the fighting spirit above mere vital impulses. The goal was to infuse the fighting spirit with spirituality. It accomplished what passive opposition cannot and will not attain. The Kshatriya was an individual who opposed oppression, engaged in combat against it, and refrained from oppressing others, that was the epitome. Gandhi asserts that he is indifferent to eliminating violence in others; his focus is on practicing non-violence himself.

Sri Aurobindo posits a correlation between the end and the methods, asserting that the means justify the end. In other words, the means are as important as the end. The only way to reach conclusions is by pursuing the perpetual source of strength within humans. If the outcomes are significant, then the means should be equally substantial. Consequently, his political morality evolved to be more pragmatic and realistic. Ethics should be grounded in empirical evidence. Aurobindo's perspective on the relationship between objectives and methods suggests that an ideal motto alone cannot fulfil the actual needs of individuals. In practice, it often becomes paradoxical.

Aurobindo posits that spirit transcends reason. We require a genuine religion of mankind that distinguishes itself from orthodox faiths. Sri Aurobindo posits that the foundation of religion, grounded in humanity, must be love and the reciprocal acknowledgement of human brotherhood. Dharma, in his view, is the bedrock of spiritual principles, promoting ideas that are independent of time and space. Dharma is the ladder that leads to insight with the divine. There is considerable philosophical, practical, and ethical weight to a spirituality based on dharma. In its broadest sense, "ethical dharma" refers to a set of universally accepted moral standards. "The notion of Dharma is, in essence, primarily moral," Sri Aurobindo explains, illuminating the concept's evolutionary relevance. Upholding the moral code independently and pushing for its acceptance and adherence by humanity is the highest form of dharma. The overarching concept of Dharma encompasses the authentic law governing all energies, incorporating conscience, rectitude in all matters, and a rightful framework for thought, knowledge, aesthetics, and all other human endeavours, extending beyond just ethical conduct.

Nevertheless, within the framework of Dharma, the ethical dimension has persistently prevailed and even overshadowed the understanding of right that humanity develops. This predominance arises because ethics pertains to the actions of life and interactions with one's essential being and fellow individuals, which remain primary concerns and significant challenges. Moreover, it is within this domain that the motivations, preferences, and drives of the essential self frequently

enter a significant and impactful struggle with the concept of justice and the demands of the elevated principles. The appropriate ethical behaviour seems to an individual, in his current stage, as the singular obligation among the several standards established by the intellect, the moral imperative, and the ethical law, encompassing the entirety of his Dharma.

In India, the study of philosophy lacks a specific branch solely focused on ethics, in contrast to Western philosophy. Indian philosophers aim to clarify philosophy as a synthesis of its various branches. In this context, 'ethics' refers to the application of moral principles. Here, we adhere to the injunction "Thou shalt not kill," which compels individuals to regulate their appetites, avarice, selfish motives, and issues of ego to refrain from committing murder. The Kshatriya, the warrior caste, possesses the right to kill in defence of the vulnerable class. In addition to the practice of morals, there are various avenues to attain perfection, including knowledge, aesthetics, and strength. Sri Aurobindo presented three innovative ideas within the framework of Indian tradition. In his view, i) human beings are not inherently ethical, ii) moral values are human constructs that transcend individual perspectives, and iii) there is a re-evaluation of all values. He believes that while ethics may not provide solutions to societal and universal issues, it serves to reduce the disparities present. Within the framework of transvaluation, a diverse array of experiences exists. 'Non-ethical' relates to material and animalistic dimensions; 'infra-ethical' pertains to barbaric and primal instincts; 'anti-ethical' involves conflicts driven by ego; 'ethical' addresses the rational mind; and 'super-ethical' connects to super-rational awareness.

Sri Aurobindo posits that ethics plays a crucial role in governing the civil mind. It is essential for society to establish norms and ideologies to foster a stable social order while ultimately allowing ethics to guide religious practices. Sri Aurobindo proposed a progression in consciousness that goes beyond the limitations of mental cognition. He posits that ethics provides a distinct perspective for tackling social challenges. He stated, "Ethics represents a phase in evolution" (23). At every stage, the underlying element is Sacchidananda's impetus for seeking self-expression. This impulse starts without ethical consideration, evolves into an infra-ethical state in animals, and in intelligent beings can even take on an anti-ethical nature, permitting the endorsement of harm towards others that we would otherwise condemn if it were directed at ourselves.

In this context, humanity demonstrates a somewhat limited level of ethical consideration. Given that everything beneath us is characterised as infra-ethical, it is plausible to consider the existence of a higher realm that we may eventually attain,

which is supra-ethical and free from ethical obligations. The ethical impulse and attitude, essential for humanity, function as a mechanism that facilitates the transition from a lower state of harmony and universality, which is based on conscience and disrupted by individual discord, to a higher state of harmony and universality that is founded on an unconscious unity with all forms of existence. Once that objective is achieved, the means will become unnecessary or impractical, as the qualities and oppositions it depends on will inherently dissolve and disappear in the final reconciliation. Sri Aurobindo posits in *The Life Divine* that humans do not possess inherent ethical or rational qualities; instead, rationality requires cultivation during a specific stage of mental development, mirroring the evolution of sensory perception. Humanity needs to enhance its higher-level cognitive abilities for deeper comprehension. Intuition represents a higher-level cognitive function. Intuition sheds light on the illogical aspects of existence. The supra-ethical perspective is distinct from the ethical perspective.

Ethics encompasses three fundamental theories: virtue ethics, teleological or consequentialist ethics, and deontological ethics. Ethics includes essential traits like justice, respect for others, honesty, humanity, tolerance, and non-violation. However, Sri Aurobindo emphasises that the realisation of God is the sole criterion for determining a good action. Every ethical goal must be based on the idea of absolute truth, which is the philosophical basis for all ethics. Sri Aurobindo's ethical perspective endures due to its intrinsic characteristics. He holds that morality is independent of the consequences of actions, fundamentally adhering to a deontological perspective. The outcome relies on the evolution of consciousness and the degree to which human behaviour serves as a genuine means of self-expression. The primary reward for the ethical individual is his internal development. He acts solely for this purpose and not for any other outcomes. He asserts that ethical behaviour is a pathway to spiritual existence, with the ultimate essence being spirit.

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