

In good faith: If you know what's good for you

The young lacking experience of the world, wrote Aristotle, should not study ethics, for ethics is not a science. Although Aristotle may single-handedly be responsible for the disaster known as western civilisation, his dismissal of the young is not a dismissal of ethics. Rather, for him, the young need to learn what is good, even though they lack understanding. They learn by imitating their elders and other role models. Society is the first repository of value.

If ethics truly is not a science it cannot be taught the way such disciplines are (by rote and repetition it would seem). The task, in India, as in Greece, was left to the poets (the media of the day): Praising the deeds of the praiseworthy and decrying the blameworthy, through song, dance and drama, the moral compass of society was controlled by the stories people heard. Ethos, from which the word ethics derives, was tradition.

Philosophers in India may not have interfered in the work of the poets, because abstruse philosophical writing was restricted to an intellectual elite those who preferred, and had time (and patience) to ponder the imponderable than deal with the complex problems of interpersonal relations. Morality, however, cannot be limited to any one group. That is why to find what is praised or blamed we looked, as the Greek philosophers did, to the poets.

Human conduct operates in two broad spheres: Transactions with the gods (prayers, rituals etc) and those with other humans (including women, animals and by extension, even plants). Broadly it's a question of who gets to eat whom and how. While there is deep connect between religion and morality, the overlap of their intricacies must await an Alexander. Both spheres, however, are concerned with the good, a general adjective of commendation, whose meaning is usually determined by the class of things it applies to. While philosophers have wrestled with this angel for a couple of millennia, we have a rough idea of what it means. In the plural, goods, refers to material things, those which everyone either needs or desires.

It is easier to determine the good by looking at what is clearly (at first) not good: Death is an evil, so are old age and sickness, as the Buddha noticed. Nor was he alone. The earliest prayers to the gods concern these very things. But the living must focus on life, where needs and desires reign supreme. Law and ethics, the visible face of politics, were designed to keep self-seeking men in check. Poetry was the charm that enthralled them, leading them gently into both sense and sobriety. The poets then (like intellectuals at other times), were caught on a cleft stick. Being poets, they required patrons (the government of the day). The poet had to be clever and accomplished, he had to please, while at the same time as "the unacknowledged legislator of mankind", he alone had opportunity to speak truth to power. Naturally, poets protected themselves by resorting to enigmatic sayings. Not only the rudiments of ethics, but out of such ambiguous speech were born all the tropes of indirection and oblique reference: Irony for blame, hyperbole for praise. But the poets had to struggle with conundrums: Wealth was good, but what about that which was dishonestly acquired? Wealth, honestly acquired, was a godsend. But often the gods did not send wealth to the deserving. Why do the right thing when its opposite seems to pay? The poets wove stories in which the good guys eventually overcome the bad ones. Being good, they emphasised, is good for you.

Aristotle described ethics as the study of what is good for man. His book opens with an unlikely truth: "All men by nature desire the good". Unlike his equally famous teacher, he clarified: While everybody desired the good, they did not always know what was good. This is where philosophers could help. Early philosophy was a bit like self-help writing today - to live ethically was simply living smart and healthy. Not surprisingly, it was compared with medicine. As the physician catered to the body, the philosopher cared for the soul.

Given the uncertainties of life, and human short sightedness, teaching people to look after their interests could not be done overnight but required the help of society at large. This is what a good education was all about, teaching people not only how to live but how to live well. Building character by emulating the good man - though initially without understanding, eventually coming to grasp that what is right and just and noble - is actually in one's own interest. Thus, the importance of role models. In consequence, a return to and critique of the poets, who depicted the gods and heroes doing terrible things and remaining unpunished. Greek philosophers were critical ("Homer ought to be flogged"); their Indian counterparts more circumspect, here the poets were left to solve their own problems.

If being moral is in the agent's interest, then that is a powerful reason for being moral, yet not entirely convincing. Otherwise we wouldn't still be talking about morality. How can people know what is good for them and still not do it? In any case, is acting morally always good for me? Surely there are occasions when a little deception will be more advantageous. The conflict between the right and the expedient is not new. "Be practical" is a familiar advice, asking us to suspend our better judgment for the sake of self-interest. In fact, self-interest seems to conflict most with the demands of morality as equitable behaviour - giving the other, rather than oneself, their due. Nevertheless civilisations have been built on the idea of self-interest as the driving force not only of economics but also of ethics.

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com