

Ethics and Moral Perspectives-A Study

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America has been one of the few advanced nations in the world in social, political, economical and technological walks of life. The modernity and prosperity brought out drastic changes in the life-style of people. Though they enjoy the fruits of mechanization, there exists a vast gulf between traditional life and modern life. There has been chaos, disillusionment and depression in the society despite their all-round superiority. The devastation caused by the two world wars pushed America into psychological drabness. The Americans have become the “Lost Generation”, in the midst of the two world wars.

In this backdrop, this research tries to explore America’s ethical boundaries. The focus of the present research is to know the significance of ethics in American life and to elicit the impact of ethical philosophical ideas and values in the Inter-War American Fiction. Hence, the select works of F. Scott. Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck, who witnessed the disillusionment of the war period, have been analyzed with reference to the philosophical ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Seneca and Epictecus.

The term ‘ethics’ is derived from the ancient Greek word ‘ethos’, which means moral character. The word ‘mores’, from which morality is derived, connotes social rules or etiquette to be followed in the society. In modern science, these meanings are often somewhat deviated, with ethics being the ‘science’ and morals referring to ‘one’s conduct and character.’ But it is significant that the origins of these words reflect the conflict between an inner driven character and an outer driven conduct. “From the sociological point of view, then, ethics becomes nothing else than a definite account of the forms of conduct that are fitted to the associated state, in such wise that the lives of each and all may be the greatest possible, alike in length and breadth.” (Spencer 166)

The thesis is discussed from various perceptions based on Philosophy, Theology, Social Sciences, Professional Ethics and other ideals like Non-Violence, Pacifism etc. Philosophers regard ethics as the science of morality. Generally they emphasize it as non-empirical in character. In this regard *Encyclopedia Britannica* says that “happiness on earth and in heaven can be acquired through the practice of the moral and intellectual virtues; celestial happiness by living this life according to the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity” (Vol. 5: 485). Theologians consider ethics as a branch of Theology, especially in Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Roman Catholicism and some fundamentalist protestant sects. The *Encyclopedia of Religion* explains morality as “the actions, dispositions, attitudes, virtues, and ways of life that should characterize the moral person and society” (Vol.3:340).

It is indispensable to separate ethics from economics in some theories, notably Marxism and Social Ecology, from Feminism, and from gender in Queer studies. These views represent workers, women, and sexual outcasts who have historically been degraded by traditional ethics. Professional Ethics refer to elements of professional practice that are part of dispute resolution or which have some great potential for, like bodily harm, urban planning, medicine, law, politics and theories of civics. A fifth way instructs that the theories of Non-Violence, Pacifism, Anarchism, and Secession are the routes to preach ethics. Occasionally, ethics is regarded the de-escalation and mediation of conflicts.

From the evolutionary perspective, a moral dimension of being originates only with the formation of organized living forms. And its complexity increases with the complexity of the organizational level of the living creature. This concept is being justified by Spencer as "..., on studying the doings of the highest of mammals, mankind, we not only find that the adjustments of acts to ends are both more numerous and better than among lower mammals; but we find the same thing on comparing the doings of higher races of men with those of lower races." (48).

Morality achieves its full development at the level of human beings when a new quality appears in the evolutionary ladder, namely the human psyche with all its characteristics and properties. Though people have an intuitive understanding of ethics and morals at their fundamental level based on biological mechanisms produced by the communal living, man enlarged the scope and breadth of situations which require rules of behavior, by his cultural development. Graves has tried to state that the psychology of the mature human being is an unfolding, emergent, oscillating and spiraling process. It is inherently marked by progressive subordination of older, lower-order behaviour systems to newer, higher-order systems as man's existential problems change.

Man, being attributed with reason from nature is an active, conscious, and authentic moral agent participating in the processes of the universe. He has the capability to harmonize his actions with nature, but whether he performs it or not is left to him. He is equipped by nature with impulses to virtue or seeds of knowledge which serve as instruments for building his character. With the help of these impulses, he is able to direct himself and develop a character which is defined as a sustained disposition. This process requires an internal struggle and external influences may prevent him from developing a disposition harmonizing with nature. "Chaucer, a poet of love, human and divine, leads his readers to speculation about man's relation both to his fellows and to his Maker, while simultaneously providing delightful entertaining views of the frailties and follies, as well as the nobility of mankind." (*Encyclopedia Britannica* Vol. 4:62)

Man, being an autonomous agent develops his own character even though it is controlled by the law of nature, the law of cause and effect. He is not responsible for the environment in which he is present, but he is responsible for the way he acts in relation to this environment. He is provided with the capacity to make a moral judgment on human well-being which is related to his inner attitude and his state of mind. It is illustrated by the simile of a dog attached to a cart. The dog can run willingly and, if he does not do so, he will be compelled to. So the cart represents the man's external situation which he cannot control, but the man himself can determine whether he will run willingly or not. The same is aptly illustrated in the Cleanth's hymn to Zeus.

Conduct me, Zeus, and Thou, O Destiny,

Wherever thy decree has fixed my lot.

I follow willingly, and, I did not,

Wicked and wretched would I follow still. (Laertius N.pag.)

Bharathi supports that:

Sincere exploration and experience without any doctrine are essential to understand and discover what is truly moral. Here, it is appropriate to quote Maurice Friedman's "image of man". Moral decision does not take place through application of already existing universal values or of the conclusions of a dialectic, but through the response of the whole person in particular situations. Into this response enter attitudes that he may not be aware of, yet ones that shape his decision even in new and unique situations. (31)

However, of all the external circumstances only some are the making of nature, most are of our own doing. Thus we should be accountable for the consequences of our actions. Gibbs opines that "Successful adaptation to environment is indeed an indispensable element of morality. But for human beings it is not enough – or rather, the environment must be broadly conceived. All that a wholly naturalistic philosophy can provide is survival value; man and woman aspire to something beyond survival" (96). In order to stress further the active role of man in deciding his destiny, the stoics emphasized the importance of education. The initial potentialities of man are such that with training he can achieve the disposition to act in accord with the moral order of nature.

Every man, in his physical nature, is an individual agent. He has similar qualities and principles. Each of these has to be considered separately, and without regard to the respects that is mutual relations which they have to each other. Neither of these have the nature we are taking a view of. But it is the inward frame of man, considered as a system or constitution; who's several parts are united, not by a physical principle of individuation, but by the respects they have to each other. The chief of them is the subjection which the appetites, passions, and particular affections have to the one supreme principle of reflection or conscience.

The system or constitution consists of these respects and this subjection. Thus, the body is a system or constitution; so is a tree; so is every machine. Consider all the several parts of a tree. Without the natural respects they have to each other, one cannot have the idea of a tree; but if these respects are added, this gives the idea. The body may be impaired by sickness, a tree may decay, a machine may be out of order, and yet their system and constitution are not totally dissolved. There is plainly something which answers to all this in the moral constitution of man. Anyone who considers his own nature will see that the several appetites, passions and particular affections have different respects among themselves. They are restraints upon, and are in proportion to one another. This proportion is just and perfect, when all those principles are perfectly coincident with conscience, so far as their nature permits and in all cases, under its absolute and entire direction.

Any small alteration of the due proportions leads to some degree of disorder in the moral constitution. But perfection though plainly intelligible and supposable, was never attained by any man. If the higher principle of reflection maintains its place, and as much as it corrects that disorder, and, hinders it from breaking out into action, that is the only expectation in a man. And though the appetites and passions have not their exact due proportion to each other; and also they often strive for mastery with judgment or reflection; yet, the superiority of this principle to all others is the chief respect which forms the constitution. So far as this superiority is maintained, the character of the man is good, worthy and virtuous. Bharathi quotes Gardner's definition of morality that "the word morality means nothing more than doing what is unselfish, helpful, kind, and noble-hearted, and doing it with at least a reasonable dissertation that in the

long run as well as the short we won't be sorry for what we've done, whether or not it was against some petty human law." (28).

The science of right conduct aims at determining how and why certain modes of conduct are detrimental, and certain other modes are beneficial. These good and bad results cannot be accidental; these are the necessary consequences of the constitution of things. The business of moral science is to define the kinds of actions intended to produce happiness and unhappiness. Having done this, its definitions are to be recognized as laws of conduct; and are to be conformed to irrespective of a direct estimation of happiness or misery. "In *The Mahabharatha*, the maxim is,

Treat others as thou would'st thyself be treated.

Do nothing to thy neighbor, which hereafter,

Thou would'st not have thy neighbor do to thee.

A man obtains a rule of action by looking on his neighbor as himself." (Spencer 379)

It is a fact that Ethics aims at discovering essential qualities belonging to all things which are good. But many philosophers have thought that when they named those other qualities they were actually defining good; that these qualities, in fact, were simply not 'other', but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. Joseph Fontenrose states that:

Good is identified both with admirable individual qualities such as philanthropy, kindness, generosity, self-respect, courage, creativity and with conventional moral goodness like sexual purity, abstinence from carnal pleasures of any kind. Evil is identified with ignoble individual qualities like meanness, cruelty, violent temper, avarice, hatefulness, selfishness and with criminal acts like murder, arson, theft, embezzlement, and with carnal pleasures, particularly sex acts; and not only with prostitution and perversions, but with sexual satisfaction in general. (Contemporary Literary Criticism Vol.21: 375)

Whereas Spencer's view of good and bad is goodness, standing by itself, suggests, above all other things, the conduct of one who aids the sick in reacquiring normal vitality, assists the unfortunate to recover the means of maintaining themselves, defends those who are threatened with harm in person, property, or reputation, and aids whatever promises to improve the living of all his fellows. Contrariwise, badness brings to mind, as its leading correlative, the conduct of one who, in carrying on his own life, damages the lives of others by injuring their bodies, destroying their possessions, defrauding them, calumniating them. (60)

Philosophy is not an occupation of a popular nature, nor is it pursued for the sake of self advertisement. Its concern is not with words, but with facts. It is not carried on with the object of passing the day in an entertaining sort of way and taking the boredom out of leisure. It moulds and builds the personality, orders one's life, regulates one's conduct, shows one what one should do and what one should leave undone, sits at the helm and keeps one on the correct courses as one is tossed about in perilous seas. "Thus there is no escape from the admission that in calling good the conduct which subserves life, and bad the conduct which hinders or destroys

it, and in so implying that life is a blessing and not a curse, we are inevitably asserting that conduct is good or bad according as its total effects are pleasurable or painful.” (Spencer 64)

Without Philosophy no one can lead a life free of fear or worry. Every hour of the day countless situations arise that calls for advice, and for that advice we have to look to philosophy. All the philosophers are so anxious to persuade people that what they call the good is what people really ought to do. Do, pray, act so, because the word good is generally used to denote actions of this nature. This view would be the substance of their teaching. And in so far as they tell people how they ought to act, their teaching is truly ethical, as they mean it to be. “Marcel Proust, the 20th century French novelist, advocates that the life of everyday is supremely important, full of moral joy and beauty, which, though man may lose them through faults inherent in human nature, are indestructible and recoverable.” (*Encyclopedia Britannica* Vol. 15:131)

Traditionally, moral philosophy has always been regarded as a practical science, a science because it was a systematic enquiry towards a goal i.e knowledge, and ‘practical’ because the goal was practical knowledge, knowledge of what to do rather than knowledge of what the case is. “The moral life is life of constant activity ...that morality is not primarily a matter of being something or becoming something but doing.” (Bharathi 16)

To the great moral philosophers of the past, ethics was primarily concerned with answering practical questions. Sometimes these questions are put in a theoretical form. What is good for man? What is the nature of goodness or of obligation? Their investigations then take on a superficial resemblance to theoretical inquiries, inquiries into the nature of mollusks or carbohydrates etc.

The works of the ancient Indians furnish illustrations; at the same time showing how reaction against extreme egoism leads to enunciation of extreme altruism. Thus, in the later part of that heterogeneous compound, *The Mahabharata*, we read:

Enjoy thou the prosperity of others,

Although thyself unprosperous; noble men

Take pleasure in their neighbor’s happiness.

So too a passage in the *Cural* runs:

To exercise benevolence is the whole design of acquiring property.

He truly lives who knows and discharges the duties of benevolence.

He who knows them not may be reckoned among the dead. (Spencer 346-347)

But the disguise is thin, when Plato asks what justice is? It is clear that he keeps his eye continually on the question, what ought we to do? The Chinese books contain the answer to this question and also the moral maxims of Confucius, exemplifying his development of the ethics of amity. This is quoted by Spencer in his *Principles of Ethics* that “First, among these stands

humanity, that is to say, that universal sympathy which should exist between man and man without distinction of class or race. Justice, which gives to each member of the community his due, without favor or affection.” (347)

Moral philosophers were, of course, always partly theoreticians. They claimed to give a true account of what it is to make a moral judgment, to decide, deliberate and choose, as well as to answer moral questions in a more direct way. But they did not, except superficially, represent moral judgements as being themselves theoretical statements, as being descriptions or explanations of a special world of moral qualities and objects. When, for example, they offered definitions of goodness or obligation, they would claim that their definitions truly and faithfully reflected our ordinary use of the words ‘good’ and ‘ought’, but they regarded judgements in the form ‘X is good’ and ‘X is obligatory’ as practical judgements.

When it is observed, however, in the works of some of the best known twentieth-century moralists, it is found that this conception of moral judgements as practical judgements deliberately abandoned. The direct object of ethics, it is understood, is not practice but knowledge. And soon one can see that this knowledge is not theoretical knowledge about moral judgements and concepts. Moral judgements are themselves bits of theoretical knowledge about special moral objects. Knowing that this is right or that that is wrong is knowing that something is the case, knowing what to do.

This contrast between practice and knowledge implies the assumption that there is no such practical knowledge, an assumption that the older philosophers would have rejected if it had ever occurred to them. The moral philosopher’s task is now conceived, not to be one of conducting a theoretical inquiry into practical wisdom, but to be one of investigating questions, judgements, doubts, and beliefs that are themselves theoretical.

Social life in ancient Egypt has produced clear recognition of the essential principles of harmonious cooperation. M. Chabas, as quoted by Renouf and verified by him, says. ‘None of the Christian virtues is forgotten in it; piety, charity, gentleness, self-command in word and action, chastity, the protection of the weak, benevolence towards the humble, deference to superiors, respect for property in its minutest details, ... all is expressed there, and in extremely good language. (Spencer 347-348)

According to Prof Broad, ethics may be described as the theoretical treatment of moral phenomena. The special phenomena to be studied are of three kinds, moral judgment, moral emotion, and moral volition for which the following examples may be quoted. I know or believe that I ought to keep a promise... And that it is wrong to inflict useless pain. These bits of moral knowledge or belief are instances of moral judgments; I feel remorse or self-disapproval, as distinct from mere fear of punishment or embarrassment at being found out. These feelings will be instances of moral emotion; In so far as I am influenced in my decision (between two alternative courses of action) by the thought that one of them is right, this is an instance of moral volition. One can find the reflection of this in *The Ramayana*, “Virtue is a service man owes himself, and though there were no Heaven, nor any God to rule the world, it were not less the binding law of life. It is man’s privilege to know the Right and follow it” (Spencer 353). For both integral and political philosophy it is both Plato and Aristotle that have been either the basis for, or the rejection of further development. Importantly it is their contribution that has eventually led us to the current predominant philosophical thought. Plato established a set matrix for morality,

and good through his use of the Forms. Then, Aristotle through reason, sought knowledge of the form of good. Later Augustine, Aquinas, Hobbes et al. have extended and modified Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies as they have played an integral role in philosophy.

The major difference between traditional philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, Stoics like Seneca and Epictetus and modern philosophers like Kant, Russell et al. is that the traditional theories are concerned with how to be a good person, while the moderns are concerned with how to choose the right thing to do in a specific situation. The traditional theories are character based, while the modern theories are action based. The traditional philosophers claim that to become a morally developed person, one had to develop virtues like courage, compassion, fortitude, honesty etc. by habitually behaving in accordance with those virtues. Once one got into the habit of behaving like a good person, it would start to affect one's soul, making one a good person inside as well as outside. Once one accomplishes this, one would naturally know what the right thing to do is.

Even though many philosophical ideas have come into existence in the modern era, the preachings of Plato, Aristotle, Seneca and Epictetus have been the very foundation of ethics for their universal appeal. Irrespective of origin, region, religion and culture, people tend to be influenced by these ancient philosophies. They realize, follow and try to retain these life sustaining moral principles. That is why the ethical intimations of some of the twentieth century American writers have been elicited with reference to the philosophical ideas of Plato, Aristotle and Seneca and Epictetus.

Among the novelists of 20th century, F. Scott Fitzgerald has bound himself to the history of his country more than any other American writer. Born in 1896, he has got the scope of observing the traditions that had guided his parent's generation and his own childhood. Actually he was said by his contemporaries to have precipitated the upheaval of manners and morals. Despite his father's financial and social weaknesses, Fitzgerald has never tried to relinquish his loyalty to him and to the traditions he presented.

William Faulkner is called the moralist with a corn cob by Wyndham Lewis for his preoccupation with moral perspectives. Faulkner has been writing all the time about honour, truth, pity and the capacity to endure. Faulkner himself admitted that his basic theme is the human heart in conflict with itself.

Hemingway is inspired by the he – man ethics of Teddy Roosevelt. And he is deeply influenced by town values and parental conflicts and creates an image of a shell - shocked war veteran in almost all his works. In the midst of disillusionment due to wars, his theme is the survival of human beings with a backdrop of stoicism and physical courage. He explores the maxim that 'man can be destroyed but not defeated' in his works.

Steinbeck is one of the few writers who seek to affirm the sanctity of life and the unifying, clarifying forces inherent in human suffering. His virtual observation of the experiences of his countrymen in the depression era has influenced his themes of fiction making him concentrate on human fellowship and courage. He was commended by many reviewers for his optimistic view of humanity and its quest for improvement and redemption.

This interesting phenomenon of the gradual evolution, survival and prevalence of ethics with reference to the philosophical ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Seneca and Epictecus and its interpretation in the select works of select twentieth century American novelists namely *The Great Gatsby* of F.Scott Fitzgerald, *A Fable* and *The Wild Palms* of William Faulkner, *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* of Ernest Hemingway and *Cup of Gold* and *The Grapes of Wrath* of John Steinbeck can be studied for further analysis.

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