

A Comparative study of Indian and Western Philosophy

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Abstract

The Upanisads, the idea of goodness or concept of dharma is emphasized as universal principle. Indian ethics endeavour to follow dharma which emphasizes good conduct and morality. The purpose of life is to achieve the four aims advocated in Upanisads, otherwise called Purusharthas. They are dharma, artha, kama, and moksha. These four aims help to lead life morally and ethically. All the four segments play important role in everyone's life. In Greek tradition 'ethics' means 'good life'. Plato explains the knowledge of the good. He says the idea of the good is seen to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right. According to Aristotle happiness is the main goal and it depends upon the actualization of one's rationality.

Epicurus says happiness involves serenity and can be achieved through the simple pleasures which preserve bodily health and peace of mind. According to Epicurus, a human being's ultimate goal is not a constant succession of sensual pleasures whereas it is the state of serenity; *ataraxia* is which frees trouble in the mind and pain in the body. The satisfaction of the natural desires fulfills to preserve bodily health and mental peace accompanied by freedom from pain lead to happiness. One's goodness can be realized through philosophy and the quest for knowledge.

Key Words: Ethical Concepts, Indian Philosophy and Western Philosophy

The Upanisads exemplify two types of knowledge – higher and the lower knowledge. The lower knowledge is just understanding of the phenomenal world. The higher knowledge is the knowledge of the supreme self which is otherwise called atman. *The Upanisads* explain that experiencing oneness with the Supreme Being is the higher knowledge. The acquisition of lower knowledge is also advised because it helps us to understand the nature of the world in which one lives. In the process of acquiring lower knowledge the faculty necessary to attain higher knowledge is developed.

Bhagavatgita says "when you feel the suffering of every living thing in your own heart, is consciousness". In *The Vedas* and *The Upanisads*, the idea of goodness or concept of dharma is emphasized as universal principle. Indian ethics endeavour to follow dharma which emphasizes good conduct and morality. The purpose of life is to achieve the four aims advocated in Upanisads, otherwise called Purusharthas. They are dharma, artha, kama, and moksha. These four aims help to lead life morally and ethically. All the four segments play important role in everyone's life.

In Greek tradition 'ethics' means 'good life'. They aimed at discovering the nature of happiness. There are differences of opinion in defining happiest life and the ways of accomplishing it. The writings of ancient philosophers regard duty and right as their chief ethical concepts and gave importance to happy life. They viewed goodness as the basic concern of ethics. Socrates surprised his listeners when he said that there is something higher than justice, which is the idea of the good. He further explained that the idea of good is the highest knowledge and all the other virtues would be fruitful only by their use of the idea of the good. The western tradition has its roots in Greek tradition.

Plato explains the knowledge of the good. He says the idea of the good is seen to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right. He also adds it is the parent of light and lord of height in this visible world. It is also the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectuals. Though Aristotle rejects the view of Plato that moral evaluations of daily life are supposed to be true without proof, he tries to find out what people fundamentally desire for. Aristotle finds goals such as wealth and honours are insufficient. Aristotle points out that self sufficiency is the first and ultimate end for people. According to Aristotle happiness is the main goal and it depends upon the actualization of one's rationality. A virtuous person lives realizing his unique potentiality. He subdivides it as moral and intellectual virtues.

Moral virtues are habitual choices of actions in agreement with rational principles. Intellectual virtues are acquired through teaching and it requires experience and time. Aristotle definition of happiness can be fully

understood by understanding the nature of virtues. Aristotle says the nature of virtue relies upon the structure of the soul of both rational and irrational components.

The Indian religious text *Bhagavatgita* views philosophically the nature of life and advice people to be happy and virtuous.

Whatever has happened
has happened for good.
Whatever is happening
is happening for good
Whatever will happen
shall also happen for good
What have you lost,
that you cry for
What did you bring;
that you lost?
What did you create,
that was destroyed?
You came empty handed,
Whatever is yours today,
was somebody else's yesterday
And will be somebody else's tomorrow.

In the text, *Hindu Dharma*, the term *sachitananda* is explained as sat-cit-ananda. *Sat* means existence, *cit* means awareness and *ananda* is bliss. *Taittiriya Upanisad* describes the nature of bliss in the state of oneness with the Supreme Being, Brahman – the highest reality. *The Vedas*, *Upanisads* and *Gita* talk about eternal bliss which has no rebirth. It explains the tradition of being united with God through various methods.

Philosophers like Adi Shankara, Ramanujacharya, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Ramanujacharya followed different paths to achieve happiness. There are four major paths namely Bhakthi Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga and Raja Yoga.

Bhagavatgita talks about various methods of ethical life. *Bhakthiyoga* is also called Bhakthi marga. It refers to love and devotion towards any deity which leads to moksha. *Jnanayoga* means path of knowledge/self realization. *Karmayoga* means working hard with responsibility and doing right action. *Rajayoga* refers to the goals of yoga and the methods of attaining it. *Rajayoga* is also called *Astangayoga*. All are different paths to achieve happiness, peace, self realization and liberation. Those who renounce the materialistic world and live according to the will of God believe that they end their birth cycles and rest in eternal bliss in union with God.

The four purusarthas referred in *Hindu Dharma* are 'dharma', 'artha', 'kamaa' and 'moksha'. Dharma denotes good deeds, virtuous actions and charity. Artha means charity done (giving away one's hard earned money). It equally believes that the very purpose of owning materials is for charity. *Kama (or) Desire* destroys dharmic thoughts it is only through proper manner desires should be satisfied. In this process, maturity and wisdom is gained. Another significant purpose of religion is *moksha* which teaches to free one from all sorts of attachments. What makes human life enjoyable is right action (dharma), possession of wealth (artha) and sensual pleasure (kama). The belief in after life, which is moksha, reduces the fear of death.

Epicurus says happiness involves serenity and can be achieved through the simple pleasures which preserve bodily health and peace of mind. Epicurus' ethical theory was based upon the Cyrenaic doctrine formulated by Aristippus. Aristippus was a student of Socrates. He advocated the hedonistic principle that pleasure is the supreme good. But the concept of the pleasant life of Epicurus and Cyrenaics differ widely. Epicurus gave importance and emphasized the peace of mind where as Cyrenaic stressed the sensual pleasures.

They agreed with respect to general principles. Both holds the view that people always go after what they believe will give them pleasure and avoid what they believe will give them pain. He is of the view that pleasant life is more to be desired than long-life. He adds that a wise man neither wants to escape from life nor fears death because life does not offend him and death is not evil to him. Epicurus' *The Pleasant Life* states that the human being's ultimate goal is not constant succession of intense sensual pleasures. It is the state of serenity. He introduces the term 'ataraxia' which means "freedom from trouble in the mind and pain in the body." His fundamental principles are: "Nothing is created out of nothing." "Nothing is destroyed into nothing."

Epicurus' true philosophy says that the fear of death, the inference of the gods and the hard grip necessity do not have any foundation in reality. Philosophy serves mankind. It is not only an indispensable tool for the good life but also the most pleasant of activities. He suggests humans to be accustomed to the belief that death is nothing

but deprivation of sensation. If the concept is understood it makes the mortal life enjoyable and eliminates the craving for immortality.

“Nothing is created out of nothing” and “Nothing is destroyed into nothing” are the fundamental principles of Epicurus in setting forth the nature of the universe. Epicurus reaffirms that nature consists solely of atoms in motion in empty space, this Democritean doctrine supports his argument that natural causes operate in the world. Epicurus tries to prove that soul is also mortal and corporeal. He argues everything is made up of material atoms. This is applicable not only to inanimate and living bodies but also to the soul. He is of the view that atoms of the soul are exceedingly fine. Sensation occurs in human body through which the souls are encased within the body. He attacks the fear of death by explaining and analysing what comes after death. Man becomes incapable of sensation when the atoms of the soul leave the body after death. So it is impossible for humans to experience pain when they die or after death. The atoms of the soul are in themselves indestructible. So humans should take comfort when they come to know it and not to fear.

According to Epicurus, a human being’s ultimate goal is not a constant succession of sensual pleasures whereas it is the state of serenity; *ataraxia* is which frees trouble in the mind and pain in the body. The calm and repose of the good life are within the reach. People should keep their desires at a minimum and it is equally necessary to distinguish the natural and necessary desires from those which are artificial. Artificial desires like longings for wealth, excitement, fame and power are not merely unnecessary to health and tranquility but are in fact destructive of them. The satisfaction of the natural desires fulfills to preserve bodily health and mental peace accompanied by freedom from pain lead to happiness. One’s goodness can be realized through philosophy and the quest for knowledge.

Katha Upanisad enquires deeply into the mystery of life and death. It explains the everlasting mystery beyond life through conversation between *Yama* and *Nachiketa*. It explains man ripens like corn and born again like corn. It also describes the path of joy and wisdom. It emphasizes *Atman* is a supreme force and it never dies. The idea is beyond *purush*, there is nothing and beyond the spirit in man is the spirit of the universe.

Katha Upanisad belong to the Black Yajurveda of the Atharva Veda. Yama teaches Nachiketa the Atmic wisdom. Nachiketa seeks everlasting self knowledge.

You teach me, Death, about the heavenly fire,
Tell it to me, who have faith,
The heavenly worlds share in immortality,
I choose this by way of my second boon
(Roebuck. 316)

Epictetus was a Roman Stoic who developed his philosophy from the teaching of Zeno. The stoics understand that the god and the cosmic intelligence are the vital force. The vital force creates all things in the universe which are internally connected and the cosmic intelligence governs the universe from within. Pantheism is the basis of the stoics for the ethical insights of the conception of the God. All human beings possess the ability to understand the divine nature and the good life refers to living in accord with it.

Epictetus showed more interest in metaphysics than Roman stoic and more loyal than stoics to the original position of *Stoa*. His speculation about the nature of things is more pious than probing and he was more religious than philosophical and more practical than theoretical. The conditions of the moral life and its limitation are already given in human nature. According to him, people are happy when they value virtue for its own sake. He explains further that virtuous people pursue things that are reachable and avoid things that are beyond it. People experience a lot of unhappiness because they desire what they cannot obtain so wise individuals limit their desires and keep matters within their control. The desires that cannot be satisfied are called ‘apathetic’ and wise individuals do not have any feelings about them. Their principle is whatever is beyond the control of individual is irrelevant to ethics.

Similar views can be found in the text *The Hindu Dharma*, (the discourse of Kanchi Chandrasekharendra Sankaracharya). It explains that the law of universe has been in force from the very beginning of time. Everything in the universe is governed by this law. If it gets disturbed it will end up in chaos and unhappiness. There is a law for each one of them. Human beings must possess certain qualities and virtues to be worthy. The law governing the conduct of man is called Dharma or ethics. Human beings are endowed with intelligence and by using this intelligence human beings violate their dharma. Human beings can live happily only by living in accordance with this law for the well – being of all mankind. Humans keep on craving for one thing or the other thinking and believing that it will give them happiness. Humans who think always about material needs keep violating the dharma. They never realize dharma alone could give them happiness and peaceful life.

Both the philosophies establish the fact that ethical values and principles are universal, whether they are from the Orient or from the Occident. It also proves that great minds think alike and great religious and philosophical traditions have the common core namely, the human welfare which includes happiness and peace.

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