

Ethics
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Module No 1
Lecture 03
The Historical Perspective

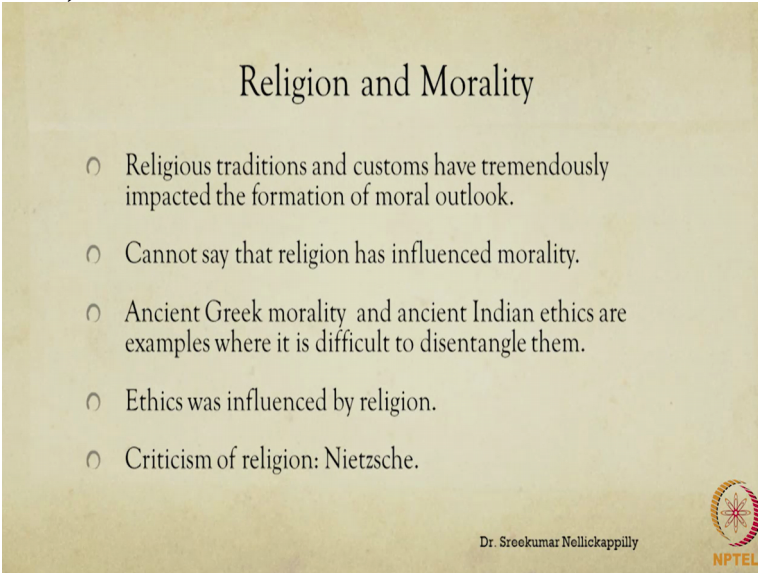
Welcome to this lecture series on ethics. This is the 3rd lecture and this will start some analysis of the historical perspective. We are trying to understand ethics as a discipline from the historical perspective. We will largely focus on the European context and also mention about some aspects, some important historical events that have happened in India as well. But before that, let us see the connection between religion and morality.

For many people, religion and morality are synonymous because they claim that morality gains a lot or rather is influenced immensely by religion or religious traditions and religious perspective which is true, there is no doubt in that. But at the same time, we have to keep in mind that religion and morality are not one and the same because there are societies. Morality existed ever since human beings started socialising.

Because as I mentioned in the previous lecture, the need for harmonising was so important for human social living, human beings have to harmonise with a social existence, the society, the clashes, the possibilities of clashes and conflicts should be minimised among individuals, between individuals, and also between individual and society. So morality addresses such concerns, such needs and religion also plays a role, a very important role in that. But religion had many other objectives.

Religions also, many religious traditions envisaged to understand human reality from a different perspective. They always great to realise the higher realities of human life, the destiny of human life which is not clearly the purview of morality. Morality not necessarily or ethics not necessarily deal with that. But for some religious traditions, the ultimate moral objective of human kind or human being lies in the outer world. For example, in Christianity. So we will see that very briefly now.


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Religion and Morality

- Religious traditions and customs have tremendously impacted the formation of moral outlook.
- Cannot say that religion has influenced morality.
- Ancient Greek morality and ancient Indian ethics are examples where it is difficult to disentangle them.
- Ethics was influenced by religion.
- Criticism of religion: Nietzsche.

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And religious traditions and customs have tremendously impacted the formation of moral outlook. I am just saying that they have impacted, not that they have shaped it or they were instrumental in, exclusively instrumental in shaping it. They have impacted definitely and they have influenced also. But at the same time, we cannot say that religion precedes morality. In one sense, we can say that they go hand-in-hand.

Some of the moral concerns of any society or a particular society are being addressed religion. So religion became a way by means of which the moral concerns of our society are addressed and communicated to the community as a whole. Particularly in the ancient societies, religion played a very effective role in communicating the moral concerns of a society to its people, which became not very effective and powerful in the modern time.

Particularly in the contemporary days, though religion plays a very important role, its rules have changed a lot. Say take for example, we are living in India which the democratic country. Unlike any other democratic country, we value, we give importance to democratic values over and above religious values. Some of the religious practices and conventions have become obsolete in the light of contemporary modern life.

That is because we value certain other things or certain other values have become important in contemporary life. Say for example, equality, we are also gone a lot ahead in minimising the differences between different communities, then gender differences are minimised. Or rather, we

are trying to eliminate completely such differences from our society and try to develop into an egalitarian social existence.

Then ancient Greek morality and ancient Indian ethics are examples where it is difficult to disentangle religion from morality. So this is what I said. A particular, this is a very important feature or a peculiar feature of many ancient societies that you cannot disentangle religion from morality. For instance, the most important concern of ancient society in India was arguably the concept of dharma, the enquiries towards understanding what dharma is.

That played a very important role in ancient society, in ancient Indian society. In ancient Greek society, there was a concern for virtue. Virtue in the ancient Greek society and ancient European Society by a large played a very important role and it appears in different contexts in different ways. There is no one single concept of virtue advocated by everyone, rather the concept of virtue like the concept of dharma in India is a very broad concept which accommodates, which incorporates many layers of meaning into it.

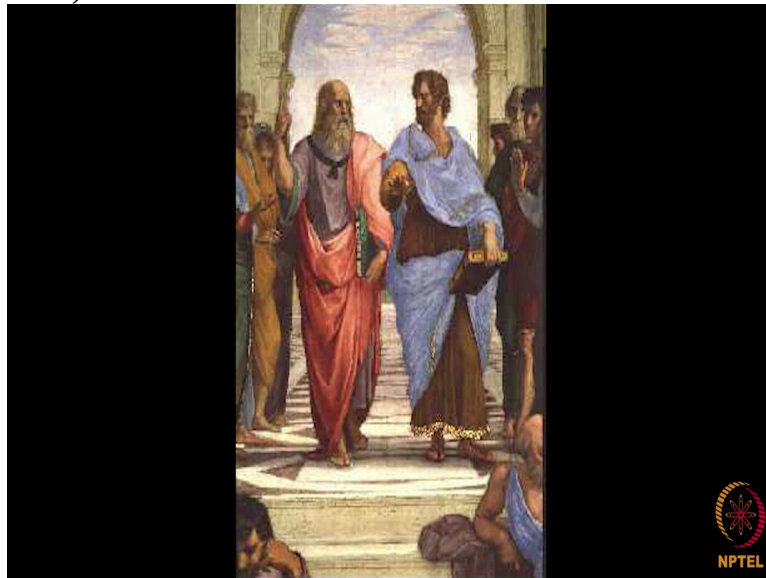
Say for instance in drama, there are samanya dharma, then there is vishesh dharma, that is the varna dharma, ashrama dharma, there are different layers of dharma and it has to be understood from all these context to have a comprehensive about what dharma is. Similarly virtues because in the ancient Greek tradition, usually they talk about certain virtues which are cardinal, which are treated as very important and they are called cardinal virtues.

They are cardinal wisdom for example. Wisdom is such a cardinal virtue which is, Wisdom is not knowledge. It is something more than that. It is something inner insight about things in this world. And then you have moderate living, temperance, and then justice is another virtue, courage is another virtue, so these are all virtues which probably refer to some sort of human excellence.

Wisdom is obviously a human excellence, courage is again another kind of excellence which are required, which would be aspired positively by people in society. Now again, ethics was influenced by religion. By the time you know, historical developments in societies we can see that this is happening quite explicitly that religion is playing a very important role. This is particularly in the European context we can see this that the medieval age.

Christianity was the dominant religion, Catholicism was the dominant religion and what Catholic fathers, philosophers have done was they have tried to interpret the Scriptures, particularly the Judaic and Christian Scriptures in the light of Greek philosophy.

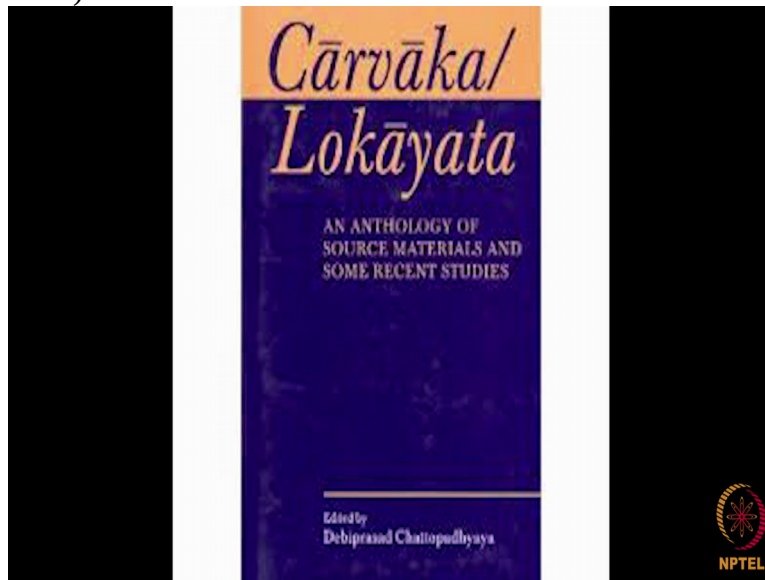
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When they tried to do that, I mean they took insights from the Greek philosophy, the very rich insights presented in Greek philosophical traditions, particularly the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle.

They were interpreted or rather the Christian doctrines were interpreted in the light of these philosophical insights and in that context, they developed their philosophical and ethical insights. So we can see that morality or ethics was influenced by religion at a particular period in human history in many civilisations. And we can also see growing criticism of religion. In many tradition, this is quite explicit. Even in ancient societies also we can see this happening.

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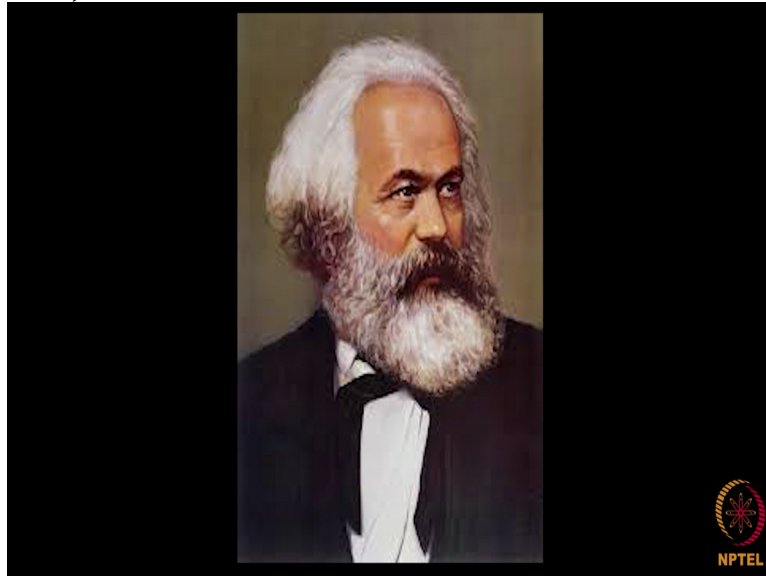


Say for example if you come to the Indian context, you have the Charvakians. The Charvakians were explicitly atheists, they were criticising the dominant Vedic civilisation, the dominant Vedic philosophical outlook and all the philosophical and metaphysical and moral insights associated with the Vedic perspectives were critically evaluated by the Charvakians who advocated a very interesting philosophy.

We hardly have any written materials, written documents from the Charvakian's traditions. We have only references given mostly by the critics which are left about the Charvakians but still we learn a lot from them and we know that there were people who were materialists, who advocated a life which is quite materialistic rather than focusing more and more on spiritualistic values and spiritual enlightenment.

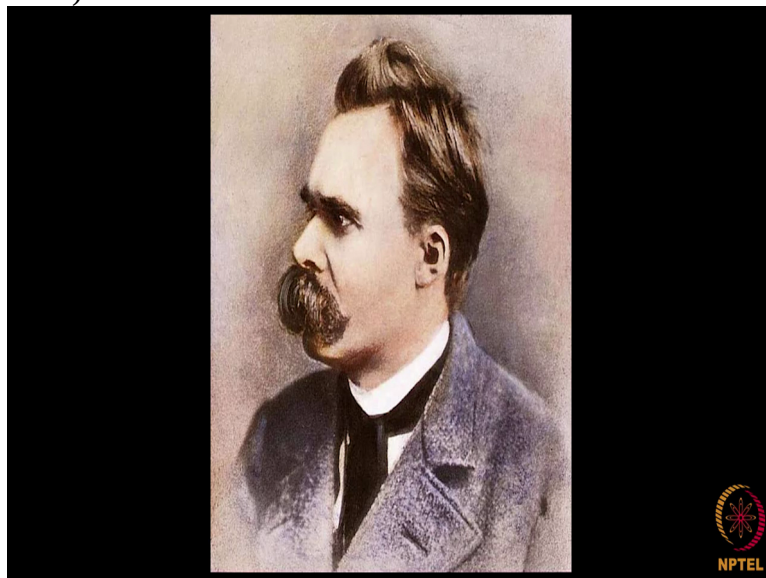
And in the Western context, we can see that from the very beginning there is emergent parallel to the development of philosophy and ethics. There is a development of, there is an emergence of secularistic perspective which became quite dominant in the modern period with Marxism for example.

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Marx was one of those philosophers who very emphatically denied the value of religious thinking and he called religion as the opium of humanity. And again if you come to the 20th century or 19th century, you have another philosopher or two very important thinkers.

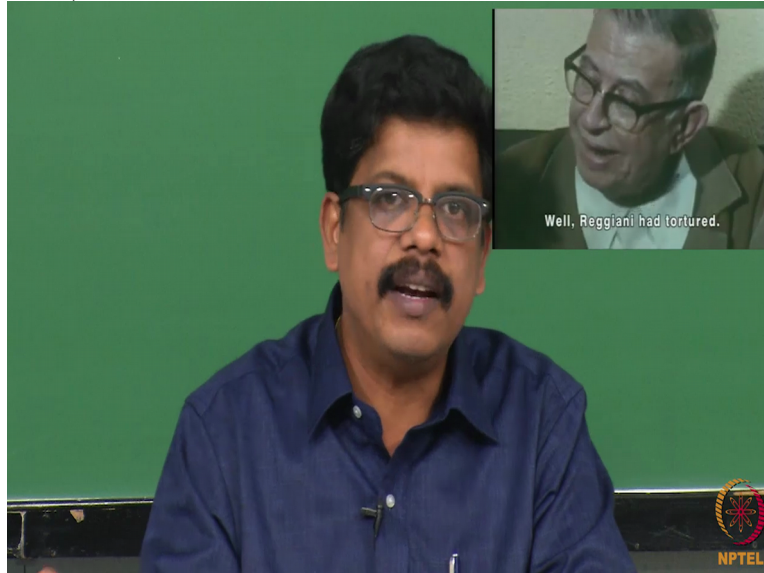
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One is Friedrich Nietzsche whose death of God has influenced the philosophical thought of modern Europe tremendously and then the psychoanalysis of Freud, Freud's psychoanalysis was another

moment which actually was instrumental in the development of a secularist perspective in Europe during 20th century.

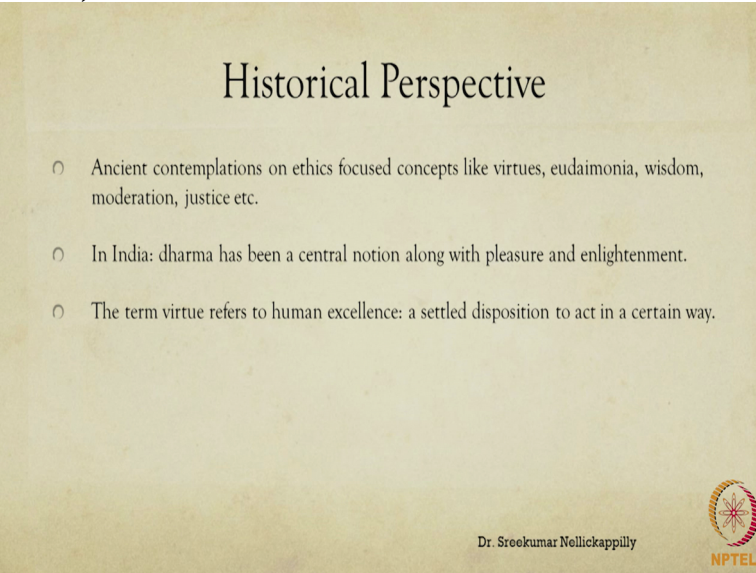
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And when you come to 20th-century, later half of 20th-century, particularly the writings of John Consath, the novels and his philosophical writings where he advocated uncompromising atheism which denies the value of all religious perspectives and religious morality. He says that the very idea of God itself is a contradiction and he was an atheist, a stronger atheist than any of his other predecessors.

So we can see that you know along with the criticism of religion, there is also developing a criticism or a critique of religion-based morality, religion-based ethical frameworks which resulted ultimately philosophers to think about developing some other perspectives on ethics which is more secular and open. Before we getting into all these details, let us have a very brief historical perspective about the development of ethics in the various traditions, various civilisations.


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Historical Perspective

- Ancient contemplations on ethics focused concepts like virtues, eudaimonia, wisdom, moderation, justice etc.
- In India: dharma has been a central notion along with pleasure and enlightenment.
- The term virtue refers to human excellence: a settled disposition to act in a certain way.

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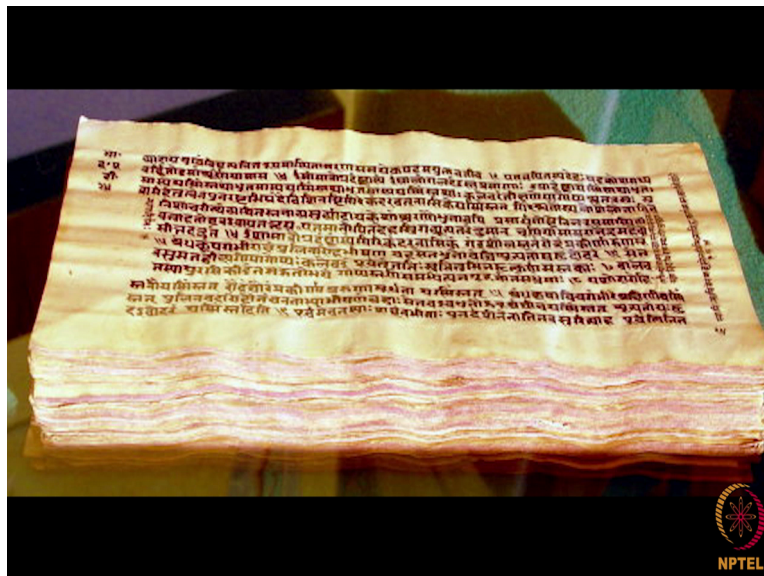


Ancient contemplations on ethics focused on concepts like virtues, Eudaimonia, wisdom, moderation, justice, et cetera. I have already just mentioned it. This is particularly in the Greek philosophical traditions. These were the concepts, these were the principles and notions which are emphasised by the ancient Greek thinkers or in the ancient Greek conduct. Virtues for example, what is a virtue?

I have just told you that there are different ways in which the town virtue is understood but it is some excellence of some type, we can understand it in that way. And Eudaimonia is another interesting notion which is so peculiar to the Greek civilisation and we can also see that something very similar to these concepts are available in other civilisations, in the Chinese civilisation, in the Indian civilisation and various other places, wisdom, moderation, justice, et cetera.

And in India particularly we can see that the concept of dharma is a very dominant notion. The Hall of India's history can be understood, can be read from the perspective of how dharma is being conceived in different ages by different philosophers and different thinkers and different texts.

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For example, the notion of dharma that is advocated in Vedic tradition, the Vedas offer a very broad framework in discussing all these themes. You can see parallels of all the themes which are discussed in the European tradition like virtue, Eudaimonia, wisdom, moderation, justice, et cetera in the Vedic tradition. And this discussion is carried on by the Upanishads also, not a very systematic discussion on these concepts but you can see fine references to them here and there and very strong references and very strong discussions in the Upanishads we can find.

And when we come to Buddhism and Jainism and the Charvakyaans which are known as the heterodox schools of thought in the Indian context, we can see a very different form of

interpretation or set of interpretations are promoted and initiated by these traditions. I have already mentioned the contributions of the Charvakians who denied the dominated interpretations of dharma and who also questioned the very legitimacy of the concept of dharma.

And that is very interesting actually because in the Vedic civilisation or that rather vedic perspective and the Upanishadic philosophical perspective very strongly subscribe to idea of dharma and they were all contemplating about this concept from different angles. And suddenly another school of thought which emerges and very strongly criticises the very legitimacy of the concept of dharma and also the associated concepts because the way the context, the concept of dharma is associated with the kind of egocentric I mean rather it points egocentric benefits of the agent who performs dharma.

Dharma is never performed for the sake of dharma in the Indian context. Or rather, to put it in another words, dharma is not advocated or practised for the sake of dharma. There is a higher perspective, there is a higher goal or objective which legitimises the very pursuance of dharma in the Indian context. So it is in this situation we have to focus our discussion on the idea of the 4 objectives of life. Earlier, it was the 3 objectives.

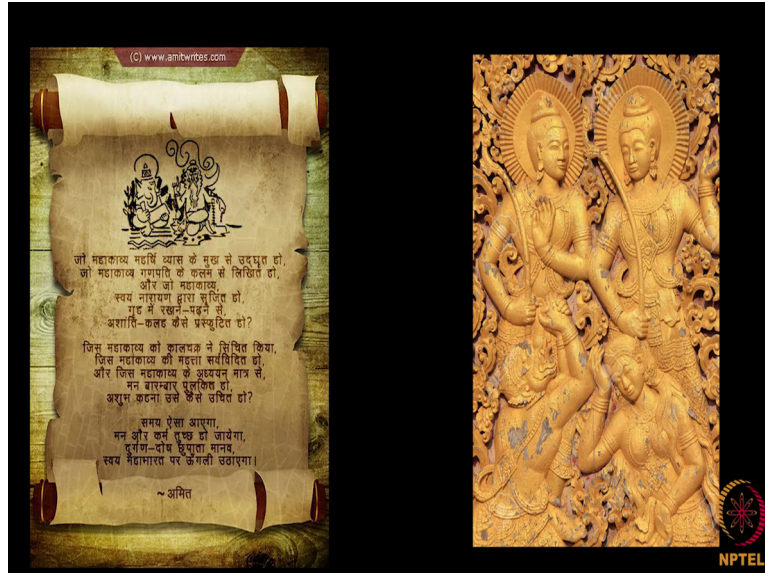
The final objective is, the Purusharthas they were called. Earlier, they used to have 3 of them, dharma, artha and sukha. Dharma is righteousness, artha is anything that promotes physical pleasure and other aspects like that, materialistic, spiritual pleasure, material embellishment and then the 3rd one is sukha. Sukha is 2 aspects, one aspect is quite materialistic which is called desire, desire for physical pleasure. The other aspect is more spiritual to put it in a context which underlines the value of a spiritual enlightenment.

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And this context of Purushartha then which it is discussed, again you can find that the different traditions, Buddhism and Jainism also advocate different concepts of dharma. They do not deny the whole idea's legitimacy like the Charvakyans. They also add to the debate, add to the dialogue about dharma but they add several other dimensions to that emphasising and underlining dimensions. But then in response to this Buddhist and Jainist philosophers, we can find that later texts which have automated in the orthodox Hindu traditions also carry the discussion on dharma.

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And at one particular stage, we can find that more than any other text, more than any other philosophical or Vedic that have originated in the tradition, the epics particularly the Mahabharata and Ramayana gain a lot of importance in the Indian context, in the historical context of India, the cultural history of India.

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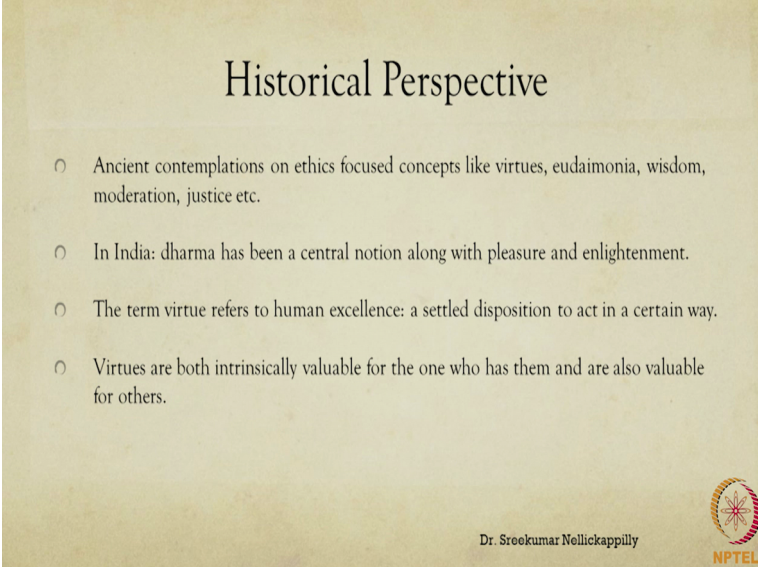
These 2 texts, particularly Ramayana has become very influential text in the, in forming, in shaping the religious sentiments of Indians. And then the Mahabharata or rather the Bhagvada tradition, all these epics contributed in shaping a very peculiar notion of dharma which of course

are not one and the same but are very similar to each other, we can find. And Mahabharata actually opens up the question of dharma and thing is that it is a very difficult question.

It is a highly difficult and it is almost impossible to understand dharma. Dharma is such a complex concept according to Mahabharata. And it has to be understood contextually since the context in which we have to understand dharma are innumerable. It is very difficult to a priori arrive at a concept, at understanding of dharma. There also you can find that the practical knowledge aspect is understood as far as ethics is concerned, as far as morality is concerned.

These are the theoretical aspects of morality that has happened in the Indian context. And then again you know, you can find that the discussion goes on and various other dimensions to this notion and the concept is being added over a period of time in India's history. Now again, let us come back to virtue.


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Historical Perspective

- Ancient contemplations on ethics focused concepts like virtues, eudaimonia, wisdom, moderation, justice etc.
- In India: dharma has been a central notion along with pleasure and enlightenment.
- The term virtue refers to human excellence: a settled disposition to act in a certain way.
- Virtues are both intrinsically valuable for the one who has them and are also valuable for others.

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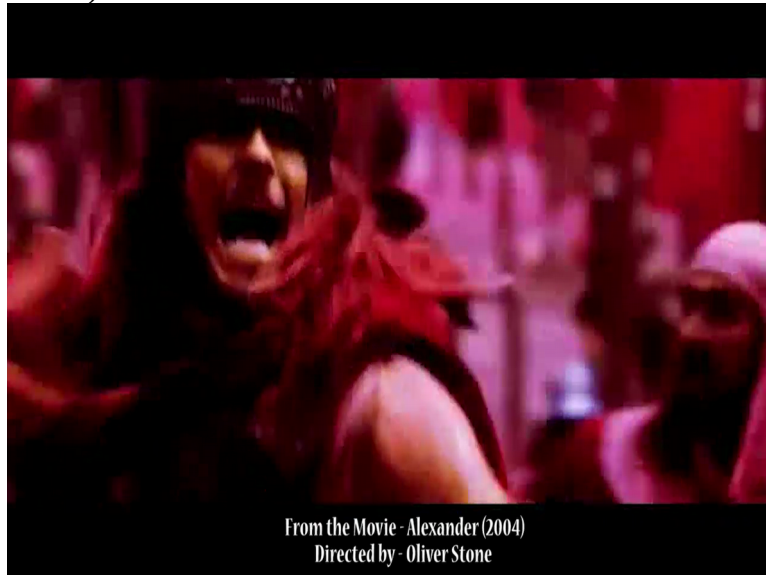


The term virtue refers to human excellence as settled disposition to act in a certain way. So here, it is a kind of habitable behaviour that is emphasised. Virtue is not just an accidental behaviour, virtue is not exhibited in people's behaviour as such, virtue is exhibited in conduct, it is a habitual behaviour, it is a disposition, it is a settled disposition of human beings. A brave man is always brave. He or she may not exhibit his or her bravery are occasional, rather he or she would exhibit it always.

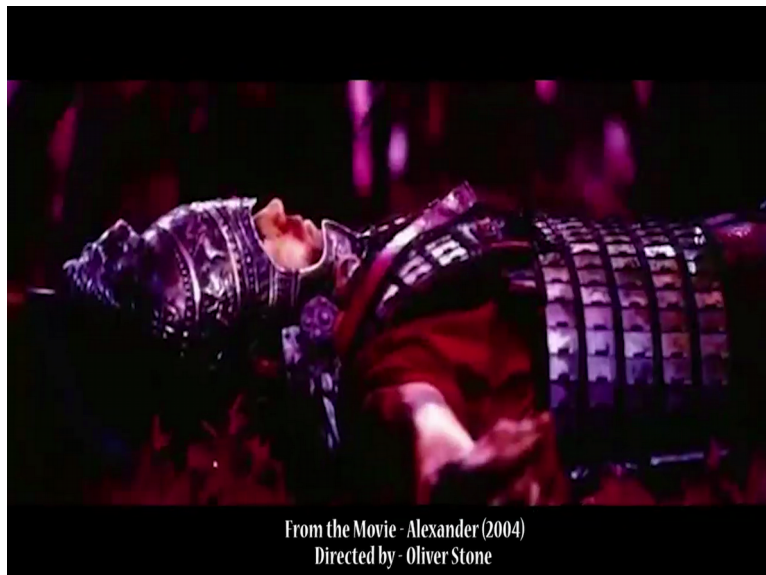
It is a settled disposition. In, to use a Sanskrit word, I think we can use the word swabhava for that. In Mahabharata, this aspect is emphasised. In one context, did not find the Yudhishtara tells Draupadi that to follow dharma is my swabhava. It is not that I do it consciously but it is not that I do it for attaining something, it has become my swabhava. So virtue is a conduct.

Virtue is associated with conduct, dharma is also associated with the swabhava of people who are dharmic. Virtues are both intrinsically valuable for the one who has them and are also valuable for others. This is the case with dharma as well. Both would do good for the person who possesses them as well as the society in which they are.

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From the Movie - Alexander (2004)
Directed by - Oliver Stone



From the Movie - Alexander (2004)
Directed by - Oliver Stone



Say for example, the bravery of a soldier. The bravery of a soldier would help him to attain or rather realize his self, realise all his potentials because his very character consist him being a brave man, a courageous individual. So courage becomes a virtue for this individual and it benefits him, the performer of actions based on courage as well as a society because he would be able to protect the society from internal and external harm.

So in that way, virtues like dharma are both beneficial for oneself as well as they are other regarding. So it is not that you know the they are meant for others, they are meant for serve society. The concept of serving the society is a, is a much later concept. In this ancient period, you will find that what is dominant is not the servee's aspect associated with virtue dharma. Rather, it is a egocentric benefits which are associated with that.

I think that is quite logical because you know naturally a person who was asked to perform dharma or who was asked to be virtuous would be wondering, what would I gain from this? So the ancient philosophers, both in Greece and India, seem to be telling their followers that it is ultimately done for your sake, not for the sake of others or for the society but primarily it is done for your own sake, your own benefit, you have to adjust for your own sake.

Of course, this is not the only be supported. There are different perspectives but this is one of the dominant views. And now, I will come to the very important concept, Eudaimonia. It is the feeling of contentment or satisfaction with the way one's life as a whole is going. When usual

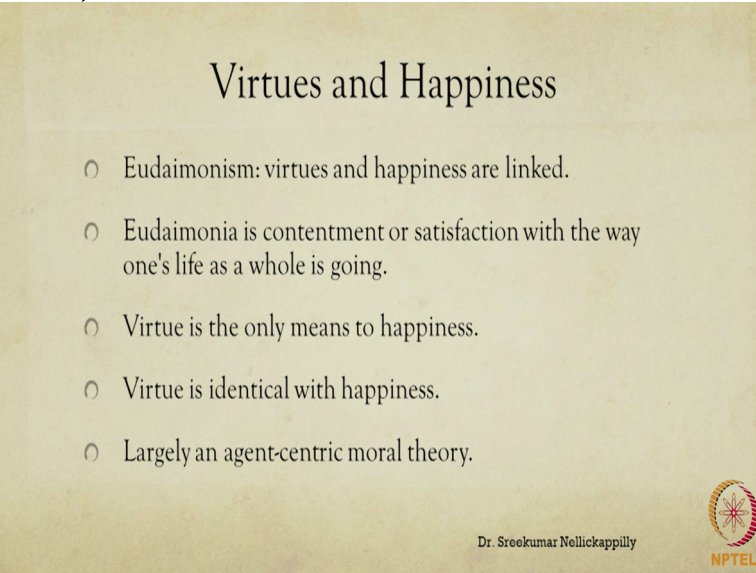
way in which the concept of Eudaimonia is understood as to equated with happiness to translate the word Eudaimonia as happiness.

But this is bit of misleading because Eudaimonia is not just happiness. It is rather, it is better to use the word contentment or satisfaction in the way one's whole life is actually going. So there is a reference to the totality of one, a person's life, the whole of life. You feel satisfied, you feel that you are happy. I mean, it is not that the person is saying that I was happy yesterday but not today. Or rather, those were my happy days which implies that now it is not so.

But Eudaimonia does not refer to happiness in that sense, it refers to happiness in a very broad sense. The whole of person's life is involved and it refers to the whole of a person's life, a satisfaction he or she gains out of living it. Now, virtues and happiness. So there is a very important connection between virtue and happiness. This is what I was trying to emphasise.

Particularly in in both the contexts which we have been examining, both the European, the Greek context as well as in the Indian context, that is a connection, there is a very intrinsic connection between virtues and happiness.


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Virtues and Happiness

- Eudaimonism: virtues and happiness are linked.
- Eudaimonia is contentment or satisfaction with the way one's life as a whole is going.
- Virtue is the only means to happiness.
- Virtue is identical with happiness.
- Largely an agent-centric moral theory.

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And there is a term called Eudaimonism which says that virtues and happiness are linked, are intrinsically linked. That is what is known as Eudaimonism. It is not that they are accidentally linked. They are intrinsically linked. And to say this, we may also have to raise certain questions. In what way they are intrinsically linked? Can we say that virtues are the necessary, sufficient conditions for happiness which also means that there could be other conditions.

Say for example, I am very rich and I have a lot of money with me and lot of other comforts around me and I am enjoying a lot of power. All these things might add to my happiness ok? Because the more powerful I am, there is the possibility that the happier I am. I mean not necessary but one possibility that there is a happiness associated with power, happiness associated with money, comforts and various other things.

But again, you know the propagators, the advocates of this Eudaimonist tradition, both in the West as well as in India, I am using the term Eudaimonia in a very very broad sense, not in a very technical sense in which it is used in the Greek civilisation. I am using it in a very broad sense which includes happiness in the sense of contentment, satisfaction, et cetera. So they would argue that the link between virtue and Eudaimonia, happiness or in the Indian context, dharma and enlightenment, is definitely not accidental, it is very intrinsic.

But at the same time, virtue is not only the necessary condition for happiness, it is the sufficient condition. You do not need anything else just have to be virtuous. This is a kind of spiritual

perspective which you would find in the Greek traditions as well as in the Indian tradition. Dharma is not just a necessary condition but if sufficient condition for enlightenment. You just have to be dharmic in order to be enlightened.

Of course, I am aware of the fact that when I say this in the Indian context, I am not just making a comparison here, I am just trying to argue a point, a perspective, for a perspective which is present here. And I know that virtues are different from dharma and Eudaimonia is different from enlightenment in the Indian context. There are essential differences between these concepts but just try to understand these similarities.

I am rather emphasising more on similarities rather than differences for the sake of understanding certain other concepts which I consider are important in this lecture. Eudaimonia is contentment or satisfaction the way one's life as a whole is going and virtue is the only means to happiness. So, no other means, there are no other means because you know, even if you have a lot of money, you are not necessarily happy.

Even if you are the most awful person, you are not necessarily a happy person. So there are several other factors that make, one might be wondering what is it that that is going to make me happy? There is a very interesting story in the Chandokya Upanishad where Narada goes and tells Sarad Kumara that he finds himself not really happy, not really content I mean a mind come completely satisfied.

He is not aware of any particular want that he craves for. He has everything. He thinks that he has everything. I do not need anything else to be happy. I have learned a lot, I have learnt mathematics, I have learnt Jyodisha, I have learnt sciences, I have learnt whatever is available in the curriculum in those days, I have learnt but still I find there is something which makes me unhappy.

Then Sarad Kumara says that you have not learned the essential thing, you have not learned the very nucleus of knowledge. You know many things but you have never captured the nucleus, the knowledge that essentially makes everyone happy and the knowledge that is necessary for being happy and the knowledge that is sufficient for being happy. That is something which you are lacking and that is our pravidya in the Upanishad context. And then Narada was instructed on aatmavidya which is not a kind of instruction that happens in classrooms.


It is a different kind of instruction. Anyway I am not getting into those details. Virtue is identical with happiness and largely an agent centric moral theory. So this is one aspect probably I would emphasise in this lecture that the connection between, the intrinsic link between virtue and happiness when we will examine it, we will find that virtue is identical with happiness. It is something which it is not really different from happiness.

But it is identical with happiness and largely an agent centric moral theory. And I have already mentioned what is meant by agent centric moral theory.


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Agent-Centric Moral Theory

- Focus on the state of mind and character, the set of values, the attitudes to oneself and to others, and the conception of one's own place in the common life of a community . [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy]



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Because in an agent centric theory, who is given importance is the agent. The welfare of the agent, the benefit of the agent is very important in an agent centric theory. And as far as the moral theory of virtue, ethics is concerned, it is largely by a large agent centric which can be contrasted with the modern theories of ethics which are action centric. I will refer to that slightly later.

So in this agent centric theory as I mentioned a few minutes back that the agent benefits a lot by being moral. So one is being moral for one's own sake. So in one sense, we can also raise a criticism against such theories by saying that they are very egoistic. They ultimately do it for the ego more for the benefit of the ego but to do justice to this critical framework, what is wrong in it?

What is wrong in craving for one's own benefit so long as this craving would not hamper for would not put others into trouble? Or in this context actually what they say is not only that it would not hamper other people's happiness but also makes other people happy. So you are, by performing dharma, you will be happy and you will also make others happy. By performing virtue, by advocating a virtue, by practising a virtue which is a settled disposition which is an excellence, you would benefit out of it and you would also benefit to society.

So this is largely an agent centric theory and this you would find in the philosophy of Socrates who is considered arguably the 1st moralist in the Western tradition. Of course, morality existed and the moral theories resisted or moral theorisation existed much prior to Socrates but Socrates tried to systematically develop a moral theory. In that sense, he is very important in the European context.

And the focus is on the state of mind and character. This is from Stanford encyclopaedia philosophy which talks about agent centric philosophy in the following lives. It focuses on the state of mind and character, the set of values, the attitudes of oneself and to others, oneself and to others and the conception of one's own place in the common life of a community. So that is very important.

You are you are not just isolating yourself and just going to the solitude of mountains and completely resigning yourself from social life. You are well within the society like Socrates.

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You will find that Socrates is a very interesting philosopher, arguably the 1st greatest philosopher in the Western tradition but also because he philosophised mostly in places where people would assemble, common men would assemble. In the marketplace, in in certain functions, marriage functions and other such context. So he brought down philosophy from heavens, from the skies to the earth by discussing it here with people and tried to develop a perspective, a moral philosophy which would not where a philosopher, a moralist or an ethical philosopher does not seem to be having superior knowledge than him and trying to advocate this knowledge to others, Socrates does not appear to be so.

He is not a person who says that I have a superior knowledge. I possess a superior knowledge and those who can come to me and I will teach you that knowledge. He does not do that. He rather went to people and tried to learn from them and tried to advocate that cooperatively, jointly we can probably pursue the path of truth and know what ultimate reality it is. And in that process of knowing ultimate reality, in that process of knowing the ultimate destiny of humankind, Socrates was officiating moral knowledge as an essential component in that process.

Rather moral knowledge is the highest knowledge in Socratic framework. We will continue this discussion with a little more emphasis on this agent centric moral theory and then also try to understand the Socratic ideas about ethics in the coming lecture. Now for the time being, we will wind up. Thank you.