Globethics Repository



Morality and moral development

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Srivastava, Chhitij;Dhingra, Vishal;Bhardwaj, Anupam;Srivastava, Alka
Publisher	Medknow Publications And Media Pvt. Ltd.,
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-08 23:54:52
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/193042

[Downloaded free from http://www.indianjpsychiatry.org on Wednesday, September 25, 2013, IP: 59.160.153.178] || Click here to download free Android application this journal

Morality and moral development: Traditional Hindu concepts

Chhitij Srivastava, Vishal Dhingra[1], Anupam Bhardwaj[2], Alka Srivastava[3]
Psychiatry Unit, Department of Medicine, [1]Department of Pathology, MLN Medical College, Allahabad, India, [2]North Essex Partnership Foundation Trust, Stapleford House, 103 Stapleford Close, Chelmsford, Essex CM2 0QX, United Kingdom, [3]Consultant Pediatrician, Vatsalya Hospital, 6/8 Elgin Road, Allahabad, India

ABSTRACT

Morality (from the Latin word *moralitas* that means "manner, character, proper behavior") is the differentiation of intentions, decisions, and actions between those that are good (or right) and those that are bad (or wrong). It is determined by how one's genetic makeup interacts with the environment. The development of morality has been a subject of investigation for a number of decades, and our understanding of neuro-biological and psychological mechanisms has increased manifolds in the last few decades. Development of morality has been of particular significance to psychiatric literature because of its significant contribution to the development of one's personality and it's aberration in various disorders. Cultures that have been just, equal and moral have been widely accepted and appreciated. In this review, we shall summarize the modern theories of moral development and then look into a part of our past and cultural heritage and review the traditional Hindu concepts of morality and their contribution to development of one's personality and their relevance in the current times.

Key words: *Dharma*, Hindu, morality, *vedanta*, *vedas*

INTRODUCTION

Morality (from the Latin word *moralitas* that means "manner, character, proper behavior") is the differentiation of intentions, decisions, and actions between those that are good (or right) and those that are bad (or wrong). It is an intriguing and evolving construct. Moral values are governed by a number of biological-socio-cultural-religious underpinnings. Not everyone within the same environment ends up with the same moral values. It is determined by how one's genetic makeup interacts with the environment.

The development of morality has been a subject of investigation for a number of decades[1,2] and our understanding of neuro-biological and psychological mechanisms has increased manifolds in the last few decades.

Development of morality has been of particular significance to psychiatric literature because of its significant contribution to the development of one's personality and it's aberration in various disorders. The abhorrent acts of "immorality" conducted by those who are "psychiatrically unwell" have intrigued the society for long. Society is in some ways in pursuit of the "ultimate in morality". Cultures that have been just, equal and moral have been widely accepted and appreciated. Such social set-ups promote healthy upbringing. An essence of this healthy upbringing is inculcating moral values from parents, teachers, role models, peers, colleagues and the wider society. In this review, we shall summarize the existing modern theories of moral development and then look into a part of our past and cultural heritage and review the traditional Hindu concepts of morality and their contribution to development of one's personality and their relevance in the current times.

Address for correspondence: Dr. Chhitij Srivastava, Psychiatry Unit, MLN Medical College,Allahabad - 211 001, India. E-mail: srivastavachitij@gmail.com

How to cite this article: Srivastava C, Dhingra V, Bhardwaj A, Srivastava A. Morality and moral development: Traditional Hindu concepts. Indian J Psychiatry 2013;55:283-7.

Access this article online	
Website: www.indianjpsychiatry.org	Quick Response Code
DOI: 10.4103/0019-5545.105552	

[Downloaded free from http://www.indianjpsychiatry.org on Wednesday, September 25, 2013, IP: 59.160.153.178] || Click here to download free Android application this journal

MODERN THEORIES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Biological theories

Moral development doesn't start on a blank slate at birth. Our genes determine our temperament to a large extent, although, gene expression can be influenced by one's environment. It therefore, follows that both our genetic makeup and the environment we experience would influence our overall development, including our moral development. However, further discussion on this is not the purpose of this review and therefore, we will not dwell on this further.

Cognitive theories

Cognitive development theorists, Jean Piaget (hereby referred to as Piaget) and Lawrence Kohlberg (hereby referred to as Kohlberg) have shown that the moral development during childhood occurs in stages and is mirrored by other cognitive changes in the child's brain. Piaget referred to himself as a genetic epistemologist, interested in the process of development of human knowledge. He explained that Genetic Epistemology attempts to explain knowledge, and in particular scientific knowledge, based on its history, its sociogenesis, and especially the psychological origins of the notions and operations upon which it is based. According to Piaget's theory, morality is formed in two stages. The first stage is that of "Heteronomous morality" in which children are able to see rules as fixed and dictated by authority.[1] Rewards and punishment dictate one's actions. The next stage is that of "Autonomous morality", in which they are able to move beyond the consequences and are able to see morality as linked to intentions and that rules are flexible.[1]

Kohlberg further developed Piaget's theory. He described stages of moral development that depended on Piagetian stage of cognitive development. Kohlberg described three major levels of moral development that were each further subdivided into two stages making it six stages in total. The three levels are pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional morality.[2] The pre-conventional stage is essentially the morality possessed by pre-school children and is focused on avoiding punishment and obtaining reward. The morality in the conventional stage focuses on the notions of mutual benefits, social conformity and following law and order. The post-conventional stage focuses on general internalized moral principles. The sub-stages are listed in Table 1. Kohlberg used moral dilemmas to investigate the moral reasoning of individuals and he focused on individuals' thinking process rather than the content.

Table 1: Stages of moral development as described by Kohlberg

Level 1 (Pre-Conventional)
1. Obedience and punishment orientation
(How can I avoid punishment?)
2. Self-interest orientation
(What's in it for me?)
(Paying for a benefit)
Level 2 (Conventional)
3. Interpersonal accord and conformity
(Social norms)
(The good boy/good girl attitude)
4. Authority and social-order maintaining orientation
(Law and order morality)
Level 3 (Post-Conventional)
5. Social contract orientation
6. Universal ethical principles
(Principled conscience)

Other theories

In her book "In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development", Carol Gilligan criticized Kohlberg's theory as it was developed by studying male subjects exclusively.[3] Gilligan argued that females act from concerns about social relationships and that their moral development has elements of compassion and caring strongly built in. On the other hand, according to her, justice dominates men's morality.

Social intuitionists such as Haidt[4] argue that individuals often make moral judgments intuitively and that the reasoning only comes later to justify their actions.

Modern psychoanalytic theory conceptualizes the development of conscience as growth of superego through positive identification of parental values and not guilt, which was given a lot of importance by the classical psychoanalytic theory.

THE HINDU LITERATURE

The most important Hindu scriptures are the *Vedas, which* are recorded in the four sub categories viz., *Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda* and *Atharva Veda* and contain the earliest concepts of Hinduism. These four *Vedas* are further divided into two parts, *Karma-Kanda* and *Jnana-Kanda*. *Karma Kanda* is the section dealing with rituals and prayers while *Jnana-Kanda* deals only with the ontological realities – the nature of world, consciousness (or self) and God known as *Brahman* in the *Vedas*. It logically analyses their mutual relationship to determine whether these are interconnected or if there is any fundamental difference between them. *Vedanta* refers to the set of teachings that are contained in the *Jnana-Kanda* section, which are culmination of the *Vedas*. Their vision is to present what the *Vedas* want us to know.

Vedanta is not restricted or confined to one book and there is no sole source for *Vedantic* philosophy.[5] However, it is widely accepted that the three most important constituents of *Vedanta* are the *Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita* and *Brahmasutras*. *Upanishads* are passages from the *Jnana-kanda* section of the *Vedas*. They are the core of *Vedic* wisdom and are essentially philosophical in nature. Though the authorship of many *Upanishads* are not known,

[Downloaded free from http://www.indianjpsychiatry.org on Wednesday, September 25, 2013, IP: 59.160.153.178] || Click here to download free Android application this journal

many of them are presented as set of dialogues between teacher and disciple in logical method trying to uncover the nature of reality. *Brahmasutras* are intended to logically explain the teachings of the Upanishads.[6] They attempt to systematize the various strands of the *Upanishads*, which form the background of the orthodox systems of thought.

It is also important to mention that there is a lot of literature for children, to help in their moral development, from an early age. The *Panchtantras*,[7] which are an ancient Indian inter-related collection of animal fables in verse and prose, are a wonderful example of using social stories to communicate the principles of *Dharma* (morality) to children. The original Sanskrit work is believed to have been composed in the 3rd century BCE. The *Panchtantras* continue to be very popular in India as children stories.

The moral dilemma in *Bhagavad Gita*

The *Bhagavad Gita* has always been of utmost importance and is arguably, one of the most revered religious texts of the Hindus. It consists of 700 verses divided in 18 chapters. It is considered to contain the essence and spirit of Hindu philosophy and is also a literary masterpiece because of its superb poetry. The great Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy referred to the *Bhagavad Gita* as the essence of all Hindu scriptures. To understand *Bhagavad Gita*, it is important to understand the context within which it is placed. It forms a part of the great epic, *Mahabharata* which is traditionally ascribed to the sage Vyasa.[8] It revolves around the fight for the throne of the kingdom of Hastinapur. This battle is fought between the Pandavas (five sons of King Pandu) and the Kauravas (hundred brothers who are descendants of King Kuru) who are related as cousins. Pandavas have the legal right to the throne, but Kauravas take over the kingdom by cheating the Pandavas, in a game of dice. The Pandavas have Lord Krishna on their side as their guide, but he has vowed not to use any weapons in the battle. Lord Krishna is considered to be the incarnation of Lord Vishnu who is one of the Gods in Hindu mythology and considered to be the creator of this world. There are numerous moral dilemmas contained in *Mahabharata* that make it a very meaningful and interesting read. The *Bhagavad Gita* is centered on the moral dilemma that is faced by despondent Arjuna (one of the Pandavas) in the midst of the battlefield. Lord Krishna is Arjuna's charioteer in the battlefield but essentially his spiritual guide. Just when the battle is about to begin, Arjuna is burdened with severe self-doubt about what he is just about to engage in: a bloody war with his cousins over a kingdom! His dilemma is whether it is appropriate for him to kill his own cousins Kauravas and other close associates for the sake of the kingdom, despite it being his legitimate claim. It is then that Lord Krishna enlightens him through the teachings that together form the *Bhagavad Gita*. These teachings comprehensively bring out the essence of *Vedas*, primarily *Upanishads*, in a language that is less terse than that in the original *Upanishads*. The main intention of these teachings is to help humans, with the task, which is, perhaps the most difficult, that is, to discriminate, choose and perform actions that are moral and righteous, especially when one is going through an emotional crisis. One of the tenets of *Bhagavad Gita's* philosophy is *Karma Yoga* that translates into "path of union through action". It emphasizes on performing selfless actions with an attitude that is not influenced by one's likes and dislikes.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna says:
"*tasmad asaktah satatam karyam karma samacara asakto hy acaran karma param apnoti purushah*"[9] which translates into "Therefore, without being attached to the fruits of activities, one should act as a matter of duty, for by working without attachment one attains the Supreme".

Arjuna finally decides to fight the Kauravas. However, it was not because he didn't like them for cheating him and his brothers. It was because that was the most logical course of action based on his *Dharma* (morality) that demanded that by fighting the Kauravas and defeating them, he would ensure that justice had been delivered.

The *Purusharthas* (human endeavours)

The teachings of *Vedas* and *Vedanta* focus on the understanding of two aspects: Ontological nature of existence and *Dharma* (which approximately translates into morality). It is vital to have a clear understanding of *Dharma* and their various facets that would eventually help to get a more philosophical insight into nature of reality. We will discuss *Dharma* but as it is not a straightforward topic, we will first place it in context within the four *Purusharthas* (human endeavours) as expounded in the *Vedic* tradition. *Purushartha* refers to a goal, end or aim of human existence. It is a key concept in *Vedic* tradition that one needs to be clear about. By fulfilling the *Purusharthas*, man gets fulfillment for life as well as sustains the society.

Purusharthas can be broadly categorized into four major categories:

1. *Dharma*
2. *Artha*
3. *Kama*
4. *Moksha*

Dharma is a concept of central importance in Hindu religion and philosophy and is defined in The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions as "the order and custom which make life and a universe possible, and thus the behaviours appropriate to the maintenance of that order". *Dharma* embraces every type of righteous conduct, covering every aspect of life, both religious and secular, that is essential for the sustenance and welfare of the individual, society and creation. It emphasizes the need to perform one's duty with sincerity. *Artha* and *Kama* are pursuits of securities and pleasure, respectively. *Artha* means looking after

[Downloaded free from http://www.indianjpsychiatry.org on Wednesday, September 25, 2013, IP: 59.160.153.178] || Click here to download free Android application this journal

one's material and social needs and translates into earning money, social recognition, power, control or its equivalent. The pursuit of *Artha* gives one a sense of security. Some of these pursuits can also be viewed as *Kama* because they also give a sense of pleasure although generally, *Kama* implies pleasure seeking and mainly refers to fulfillment of sensual pleasures.

In its true sense, *Dharma* should be the basis for *Artha* and *Kama*. If a man pursues *Artha* and *Kama* with *Dharma* at its core, his endeavours will not only help him evolve as a responsible human being, but will inevitably benefit the society at large. The Hindu system makes it clear that the ultimate human endeavour is to attain *Moksha* in the form of total ending from seeking any of the other *Purusharthas* on its accomplishment. What it would practically mean that even though one may continue to seek *Artha* and *Kama* with *Dharma* as its core to carry on with life, one doesn't have to be attached with it in any form. *Moksha*, in other words, refers to the freedom from travails that are associated with any pursuit, which is only possible through right knowledge about the nature of one's own consciousness (see the section on "*Dharma* as related to *Moksha*" for further elaboration of this).

A similar concept was proposed by Maslow.[10,11] He described a "hierarchy of needs" model in which he divided human needs into basic (physiological, safety, love, and esteem) and growth needs (cognitive, aesthetics and self-actualization). Although this model is conceptually similar to *Purusharthas*, there is no concept of attaining *Moksha* as a human endeavour.

Dharma

The concepts of *Dharma*, as expounded in the *Vedas*, are based on an intrinsic higher order. They are not only confined to human pursuits but also include the nature in totality. Everything that exists on the planet earth, other planets, the solar system, galaxies and indeed the entire universe is governed and sustained by the laws of *Dharma*. Thus, the laws in empirical science would also be a part of *Dharma*. There are differences between how the laws of *Dharma*, if one were to call them laws, apply to the universe as compared to the human beings and to a certain extent, to the animal kingdom on earth. Human beings are born with the unique mental faculty of being able to discriminate and choose. This is a blessing indeed, but is also a curse, because choices create conflicts, which are moral dilemmas for a conscientious person. One's attitude when making these choices and acting accordingly determines how moralistic one is; that is how much one follows the laws of *Dharma*. So while the universe may naturally and unquestioningly follow the laws of *Dharma,* human beings may choose otherwise. Whenever *Artha* and *Kama* gain excessive importance for humans, they knowingly or unknowingly, deviate from the laws of *Dharma*. This creates conflicts, which are evident both within individuals and in the wider society. It gives rise to passions of greed, desire, jealousy and anger that give rise to all forms of conflicts and social disturbances.

Dharma as selfless action

This comes out in teachings of *Karma Yoga* in the *Bhagavad Gita*. It states that one has the ability to choose actions, but the individual does not govern the results of these actions. There is emphasis given to selfless action that is not influenced by one's likes and dislikes and without concern for the outcome. The outcome is then accepted as *Prasada* (gift from God), whether it is desirable or undesirable. This allows the individual to focus on action completely without allowing his mind to be affected with the anxiety and exhilaration invariably associated with its consequences. This also allows actualization of one's full potential.

Dharma as universal moral principles

Compassion and empathy form an extremely important part of *Dharma*. It comes out in various principles of *Dharma*. In following *Dharma*, a number of values and attitudes are listed in the Hindu scriptures as necessary for a human being, for example absence of conceit, absence of hypocrisy, speaking the truth, harmlessness, accommodation, straightforwardness and compassion for all beings. *Ahimsa* (Non violence) is often regarded as an absolute *Dharma*. However, the Sanskrit phrase is "*Ahimsa Paramo Dharma. Dharma himsa tathaiva cha*" that translates into "Non-violence is the ultimate *Dharma*. So too is violence in service of *Dharma*". In the great epic, *Mahabharata, Arjuna's* decision to inflict violence on his cousins *Kauravas* was therefore, in accordance with his *Dharma*.

Dharma as related to Moksha

Dharma assumes more significance due is its complex but invariable relationship with the fourth *Purushartha, Moksha*. *Dharma* says that there is an inherent relationship between everything in this creation that is built on mutual interdependence based on unseen laws. If these laws were flouted, then the one who is responsible for this would be penalized through ways that do not lend easily themselves to logical scrutiny. Therefore, *Dharma* involves faith in intrinsic intelligence of creation and that the world is not as inert as it apparently appears to be. Following *Dharma* for a sustained period of time leads to purification of mind that becomes free from strong likes and dislikes. A purified mind can ask fundamental questions of life and is capable of discovering the basis of creation called *Brahman* in *Vedic* philosophy. Discovering *Brahman* as one's own self is *Moksha*. This discovery is of enormous significance as it brings with it a deep sense of fulfillment that is difficult to be expressed in words. It is extremely important to understand *Brahman* to understand the meaning of *Moksha*, as understood by the *Vedas*. *Brahman* is the basis of the creation. The Creator or God is both the intelligent cause and the material cause. This

[Downloaded free from http://www.indianjpsychiatry.org on Wednesday, September 25, 2013, IP: 59.160.153.178] || Click here to download free Android application this journal

means that God is not separate from the world. It is within you and within everything. The knowledge that your own consciousness is one with God, the *Brahman*, is called *Moksha*. Wig[12] discussed this as differing with the concept of God in a number of other religions including Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In these traditions, 'God' is the Creator of the universe and everything in it; thus the Creator, in a way is 'outside' this world, which he has created.

CONCLUSION

The *Vedic* principles have influenced the Indian psyche for many centuries. These principles have underpinned the socio-cultural-religious framework for the development of individual and social moral principles. The Indian psyche and society is in a phase of rapid evolution. Pursuit of *Artha* and *Kama* are overtaking the responsibility of *Dharma*. The moral structure of our society is at an interesting crossroad. Prosperity has given rise to greed and corruption. Reminding oneself of our glorious past and enriching scriptures and understanding their essence can bring back the necessary balance for us to develop and evolve into mature beings. This would not only benefit the Indian society but also the world at large.

REFERENCES

1. Piaget J. The Moral Judgment of the Child. New York: The Free Press; 1965.
2. Kohlberg L. Moral stages and moralization: The cognitive developmental approach. In: Lickona TE, editor. Moral Development and Behavior: Theory, Research and Social Issues. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; 1976.
3. Haidt J. The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. Psychol Rev 2001;108:814-34.
4. Gilligan C. In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1982.
5. Brodd J. World Religions. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press; 2003.
6. Radhakrishna S. Brahma Sutra, The Philosophy of Spiritual Life: Greenwood Press; 1960.
7. Edgerton F. The Panchatantra Reconstructed (Vol. 1: Text and Critical Apparatus, Vol. 2: Introduction and Translation), Vol. 2-3. New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Series; 1924.
8. Fowler JD. The Bhagavad Gita: A Text and Commentary for Students, Eastbourne: Sussex Academy Press; 2012.
9. Bhagavad Gita. Chapter 3, Text 19.
10. Maslow AH. A theory of human motivation. Psychol Rev 1943;50:370-96.
11. Maslow A. Motivation and Personality. New York: Harper; 1954.
12. Wig N. Mental health and spiritual values. A view from the East. Int Rev Psychiatry 1999;11:92-6.

Source of Support: Nil, **Conflict of Interest:** None declared