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Essential Ethics

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ESSENTIAL ETHICS*

Sudhir Kakar

It was in January, 1963, when my mentor and later, friend, Erik Erikson, delivered a lecture at Delhi University on the topic 'The Golden Rule in the Light of New Insight.' It is thus a great honour for me to be asked by Delhi University to follow in Erikson's footsteps and talk on a very similar theme though, of course, without ever hoping to match the depth and insights of one of the greatest psychoanalytic thinkers of the last century. I am, thus, both honoured and humbled.

The title of my talk is *Essential Ethics* by which I mean to convey two ideas: one, the essentiality of ethics (and thus also of education in ethics) for the leading of a meaningful and fulfilled life and, two, the essence of ethics.

The essence of ethics is encapsulated in the Golden Rule that seems to be a feature of all the major religions of the world. 'Do unto others what you wish others to do unto you.' In its maximal, most unconditional form, we encounter it in the Upanishads as 'he who sees all beings in his own self and his own self in all beings' and in the Christian injunction 'love thy neighbor as thyself.' In its minimal incarnation, we meet it in the Jewish Talmudic version where in words of Rabbi Hillel, 'What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah and the rest is but commentary.'

Today, with widespread doubts on whether the moral exhortations of religion are 'practical' and have any relevance to the leading of our lives, any education in ethics that bases itself on religion will not convince young people of the truth of the Golden Rule, no matter how venerable the religious texts and religious authorities, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Sikh, Christian, Jain that one may cite in its support. What we need is a translation of the Golden Rule for our contemporary times and arguments that harness the prestige of science more than the moral injunctions of religion to carry conviction. We need to turn to recent developments in social psychology, sociobiology and social neurosciences that highlight the innate altruism of human beings, findings that seriously question the British philosopher Hobbes vision of man as basically self-centred or an older sociobiology's belief in the 'selfish gene' as essential to evolutionary success.

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The translation of the Golden Rule in light of these findings, then, is: 'Doing good to others is doing good to your self.' What we need to demonstrate is that this is not based on religious-moral prescriptions but on the nature of human reality itself. Each one of us is deeply embedded with other human beings as also connected to animate and inanimate nature, an embeddedness that demands a caring for all that is not self for our own health and happiness. And here I am not only talking of emotional well-being and happiness, which some may consider as vague categories, but of concrete, physical health.

The benefits of caring behavior are so large that they even show up in improved health and a longer life span. In a large, longitudinal study from the United States, those who reported giving more help and support to spouses, friends and relatives went on to live longer than those who gave less, whereas the amount of help that people reported receiving showed no relationship to their longevity. In other words, it is indeed more blessed to give than to receive. Since this particular study also studied the effect of specific altruistic actions, it might be of interest to give you some details regarding these. As you know, aspirin is often prescribed as a preventive to those at risk of heart attack.

To help another person, has five-times more positive effect on your longevity than the ingestion of aspirin. Just to listen to another person is still twice as good as aspirin for your survival.

The available evidence, then, supports St. Francis' prayer, 'Grant, that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive.' Or His Holiness Dalai Lama's flat statement, 'Paying attention to one's own needs is a producer of suffering; cherishing others a giver of happiness.' I often tell budding psychologists who are contemplating a career as a psychotherapist, 'You won't make much money in psychotherapy, but it is a great anti-depressant for the therapist.'

To witness good deeds-caring behavior-gives rise to feelings of elation (some call them religious feelings) that are physiologically related to the rewarding release of the hormone and neurotransmitter oxytocin, to which I'll come back later.

In an ingenious experiment, the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt gathered 45 nursing mothers with their infants in a psychological laboratory where half were shown videos depicting altruistic behavior while the others watched comedy videos.

Almost half the mothers who were shown the morally uplifting video showed increased milk flow or nursed their babies after watching the video while only very few mothers did so after watching the comedians. The first group also turned toward their babies more, touching them and clasping them to their breasts. Haidt comments that 'The effect was one of the biggest I ever saw.' Other experiments have demonstrated the presence of caring behavior in children as young as 18 months and even in 2-3 year old chimpanzees who spontaneously help a familiar adult who appears in some distress.

I just mentioned the hormone oxytocin, popularly called the 'love drug' or 'cuddle hormone', that rewards caring, altruistic behavior. It is the hormone that provides a powerful motivation to care for one's children as also forges other kinds of bonds. It makes people trust others and conversely people who behave trustingly cause oxytocin levels to rise in the partner they trusted. Oxytocin levels rise in people who report feelings of wanting to help someone who is suffering. Our brains secrete more oxytocin when we have intimate contact with another person, even if that contact is a back massage.

Whereas the release of oxytocin in the brain is the physiological basis for why human beings are a caring lot, evolutionary biology would explain the evolution of our altruistic gene as a result of natural selection; in contrast to the selfish person, people who helped others were more likely to get help when they need it most, say in an attack by predators.

But what about cases when, for some reason or other, acting on the Golden Rule, doing good to others, does not bring good but harm in return? Where your compassionate act is reciprocated with a slap on the cheek? And here, true to our first loyalty to truth, we must point out that though caring behavior is built in us, saintly behavior of turning the other cheek is not. That requires exceptional human beings, saints.

Recent research seems to be showing that all of us have a reciprocity reflex that is activated in interpersonal situations. In other words, we are primed to act according to the dictums: "I'll scratch your back, if you scratch mine; "I'll stab your back, if you stab mine." Theorists are even talking about an "exchange organ" in the brain, as though a part of the brain is keeping an account of debts owed and insults to be avenged. Specifically, the strategy of this exchange organ is to be nice in the first round of interaction, but after that do to your partner whatever your partner did to you in the previous round. The exchange organ wants to repay a favor even if the favor is an empty one. In one study, a psychologist sent a Christmas card to randomly chosen people who he did not know. The great majority sent him a card in return.

An awareness of our unconscious tit for tat tendency of -insult for insult, injury for injury, fairness for fairness, and, very important, the bias towards fairness at the start of an interaction, is helpful knowledge for all our inter- personal encounters. In day to day life, the reciprocity principle under which we unconsciously operate, is visible everywhere. People, and especially, sales people, who want something from us, try to give something to us first. Waiters placing a sweet or *saunf* on the tray with the check, get more tips than those who don't.

We must, however, not downplay the suspiciousness which an exhortation to ethical conduct for the good of society encounters, and rightly so, among a large section of our young (and older) people. We must remember the English poet William Blake's admonition that 'common good' readily becomes the topic of 'the scoundrel, the hypocrite, and the flatterer', an observation as true of India (and other countries) in 2017 as it was of Britain in the 17th century when it was first made. He who would do good for his own health and happiness must first do it in minute particulars, in the dailiness of his lived life.

The pointing out of benefits of altruistic, caring behaviour for individual well-being and happiness are apparent. Can an education in ethics also point to similar benefits on a societal level? Before I come to that question, let me say that I believe that a quickening of the altruistic impulse is evident in the wider social arena, with a flourishing of NGOs, including some on a global scale, such as the Gates Foundation, Oxfam, Amnesty International or Medecins sans Frontier. The unprecedented rise in charitable giving which is not limited to one's own community as has been the case earlier but goes beyond it, is another signpost on this road.

What I now want to talk about is the role of the essence of ethics, of the Golden Rule, as we have discussed it so far, in nation building. Diversity is one of our greatest resources. But diversity can also be divisive and the question arises whether the protection of this diversity does not need a framework to contain its centrifugal forces. Super-ordinate identities like the Indian nation or Indian-ness, if not imposed by force or diktat, dampen internal conflicts and are an antidote to divisiveness. The process of converting a diverse people into a nation can be accelerated by endowing certain ideas that bind people together in a single entity, with a very high value as being markers of Indianness or Indian civilization. An education in ethics can do so by pointing out that some of the greatest Indian icons, Buddha, Tagore and Gandhi come immediately to mind, have held that compassion, caring, sympathy (I use them interchangeably), have been the supreme values of our civilization. Let me just take Tagore.

The defining feature of Indian civilization according to Tagore, which we are in the process of losing, is sympathy. Sympathy, as I understand it, is the feeling of kinship that extends to beyond what is our kin, a sense of 'we' that extends beyond kinship. And this feeling of kinship is not limited to human beings but extends to the natural world. The Golden Rule is based on the presence of sympathy. Here Tagore and Gandhi are in complete agreement. 'Brotherhood,' Gandhi writes in one letter, 'is just now a distant aspiration. To me it is a test of true spirituality. All our prayers, and observances are empty nothings so long as we do not feel a live kinship with all life.'

For Tagore, in contrast to the West, Indian civilization sought to establish a relation with the world, with nature as also with the living beings, not through the cultivation of power but the fostering of sympathy. 'When we know this world as alien to us, then its mechanical aspect takes prominence in our mind; and then we set up our machines and our methods to deal with it and make as much profit as our knowledge of its mechanism allows us to do so,' he writes, 'This view of things does not play us false...this aspect of truth cannot be ignored; it has to be known and mastered. Europe has done so and reaped a rich harvest...For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realizing our own selves in it through expansion of our sympathy; not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union.'

Let me add that 'Indian' and 'Western' are not monolithic categories but only refer to the dominant strands in the imaginations of the two civilizations. Tagore, I believe, is not suggesting a simplified dichotomy between Indian and Western views. In the West, too, there have been thinkers, for example, Edmund Burke and Adam Smith in the Anglo-Saxon world, Schopenhauer in the German speaking one ("Compassion is the basis of all morality.") who have shared the traditional Indian civilizational value of sympathy, love in its most elevated form, as indispensable to social cohesion and solidarity. And we are all familiar with the famous slogan of the French Revolution, now a universal aspiration of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*-Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. It is interesting to note that fraternity, brotherhood, occupies the last place in this short list and, indeed, has become muted if not sidelined in contemporary Western discourse. I must also note that with the exception of saints like St. Francis who is said to have addressed even a wolf as 'Brother Wolf', the dominant current of Western thought since the last two hundred years, in contrast to the Indian one, has confined brotherhood, sympathy, to one's own group and not extended it beyond its borders to other

human beings, not to speak of other species. In our fascination with Western intellectual gurus, from Karl Marx to Michael Foucault, we do not realize what a disproportional space the Western idea of the role of power in social relations has come to occupy in modern Indian mind. Again, this is not to reject the value of the role of power and the truth it contains but, in Tagore's spirit, seek to assimilate this truth with our own heritage on the primacy of sympathy

For Tagore, then, without a revival of the idea of India ('Idea of India,' is a Tagore phrase), of an Indian-ness or Indian identity in modern parlance, India 'will allow her priceless inheritance to crumble into dust, and trying to replace it clumsily with feeble imitations of the West, make herself superfluous, cheap and ludicrous.' Such a fate may not be looked at with equanimity. In a globalized world that links not only entertainment and capital flows but also ideas, the bankruptcy of the East will also have an impact on Western mind, make it poorer. To adapt Tagore's words, if the great light of culture becomes extinct in the East, the horizon in the West will mourn in darkness.

Tagore's was not a defensive and regressive repudiation of Western culture. 'Let me say that I have no distrust of any culture because of its foreign character. On the contrary, I believe that the shock of such extraneous forces is necessary for the vitality of our intellectual nature...the European culture has come to us, not only with its knowledge, but with its velocity. Then, again, let us admit that modern science is Europe's great gift to humanity for all time to come. We, in India, must claim it from her hands, and gratefully accept it to be saved from the curse of futility by lagging behind. We shall fail to reap the harvest of the present age if we delay.' What Tagore objected to was the disproportional space Western ideas and world-view occupied in the modern Indian mind, and thus killed or hampered the opportunity to create a new combination of truths. 'It is this which makes me urge that all the elements in our own culture have to be strengthened, not to resist the Western culture, but truly accept and assimilate it; to use it for our sustenance, not as our burden; to get mastery over this culture and not to live on its outskirts as the hewers of texts and drawers of book learning.'

Unlike Gandhi, Tagore welcomed modern science and Western forms of knowledge. He admired the fullness of intellectual vigour in the West that is working towards the solution of all problems of life. What he bemoans is that the mental vitality of modern forms of knowledge are not balanced by the Indian idea of the cultivation of sympathy. Sympathy, as I understand it, is the highest manifestation of the human soul.

It is a continuum of loving connectedness-to nature, art, visions of philosophy or science, living creatures and, of course, to other human beings. What it gives rise to are moments of quiet exaltation that come from the flow of connectedness, from communion, to be sharply differentiated from the gratifying boost given by the feeling of power that comes from understanding the world.

Personally, I fully subscribe to Tagore's view that all our poetry, philosophy, science, literature, art, religion, society and politics, serve (or must serve) to widen the range of our kinship, our sympathy, the principle of the soul. Initiated in our love for those who nurtured us when we were children and our love for our own children, friends, lovers as we get older, it is only the wider and wider manifestations of sympathy that are the true measure of human progress. The soul is insignificant as long as it is imprisoned within an individual self. It reveals its significance and its joy only in connectedness. The more vigorous our individuality, the less the need to encase the individual self in an armor of self centeredness and more the capacity to make it permeable and thus participate in the play of what we call the 'soul'. To me, the question of the fate of the soul after death, central in our religions, is not especially interesting. If we do not free the soul from its prison of individual self, guarded by warders of self-centredness, while alive, I doubt whether there is hope of its freedom, of its salvation, after death. To adapt the poet Robert Frost's observation on love, the earth is the only place for the soul; I don't know where it is likely to get better. Or as the German mystic Meister Eckhart remarks, 'No one knows what the soul is. But what we do know is, the soul is where God works compassion.'

How would the cultivation of sympathy, the defining idea of Indian civilization, work out in practice? Let me take a couple of examples. The first is literature. Have we sufficiently explored the basic assumptions that lie behind Western theories of literary criticism and judgments of literary worth, which we use in the teaching of literature in our Indian colleges and universities? Do they need to be balanced, or at least looked at from the angle of sympathy which, following Tagore, I have postulated as the defining feature of Indian civilization, the idea of India? A hint of the possibilities is again provided by Tagore in his remarks on Shakespeare, who he greatly admired, and Kalidasa, who he revered. 'The fury of passion in two of Shakespeare's youthful poems is exhibited in conspicuous isolation. It is snatched away, naked, from the context of the All; it has not the green earth or the blue sky around it; it is there ready to bring to our view the raging fever which is in man's desires, and not the balm of health and repose which encircles it in the universe.' As I understand him, Indian literary criticism will

pay as much attention to the movement of sympathy in a work of literature as, following Western canons, it does to the movement of passions. The characters in the Hindi writer Premchand's fiction (or for that matter, Tagore's), for example, may not plumb the depth of human passions, a shortcoming that from the Indian point of view is relieved and compensated by the exquisite movement of sympathy that characterizes the best of these works. The highest accolades will, of course, be reserved for literary works that combine both the movements; some of Tolstoy's writings come immediately to mind. The second example is that of social movements.

Social movements in service of justice for the weak and the oppressed are rapidly picking up pace in our country, shaking traditional hierarchies and power structures. This is a welcome development. Most of these movements, however, seem to operate on the basis of only one ethic, justice, which is related to the issue of power, of correcting skewed and unfair power relations. In an almost sacralized ethic of justice, what matters is the outcome, not the path. Thus there have been and continue to be many eloquent voices that have defended violence in service of justice.

I believe that the Indian ethic of sympathy, compassion in this context, must temper the quest for justice. In our quest to right a wrong, bring the ethic of justice to the forefront, we are in danger of losing sight of what Gandhi and Tagore held was the defining characteristic of Indian civilization. In Tagore's words, 'Creative force needed for the true union in human society is love; justice is only an accompaniment to it, like the beating of tom-tom to song.'

Nearing the end, I want to address the question of the best methods of imparting an education in ethics, deal with the 'how' and not only with the 'what'. I do not want to be the wise owl in the story where a grasshopper comes to the owl and says, "O, wise owl! I am fine in summer but when winter comes, I am very cold and am quite likely to freeze to death."

The wise owl thinks for a while and answers, "Grasshopper, what you need to do is to change yourself into a cricket which can easily survive winters."

The grasshopper is overjoyed to have a solution to his existential dilemma when a doubt strikes him.

"But, wise owl, how do I change myself into a cricket?"

"I am a consultant," says the owl. "I have given you the solution to your problem. Implementation is your job."

Our species existed for more than 100,000 years before the earliest signs of literacy, and another 5,000 years would pass before the majority of humans would know how to read and write. Stories were the primary way our ancestors transmitted knowledge and values. Our brains have evolved to "expect" stories with a particular structure, with heroes and villains, a hill to be climbed or a battle to be fought.

Lawyers whose closing arguments tell a story win jury trials against their legal adversaries who just lay out "the facts of the case." Although stories grip us more readily than a narration of facts, they become even more powerful if they contain emotion. In an experiment reported in *Nature* some years ago, two emotionally dissimilar stories were read out to the experimental subjects. The first story was boring and went as follows: A boy is driving through the city with his mother to visit his father who works in a hospital. There the boy is shown a sequence of medical treatments.

The second story was more dramatic: A boy is driving through the city with his mother in a car and is grievously hurt in a car accident. He is rushed to the hospital where he is subjected to a series of medical interventions. The experimental subjects were then given a list of the hospital's treatments to read and sent home. After a week, the subjects who had heard the dramatic second story remembered the treatment details better than those who had heard the first one.

To understand the mechanism of the better learning through the involvement of emotions, the experiment was repeated with a small difference. All the subjects were given 40mg. of Propranolol for dampening of the sympathetic nervous system. A week later, the second group's memory of the treatments-the group exposed to the dramatic story-had also diminished under the medical dampening of emotions.(L.. (Cahill et.al. B-adrenergic activation and memory for emotional events, *Nature* 1994; 371:702-4.) In ethical education, we need to take assistance of literature, art and generally of psychology of emotions, to sensitize us to the ways in which we can make our educational efforts, the stories we need to tell in various forms, emotionally compelling.