

## Emotions and Ethics

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***Emotions and ethics are the issues of present concern as they have been a passing fad. A good human being (GHB) is the one who is pure at heart, with emotions, more of human value and less of negative value. The article emphasizes the need of cultivating the culture of noble emotions, ethics and strong character in the scheme of education and human development.***

Let us first address the issue as to whether the present concern with ethics and morals is yet another passing fad? For, it is often argued that unethicity has been a perennial companion of human society in all times and climes. So it is pointless to get worked up with today's manifestations of unethicity, etc. Like a wave it rises, and in due course it falls. We are unable to accept this kind of rationalization.

True, copying in examinations has always been a fact. But the great difference between copying when we were students and copying by a student today is the sheer brazenness and sophistication of the process. To be caught copying meant, a few decades ago, fear and humiliation in the school/college as well as at home. Such restraining impulses have now vanished. Similarly, college and university teachers missing scheduled classes, without notice, day after day, is nowadays common behaviour.

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We have known this first-hand through three years of harrowing experience of our children during their graduation. When we did our graduation (1950s), some of the busiest professionals used to take their classes without fail—whether during the day or in the evening. Are today's teachers ashamed of their contrary conduct? They shout hoarse for the right of parity with the IAS. What about taking to the streets for duties? Teachers are cheaters—this is a new phrase which is now being widely circulated to characterize the noblest of professions whose members used to be called *acharyas* (role models). Similarly, bribing is not a new human phenomenon. But the pervasive scale on which it has now become an open norm, rather than a shameful aberration, is the point to note. Ethical anguish is therefore not a luxury.

If, therefore, whatever little sensitivity to ethical degeneration we may have mustered so far is not to be reduced to mere academic logic-chopping, we must grasp the nettle at the core. Only then we may make some practical headway. Perhaps we can begin by raising the most basic question of all: How is a good human being (GHB) most commonly described as? There seems to be one universal pattern to this, although there are many shades of variation in it. This pattern is: 'He/she is a kind-hearted person'; 'He/she is a broad-minded fellow'; 'He/she has a forgiving heart'; 'He/she is so open-minded'; 'He/she has a pure heart', and so on. Have we ever heard a GHB being called 'A kind-brained fellow', or 'A forgiving brain person', 'An open-brained fellow', 'A pure-brained fellow', etc.? Why does our daily language of communication, instinctively as it were, invariably talk about GHB in terms of the heart (mind), not brain (intellect)? We cannot answer this. But we wish to build my approach on the foundation of this universal fact of social communication.

The next question therefore is: Which part of the human constitution should then receive priority attention in reconstructing ethicality—the head or the heart? Matters of head—*buddhivritti*, or matters of heart—*hridayavritti*? Sacred wisdom says the priority here belongs to *hridayavritti*. These *vrittis* can be described in terms such as emotions, feelings, sentiments, impulses, etc. In a newborn baby, these are the starting corpus. Intellect, logic, reason gradually arrive later. And this sequential priority continues throughout one's life—no matter whether one to IITs or IIMs or other such manufactories of cranial learning. A surfeit of sharp

intellect and reason does not compensate for the deficit in noble emotions and feelings. Having ignored this for long we now stand on the explosive powder keg of sharp intellect combined with perverted emotions.

It is a fundamental mistake of principle in our educational process that we are conditioned to treating emotions as a dispensable nuisance to be cleared out by reason and logic. The mistake is this: Emotions or feelings could be desirable and positive (gratitude, humility, contentment, simplicity, sincerity, charitableness, compassion, etc.), as well as undesirable and negative (envy, anger, vanity, suspiciousness, malice, hatred, greed, etc.). The former promote human values which translate into ethical actions. The latter generate negative values which encourage unethical actions. The second set of human behaviours is indeed very much widespread among those with the highest amounts of intellect and reason, e.g., CEOs, Ministers, Professors, Doctors, Pilots, etc. It is *The Statesman*, for example, which had reported on July 2, 1982 the day following Dr. B C Roy's birth centenary date (declared as Doctor's Day by the GoI), that 'Doctors Invent Disease For a Fee!' It was based on a field survey by the *Statesman* reporters in Delhi on July 1. Were these top grade professional doctors lacking in reason, intellect, etc.? Yet there was perverted behaviour. Why! Because the emotion of greed (a *hridayvritti*) overruled reason. So, what is in the driver's seat in human behaviour—emotion or intellect? To this capital issue the ancient rishi-educators had an unequivocal response: For human character development, *chittashuddhi* or *antarshuddhi* must receive priority. *The Bible* too had declared: 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God'. Why cannot the brilliant in brain see God? Purification of emotions/feelings is what is implied by pure heart or *antarshuddhi*. So, a GHB is one who has more of human value emotions and less of negative emotions.

It is an important duty that we also listen to some of the greatest minds of our own times on this most momentous theme of human education and development. Let us go to Rabindranath Tagore first for a small sample: (i) "The principal creative forces, which transmute things into our living structure, are emotional forces"; (ii) "It (the world) becomes completely our own when it comes within the range of our emotions"; (iii) "Our emotions are the gastric juices which transform this world of appearance into the more intimate world of sentiments"

(*The English Writings of Tagore*, Vol. 2, Sahitya Akademi, pp. 352–353). We may now switch to the opposite pole as it were—Albert Einstein. This is what he warns us about: “Take care not to make intellect your God. It has powerful muscles but no personality. It cannot lead, it can only follow—and it is not fastidious about its choice of leader. Intellect has a sharp eye for tools and methods, but is blind to end and values” (*Out of My Later Years*, p. 260).

Back to the East and to India again. Swami Vivekananda in his London lectures on *Practical Vedanta* had these points to make: (i) “Out of the fullness of heart the mouth speaketh, and out of the fullness of the heart the hand worketh also”; (ii) “The intellect is only the street cleaner, cleansing the path for us, a secondary worker, the policeman ... the intellect is blind and cannot move of itself. ... It is feeling that works that moves with speed infinitely superior to that of electricity or anything else...intellect is an inactive secondary help, the real help is feeling ...” (*Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 302, pp. 306–307). And looking to the West once more, this is how Bertrand Russell has reflected on the issue: (i) “Correct behaviour combined with bad emotions is not enough to make a man a contributor to the happiness of mankind”; (ii) “... it is possible to operate upon feeling, and not only upon outward behaviour, by giving children an environment in which desirable emotions (our human values) shall become common and undesirable emotions (our human values) rare”; (iii) “It is therefore very important that children should have predominantly those emotional attitudes which will make them happy and benevolent.” (*The Basic Writings of B. Russell*, p. 431). Elsewhere he had warned also that “where they (kindly impulses of the heart) are absent, science only makes man more cleverly diabolic” (*The Future of Science*, p. 59).

It has been left to Gandhi, so it seems, to be the most disarmingly frank in admitting that: “Experience has humbled me enough to let me realize the specific limitations of reason. Just as matter misplaced becomes dirt, reason misused becomes lunacy ... Rationalists are admirable beings, rationalism is a hideous monster ...” (*Collected Works*, Vol. 31, p. 496). And we can offer an endless list of decisions and choices—from the international to the domestic levels—to demonstrate the veracity of Gandhi’s candid acknowledgment. A good example of the power of undesirable emotion over reason is the manner in which Subhash Chandra Bose was forced to resign as Congress President in the second spell.

The lesson is: Decisions or choices are always made at the emotional/feeling level in the first place, not at that of reason or intellect.

Sri Aurobindo, as is only to be expected of him, offers analytically the most thorough insight into mankind's emotion–intellect dynamics: (i) "In the economy of man ... the education of the intellect divorced from the perfection of the moral and emotional nature is injurious to human progress"; (ii) "The heart is not the mind (intellect), and to instruct the mind (intellect) does not necessarily improve the heart"; (iii) "This is the real office of the intellect—to discriminate, choose, select, arrange. But so long as there is not *chittashuddhi*, instead of doing this office perfectly, it itself remains imperfect and corrupt ... The purification of the *chitta* is essential for the liberation, purification and perfect action of the intellect?" (*A System of National Education*, pp. 7, 26).

And the last thinker in this sequence I would like to sample for us is Arnold Toynbee: "The effect emotion exerts on human action is as strong as—perhaps stronger than—that of reason. Consequently, emotions can get the upper hand and suppress theoretical knowledge which is dependent on reason" (*Choose Life*, p. 305).

The above bouquet of quotes has been presented in the hope that we may, having drifted so far away from the total view of man, and groping so helplessly in an area of darkness, set the problem of ethics in its proper perspective. Clearly, all these luminaries of our own times have unanimously and unequivocally endorsed the ancient order of priority—*hridayvritti* over *buddhivritti*—in human development. And our personal experience, with our own selves and others, entirely tallies with their diagnosis and remedy.

Let us now offer some illustrations in support of the preceding emotions—ethics theory. The most powerful example is that of the Shakuni–Vidura dyad in the *Mahabharata*. Both were cast in the role of counsellors—one to the son, the other to the father. Intellect-wise both were equally superlative. Yet, the content of counseling by them represented diametrically opposite characteristics. Shakuni's was destructive, unethical; Vidura's was constructive and ethical. How to explain this vast difference? The only reasonable answer is—Shakuni was under the spell

of diabolical emotions, while Vidura was inspired by divine emotions. Chapter 16 of the *Gita* develops the concepts and ingredients of *daivi sampat* (divine qualities) and *asuri sampat* (demonic qualities). All the 26 *daivi sampats* mentioned in verses 1–3 are emotional qualities, not intellectual. This is what we call human values. The rest of the verses enumerate a smaller but lethal catalogue of *asuri sampats* (disvalues for us). Shakuni is a personification of *asuri sampat*, while Vidura of *daivi sampat*. In Shakuni's case, his brilliant intellect did the biddings of foul emotions. In Vidura's case his brilliant intellect served under the impulsion of exalted, pure emotions. Emotion is the master, intellect the servant. This explains the anti-ethics of the one and the pro-ethics of the other.

If ancient mythology does not appeal to us, let us zoom in on our very own 1990s. How do we interpret the quality of these recent magnum corporate scam? A private sector 'steel king', a public sector 'steel king', an expatriate 'biscuit king', a 'hotel king', a 'cigarette king'—all tall structures reduced now to rubble? Any deficiency in intellectual sharpness or calculative reasoning in any of them? Any material poverty for them? Lack of professional education and expertise in them? Deficit of 'work-ethic' and hardwork in their work-life? Any deficit of honours received by them? The answer is obviously 'no' in every case. So, how can we explain and what lesson can we draw from such traumatic instances of lack of 'ethics-in-work'? Our explanation again is the same: Runaway exercise of razor-sharp *buddhivritti* without the controlling reins of ever-awake *shuddh hridayvritti* (pure heart). And the lesson to be learnt is: It will be our great crime against posterity if the culture of noble emotions, *shuddh hridayvritti*, is not placed right now in the centre of every scheme of education and human development. India's first priority should be GNC, not GNP—gross national character, not gross national product. The first cannot wait, the second can, and should.

We all nurse a legitimate aspiration for objective decisions/choices—in domestic affairs, sports arenas, office matters, political processes, etc. By objectivity here, it is meant fairness, freedom from bias or prejudices, impartiality, and the like. Do data, information, formulae, statistical models bring in such objectivity? Do we not manipulate forecast data to fulfil the criteria of lending by banks or financial institutions? What prompts such manipulation? In the field of Indian cricket one of the most glaring examples of negative emotions among powers-that-be

was in evidence a decade ago in regard to the selection of a batsman from the Eastern region. Was there any dearth of smart reasons to justify the strong emotional bias against this particular batsman? In principle, therefore, objective decision-making is ultimately the function of a purified subjective or emotional make-up of the decision-maker(s). It is worthwhile to know that recent philosophical scholarship in ethics/morals is beginning to veer around the notion of 'the moral significance of emotions' in the world of action (for example, *Morality and The Emotions*, J. Oakley, 1994, p. 38).

Assailing the dehumanization wrought by our technological civilization, Radhakrishnan had reminded us: "To be human is to be trusting, to be kind, to be cooperative, to be sympathetic and responsive" (*Recovery of Faith*, p. 21). Clearly, these features of humanness belong to the heart, not the head. And later in the same book he comes close to Tagore and Aurobindo by declaring that "our belief in human values requires us to be integrated with our view of the universe" (p. 48). The *Koran* had declared the same principle—only the word God was used for universe. Thus: "God is not kind to a person who is not kind to men. We ought to show kindness to his creatures if we invoke kindness from God ... He who is not grateful to man is not grateful to God" (*Unity of Living Faiths, Humanism and World Peace*, Part I, Jadunath Sinha, pp. 137–138). Evidently, ethicality towards humans, sub-humans and supra-humans can become an integral pursuit through carefully cultivated virtuous emotions.

At this stage, one clarification could be worthwhile. When we speak of emotions or *hridayvritti*, and so do the great contemporaries cited earlier, it is by no means 'emotionalism' that is meant. This is a spurious, fickle exuberance of unregulated impulsiveness. It does not have strength of character. Rabindranath Tagore had dealt with this issue in one of his early dawn discourses in Shantiniketan: "Only if we derive purity from the root of character every day, does emotion help us. ... It is this purity that belongs to our roots, while emotionalism is of our leaves" (*Human Values. The Tagorean Panorama*, p. 121).

So, assiduously cultured pure emotions and strong character go together. It is easy to see that an unethical society is a miserable, unhappy society. The solution

to this intrinsic misery is not by way of intellect, but by the heart. Thus, Vivekananda had once cried out in London: "I would a hundred times rather have a little heart and no brain, than be all brains and no heart. Life is possible, progress is possible for him who has heart, but he who has no heart and only brain dies of dryness" (*Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 145). Needless to add, Vivekananda's 'heart' is not the seat of rapid emotionalism, it is rather the Tagorean root of character.

References have been made above from time to time about the teaching, medical and management professions. What about politics? Our hesitation about it arises because it seems to be beyond the ken of naïve mortals like us. Moreover, some of our respected modern thinkers have been advising us that all social issues ought to be politicized. To be sure, for example, education has been politicized in India with a vengeance, specially in West Bengal. Unless for such intellectuals the definition of politics is altogether different, what we see in reality kindles only the emotion of burning helpless rage.

In the early 1950s, in our intermediate college prose selections we had a piece by Joseph Addison: 'The Mischiefs of Party Spirit' (*The Spectator*, July 1711). Of late, we have been recalling it frequently. The great essayist had characterized here at length the processes of party-politics by employing adjectives like malice, hate, dreadful spirit of division, falsehood, detraction, calumny, partiality, and so on. Undoubtedly they all are pernicious emotions which pervert and contaminate our thoughts and actions by twisting reason. During the following three centuries things have probably worsened immeasurably. If Aristotle had adumbrated politics as the final means to common good, we must not forget that ethics was the first foundation he had elaborated on before moving on to politics to serve society. Contemporary Western writers on ethics call this 'virtue-ethics'. And all items in their lists seem to fall into the category of emotions or feelings, not so much reason or intellect. The difference between 'dirty politics' and 'quality politics' could be accounted for only by the degree of purity of emotional forces driving political activities.

Sri Aurobindo had admitted: "I have done politics and the most violent kind of revolutionary politics, *ghoram karma*... even though politics is not always or often a very clean occupation." But then he clarified: "All depends on the spirit

in which it is done, the principle on which it is built, and the use to which it is turned” (*Collected Works*, Vol. 23, pp. 675–676). It is this formulation, constituted wholly of the quality and direction of emotional purity, which holds some hope for politics to serve the common good.

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