

Freedom of Will in Vedāntic Ethics

Safin Pramanik

Ph.D. Research Scholar Department of Philosophy Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, India

Abstract

The notion of free will is a very presupposition in the study of ethics and morality. Without the freedom of will we cannot evaluate an action as to be commendable or punishable. If the agent has no free will and is bounded by some conditions other than his own choice, then he is no longer responsible for his actions. It has been accepted globally as a presupposition of morality, but in Indian thought system the notion of free will is very vague, especially in Vedānta school. Other schools of Indian philosophy also have the same problem. The ethics of self, avidyā, suffering, Karmā, rebirth, moksa etc are connected with each other from where it becomes very uncertain to understand the freedom of will. In this paper an effort will be made to search for the problem of free will of the individual from the ethical perspectives of Advaita Vedānta.

KEYWORDS: Ethics, Free will, Vedānta, Avidyā, Ātmān, Brahman, World

The central principles of Indian ethics are rooted in her metaphysics. In fact, ethics has been described as a branch of metaphysics and not any separate stream of study. Indian ethics and metaphysics are not separable from each other. The ethical values have been derived from the teachings of ancient scriptures and its philosophy. The purpose of ethics, in the country, is not only about to extend the boundary of knowledge but to practice it in one's own life and follow sincerely for self perfection. On the other hand, the study of ethics in the west has been kept as a branch of philosophy. Lillie defined it in his *An Introduction to Ethics* as the science which judges the conducts of human beings to be right or wrong, to be good or bad etc¹. Like the other sciences, ethics also accepts some postulates where freedom of will is given a special status among the other postulates. Freedom is an a priori that we cannot fully grasp but we know it as the condition of the moral law which is within us. Kant says in the preface to the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) that the concept of freedom is 'the key stone of the whole architecture of the system of pure reason and even speculative reason.'²

In Indian ethics, the problem of free will is much-talked-about in the monistic doctrine of Śāṅkarācārya. Free will is the choice of the subject by which the person chooses his action. For this, the question of responsibility becomes relevant. To understand the problem of free will in Advaita philosophy, firstly we need to understand the exact meaning of free will in ethics. John Mackenzie articulates the definition of free will as: "The freedom means simply the absence of determination by anything outside the character itself... To be free means that one is determined by nothing out oneself."³ From the above definition it is clear that to evaluate an action neutrally, freedom of will is fundamentally necessary. Responsibility of action can be possible only by the absence of determination in the agent or subject. Regarding the nature of the subject, Indian philosophy accepts distinct opinion than that of the western philosophy. In Indian philosophy, the subject or the self is essentially

metaphysical. According to Advaita Vedānta, the Self is the Jivā, although phenomenally there is a difference between Jivā and Brahman, but ultimately there are no differences at all. The human self and the Absolute self are essentially identical. Vedānta holds the dual application of this self. This system is the Vijñānātmān which is subject to change, while the Paramātmān is free from all change.⁴ According to Śaṅkarācārya, the ātmān is purely cognitive, and it is an active individual consciousness which is striving towards some end. The sense of activity gives the realisation of being oneself. This empirical self is the agent of all activities. This is Jivā, who is Jñātā, Kartā, and also Bhoktā. Jivā is the combination of Ātmān and Anātmā; it is subject-object, self and not self, reality and appearance. But these all are from phenomenal angle of view. For the Advaitins, there is no difference between Ātmān and Brahman. Only the monistic Brahman is real. Jivā has no existence apart from the pāramārthika or absolute sense. The connection between self and būdhī (or understanding) is the result of Avidyā. Śaṅkarācārya declares that only Brahman is real; the world is ultimately false; and the individual soul is non-different from Brahman.

Brahma satyam jagan mithyā.⁵

Actually Brahman and Ātmān are synonymous terms. This world is the creation of māyā. Although the Brahman and the individual Ātmān are identical, but due to Avidyā the individual self mistakes by thinking as different from Brahman. Avidyā vanishes at the dawn of knowledge – the supra-relational direct and intuitive knowledge of the non-dual self which means liberation.⁶ According to the Advaitins, Māyā has both positive and negative aspects. The negative aspect is called ‘Āvarana’ i.e. concealment and the positive aspect is ‘Viksepa’ i.e. projection. In the former aspect of concealment, Māyā covers the one Brahman; and in the later aspect of Viksepa, Māyā projects the plurality of world instead of one Brahman. But as Śaṅkarācārya said, this world is not real, but phenomenal; it is the result of Adhyāsa.

According to Śaṅkarācārya, this world which is full of error and illusion is actually the result of Avidyā and one must remove the error by true knowledge. With true knowledge the Jivā finds his oneness with the Brahman which is Sat-chit-ānanda i.e. existence, consciousness and bliss. This is the state of liberation which is called Moksa. Among the four Purusārthas i.e. Dharma, Artha, Kāma and Moksa which are the values of human life, Moksa has been placed at the highest position with most importance in men’s life. Different Indian thinkers used the term Moksa synonymously as Mūktī, Apavargah, Kaivalya, Nirvāna, Nihshreyasa etc. It is called the Parampurushārtha or the ultimate goal of men’s life. Although most of the Indian philosophers prescribed Moksa as the ultimate goal but they do not share identical statements about Moksa. For the Jainas, Moksa is the elimination of Karmāpudgala from the Jivā. This is the destruction of the causes of bondage. According to the Buddha, the cause for suffering is the absence of right knowledge about four noble truths. By following the path of right knowledge suffering can be dispelled forever. Buddha used the term Nirvana which literally means release from the circle of rebirth. Maharsi Gautama states Moksa as, “Tadantavimokshapavarga”.⁷ Liberation, according to him, is the end of three kinds of suffering in men’s life. The one who achieved apavargah, suffering never returns in his life. According to the Samkhya-Yoga system, liberation means the complete cessation of all the sufferings. Apavargah or Pūrūsārtha is the *summum bonum* or the highest end of life.⁸ Moksa, according to

Śaṅkarācārya, is the realisation of the self and the ultimate reality and it is the removal of ignorance by right knowledge which ends all the sufferings that the self suffers. This state of liberation is has no end and is eternal.

Although this world is phenomenal which vanishes by right knowledge, but it has an importance in individual's life. All the objects appear in the world have value of presence. For Śaṅkarācārya, this world is mithyā but it has the Vyāvahārika value. This world is real only for the ignorant, but the wise who can see through it finds nothing but God, the one reality behind this illusory show.⁹ Although this world is illusory but it does not mean that this world is just an idea of the mind. Śaṅkarācārya described this world as Anirvacaniya but not unreal. For him knowledge is the relation between knower and object. So, the experience of the practical world is true only from the Vyāvahārika view. The worldly knowledge is true only in Vyāvahārika level. Just like the dream which has Prātibhāsika sattā or apparent existence, but in Vyāvahārika sattā or practical existence it has no reality. Therefore, if we look at the world from the absolute existence or the Pāramārthika sattā, then it has no reality. It is just a mere appearance of Māyā and is the result of Adhyāsa. The world has been aphoristically represented with the magician and his magic. The God is the great magician who conjures up the world-show with all its wonderful objects.

Therefore, according to Śaṅkarācārya an embodied Jivā has no permanent existence. If there is no existence of the subject then the question regarding freedom appears quite meaningless. As it has been said that the Jivā is the result of Avidyā, which is the root cause of practical existence. It includes all the activities of the embodied self that he does in this world. So the cause for willing and acting is actually Avidyā. This kind of existence clearly denies the freedom of will of the individual. Besides, men is eternally free but his worldly existence is the result of Avidyā and so his sense of agency; all the actions he performs under the influence of Avidyā. Therefore the basic criteria for free will i.e. determined by nothing seem quite uncertain in Advaita Vedānta. Because man is determined by Avidyā, so the freedom of will cannot take any place.

However, one may say that Śaṅkarācārya illuminated the problem of free will at the attainment of Moksa. It is the ultimate freedom. But the state of Moksa does not fulfil the exact conditions of free will. And, when one is absolutely free then the act of willing becomes meaningless. At the present situation all our ethical acts including willing are grounded on Adhyāsa. Therefore, the postulate of free will, according to Advaita Vedānta, is also unreal just like the phenomenol world. Vedānta Kesari in an article titled '*Freedom Of Will And Action In Shankara's Philosophy*' stated that, "Shankara, as a monistic philosopher, denies free will, he has accepted it as a pre-supposition of ethics. That is absolute freedom is Moksa; before that we are free only apparently."¹⁰

The doctrine of Karmā also faces the problem of determinism. There is a principle governing the universe. Karmā theory says that man's present situation is due to his past deeds. All our sufferings are determined by our past deeds. So we are here not because we wanted to be here but Karmā brought us. The individual is not free but is bounded by his past actions.

So, the problem of free will in Vedāntic ethics remains unresolved. So many scholars have raised this allegation against Śaṅkarācārya. Now, let us see how Śaṅkarācārya shall deal with this problem. To start from the very beginning, the central objective of Vedānta teaching is the realisation of the ultimate Brahman within oneself - “Aham Brahmāsmi”, the oneness and in contrast to demolish the wall of inequality; to feel the presence of Brahman in every creature of the world, from small to large. According to Radhakrishnan, “The metaphysics of the Vedānta naturally leads to the ethics of love and brotherhood. Every other individual is to be regarded as your coequal, and treated as an end and not a means.”¹¹

This realisation will definitely avert us from violence and will initiate us to work for the welfare of the world as well as of the society. But how, if an individual does not have freedom of will and is determined by his Avidyā then how can he work according to his will? Ātmān or Brahman exists in the different levels of existence, like Jāgrata, Svapna, Sūsūpti and Tūriya, in the Jivā. In all these levels the conscious like Ātmān is ever free. In fact the Jivā himself is the Brahman, due to Avidyā, he thinks himself as the knower, doer and enjoyer. With the true knowledge Jivā realises his identity with Brahman, which he already is. Although in the worldly existence the Jivā cannot realise the Brahman, but in that Vyāvahārika existence he lives as a free person. This is not the absolute freedom but it is freedom with limitations, just like conjoining appearance of Ātmān and Body, one is absolutely free and the other is not. This kind freedom enables the Jivā to make decisions for his own. Professor Raghunath Ghosh called this kind of freedom as ‘Restrictive Freedom’. In his article ‘*The Contemporary Relevance of Vedāntic Moral Principles*’ he said, “An individual, though bound by past Karmā, has the freedom of choice. He is not supposed to surrender himself to the past Karmās, but he has choice to mould the future in his own way instead of suffering the past. Life is not bound, but a growth which is described as ‘undetermined in a measure’”.¹² The Vedānta ethics recognizes human freedom under the limitations. If the Karmā theory bounds an individual, it does not mean that he has to surrender himself before his fate but he has to stand up for his life. Although his present situation is the result of his past actions; but at the same time he also holds his freedom of choice to destroy his bad outcomes and to change it into good conclusion by good deeds. Again it can be that Indian ethics and Western ethics are distinct to each other in their objectives. So, it might be wrong if we judge Vedāntic ethics in the scale of western ethics. Both have importance on their own way.

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