
UNIT 14 ETHICS AND MORALITY

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14.1 INTRODUCTION

Ethics can generally be defined as the realisation of the need to justify one's life and the decision to be ethical entails the choice of a particular value: "the sense of satisfaction derived from knowing that one may judge his own life as he would judge another's and find it good".⁷² Ethical teachings were the centre of the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. He considered life to be an integrated whole, growing from truth to truth every day in moral and spiritual status. He believed in a single standard of conduct founded on dharma of truth and non-violence. He successfully led non-violent struggles against racial discrimination, colonial rule, economic and social exploitation and moral degradation. Mahatma Gandhi was not an armchair academician or a cloistered visionary. He was deeply concerned with the world around him. He disclaimed being a visionary. Gandhi spoke in a low tone and was a hesitant public speaker. Yet people of all classes were drawn to him and instinctively felt him to be a leader of deeply spiritual and moral perceptions, which he sought to realize through the pursuit of Truth. Gandhi single-handedly made non-violence a universal substitute for violence and the bed-rock of his leadership. His non-violence was the way to counter injustice and exploitation, and not run away from a righteous battle. He associated the qualities of humility, compassion, forgiveness and tolerance as corollaries of non-violence.

According to Gandhi the spirit of service and sacrifice was the key to leadership. For the spirit of service to materialize he said one must lay stress on their responsibilities and duties and not on rights. He illustrated it through the example of concentric circles: one starts with service of those nearest to one and expands the circle of service until it covers the universe, no circle thriving at the cost of the circles beyond. Service to him implied self-sacrifice. He said that Sacrifice is the law of life. It runs through and governs every walk of life. We can do nothing or get nothing without paying a price for it, in other words, without sacrifice.

The commitment to service, however demands a strong sense of conscience (moral imperative), courage (fearlessness, bravery, initiative), and character (integrity). To Mahatma Gandhi, 'inner voice' was synonymous with conscience. He believed leaders need to develop and follow their conscience even more than ordinary people as they set the path for others.

Gandhi's Satyagraha elevated the struggle for survival to the highest moral-spiritual levels and ordinary, emaciated people turned heroes. His power arose through the people whom he gave a sense of self-respect, purpose and moral strength. Mahatma Gandhi expressed that morality is quite inseparable from the conception of God and religion. Morality is the core essence of religion. For Mahatma Gandhi, spirituality should be the highest goal of man and all else must be subservient to that goal.

The relevance of Gandhi's philosophies goes far beyond the boundaries of India. It has had the greatest impact against unjust regimes and empowered voices against these. His name itself has become a symbol for rebellion against inhuman and extortionist behaviour. Gandhi's examination of modern civilization in 'Hind Swaraj' is a treatise on the ethics and morality which nascent nations can hope to inculcate. One cannot but compare this philosophical analysis in modern political thought to that of Socrates. Gandhi helps us to understand how these ethics can lead to slow but essential changes in the world.

Resisting evil through the path of Satyagraha was one of Gandhi's most public example of critical thinking. According to him 'ahimsa' was the highest ideal or bravery. He espoused that non-violence can only be practiced by the brave and not the cowardly. Choosing the right path was the highest form of struggle against tyranny and injustice. Gandhi had no Platonic or Machiavellian philosophies but a moral and spiritual root which would also help the lowest of human beings to rise. He believed in the moral growth of the individual. According to Gandhi democracy could never be achieved by coercion but had to come from within as individuals and society grew from within.⁷³

Aims and Objectives

This Unit will enable you to understand

- Gandhi's concepts of ethics and morality.
- Gandhi's idea of truth and non-violence.
- Gandhi's conceptions of non-stealing, non-possessiveness and celibacy.
- Gandhi's ideas on a moral and spiritual character.
- Life teachings of Gandhi.

14.2 NON-VIOLENCE

Mahatma Gandhi said that non-violence means to keep oneself completely away from such action which may hurt others physically or mentally. Violence is a behaviour involving physical force intending to hurting, damaging or killing. Non-violence is to bear distresses by oneself to make others happy. The basic principle on which non-violence rests is that holds good in respect of oneself equally applies to the whole universe. Gandhi believed that non-violence is a more active and more real fight against wickedness than retaliation whose very

nature is to increase wickedness. Non-violence is one of the major moral qualities of human being. Non-violence is a power force than violence because it is linked with the bravery of mind. Non-violence is a powerful weapon of the strong. Mahatma Gandhi used non-violence not only for the purification of his soul, but to purify the conduct of the human society. He practiced non-violence in mass action and devised means to fight injustice.

Non-violence is the most effective means to fight against discrimination and falsehood. Non-violence is not the outward strength. Non-violence is the internal power. Non-violence promotes vegetarianism and reverence for all life. Non-violence prevents murder, war, capital punishment in the world. Non-violence avoids abortion, mercy killing, suicide and infanticide in human society. Non-violence creates freedom from physical and psychological violence, exploitation, injustice, inequality and discrimination. Non-violence develops love, co-operation, forgiving, help, and kindness in humanity. Non-violence is fundamental to the discovery of truth. Truth is God and non-violence is God's love. Truth is the ultimate goal of human life and non-violence is the means to achieve ultimate goal. Without violence it is not possible to seek and find truth. Non-violence and truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disintegrate and separate them. They are like the two sides of the same coin. Mahatma Gandhi expressed that the first step in non-violence is that we cultivate truthfulness, humility, tolerance, loving, and kindness in our daily lives. Honesty, they say, is the best policy, but in terms of non-violence it is an unchangeable creed. It has to be pursued in face of violence raging around you. Non-violence with a non-violent man is no merit. In fact, it has become difficult to say whether it is non-violent at all, but when it is pitted against violence, then one realizes the difference between the two. This we cannot do unless we are ever wakeful, ever vigilant and striving. The power of non-violence is the power of internal force. According to Gandhi it was no non-violence if we merely love those who love us. It is non-violence only when we love those who hate us. Non-violence to be a potent force must begin with the mind. Non-violence of the body without co-operation of mind is the non-violence of the weak or the cowardly, and has therefore, no potency.⁷⁴

14.3 TRUTH

Gandhi said that truth is the law of our being. Truth is God. Truth is a virtue. Truth is in fact self-revealing, but about that humans have become blind on account of their ignorance. Ignorance, according to Gandhi, is not necessary or natural to the self. Gandhi said that moral degradation or perversion of one's character causes ignorance. He explicitly mentioned the six deadly enemies which cause prejudice, malice and ill-will to arise, on account of which the person is unable to see or feel the truth. These deadly enemies are desire, anger, greed, attachment, pride and jealousy. Therefore, in order to practice truth one must constantly endeavour to protect oneself from these evils, one must cultivate moral purity and courage and must not allow these enemies to cloud one's vision.

Gandhi was also aware that in the present day world falsehood appears to be more paying and beneficial. By speaking lies people become successful, but Gandhi firmly believed in the superiority of truth over falsehood. There is one condition relating to the speaking of truth which Gandhi accepted because of its pragmatic value. Even in accepting this Gandhi tried to be faithful to the ancient Indian teaching. The condition is that the truth should be spoken in a pleasant

way. If the truth is expressed in an unpleasant, blunt and rough manner, it may be socially injurious as it might give rise to anger and quarrels. In fact, in ancient Indian philosophy there is a maxim which says, ‘speak the truth, and speak the pleasant; but do not speak the unpleasant truth’. Gandhi seemed to be influenced by the element of practicality contained in this maxim. Therefore, he said that truthfulness has to be practiced, that it is an art which has to be developed by rigorous and constant discipline and practice.⁷⁵

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss Gandhi’s idea of truth and non-violence.

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14.4 NON-STEALING

Gandhi explained that non-stealing does not mean not to steal. Non-stealing meant not to take by thought, word and action anything to which one is not entitled. There are two meanings of the word non-stealing; it popularly means the observance of the rule of not taking away the belonging or the property of anybody unless it is given by that person. The second, more rigorous meaning of the word non-stealing; it forbids the keeping or holding in possession of such things that are not needed. Mahatma Gandhi uses the word non-stealing in both these senses. In fact, in conceiving the nature of this virtue he was influenced by Jainism which believes that stealing is also a kind of violence. Property is, in fact, outer life, because bodily existence depends upon property. Therefore, to rob one of his properties is to take away his outer life. Non-stealing is a virtue also because stealing is not compatible with the highest virtue of love. Therefore, Gandhi recommended that a truly moral individual has to take a solemn vow to cultivate the virtue of non-stealing.⁷⁶

14.5 CELIBACY

Mahatma Gandhi expressed that celibacy is abstention from self-indulgence by thought, speech and action. Self-indulgence means indulging one’s desires excessively. Celibacy is restricted to chastity. Celibacy means abstinence from sexual relations or at least physical control over the reproductive organs. Gandhi used the celibacy both in its popular sense, and in its traditional sense. He emphasized the importance of sexual control. Celibacy is putting a check and restraint over all the senses and the mind. Senses often delude and misguide human beings. Immorality is basically born out of a desire to satisfy the demands of the senses. Therefore, one must cultivate a discipline by which instead of being led astray by the senses, one may be able to keep the senses under control. In fact, even sexual control cannot be practiced unless senses are put in check.

For example, Mahatma Gandhi feels that our food habits have to be changed. The palate is responsible for our desiring delicious and rich food, which, in its turn, causes sexual urge to arise. Therefore, Gandhi experimented with different kinds of food, just in order to evolve a food pattern, which, without reducing the health value of food, would not allow amorous and undesirable urges to arise. The name celibacy is given to a discipline of this kind.⁷⁷

14.6 NON-POSSESSIVENESS

Mahatma Gandhi said that non-possessiveness is renunciation of possessions by thought, word and deed. Non-possessiveness is restricted to contentment. Non-possessiveness is non-acceptance. Possessiveness is unwilling to share one's possessions. Gandhi felt that the tendency to possess things is the cause of all evils. Thus, according to him one must cultivate the discipline of living with what one has. Gandhi was aware that it was not possible to practice this virtue in the absolute way, because absolute non-possession is impossible in life; even the body is a possession- the things needed for the preservation of the body are also possessions, and therefore, so long as one is alive one cannot completely do away with possessions. Even so, non-possessiveness has to be practiced to the best of one's capability because this does not create rifts in social life and provides a solid foundation for a universal love to flourish.⁷⁸

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

- 1) Briefly explain Gandhi's conception of non-stealing, non-possessiveness and celibacy.

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14.7 CHARACTER

Gandhi believed that character is moral and ethical strength. Character comes from within. Character is the key to success. A man of character will make himself worthy of any position he is given. Character, not brains, will count at the crucial moment. Character is any day more eloquent than speech. Character must be above suspicion and truthful and self-controlled. What will matter in the end will be one's character and not a knowledge of letters. The real wealth that parents can give to their children equally is his or her character and access to education. The truest test of civilization, culture and dignity is character and not clothing. Success is a result of suffering of the extremist character voluntarily. Sorrow and suffering develop a character only if they are voluntarily borne, not if they are imposed. Men of stainless character and self-purification will easily inspire confidence and automatically purify the atmosphere around them.

In the times to come people will not judge other by the creeds they profess or the label they wear or the slogans they shout but by their work, industry, sacrifice, honesty and purity of character. Purity of character shows up in one's actions just as dignity of labour and will to earn our own living were symbolized by the spinning of the Charkha. Character alone will have real effect on masses. Gandhi expressed that all scholarship, all study of Shakespeare and Wordsworth would be vain if at the same time one does not build one's character and attain mastery over his or her thoughts and actions.

A vow imparts stability, ballast and firmness to one's character. A language is an exact reflection of the character and growth of its speakers. A dissolute character is more dissolute in thought than in deed, and the same is true of violence. Literary training by itself does not add any inches to one's moral height. Character building is independent of literary training. Character cannot be built with mortar and stone or by any other hands than one's own. The principal and professors cannot give students character from the pages of books. The character of an individual comes from his or her own life experiences as such it grows inwards to outwards. Gandhi said that if wealth is lost nothing is lost; if health is lost something is lost; if character is lost everything is lost.⁷⁹

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What were Gandhi's ideas on a moral and spiritual character?

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14.8 WORLD PEACE

Gandhi's achievements were nothing less than miracles. His aim was to bring peace to not only those who suffered injustice and sorrow but to present a new way of life for Mankind, with peace and harmony. His life was a message of peace over power, of finding ways to reconcile one's differences, and of living in harmony with respect and love even for our enemy. According to Gandhi the force of power never wins against the power of love. During hours of greatest unrest and turmoil in the world, the greatest force to be reckoned with lies within one's hearts—a force of love and tolerance for all. Gandhi as we know was always a staunch believer in peace always. War he said always inflicts pain and sorrow on everyone. History has witnessed countless examples of dictators, including Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin etc. who inflicted sorrow and destruction on our world. A world of peace can only be achieved if we realize the power of non-violence, as shown by the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi proved that anyone can achieve the noble causes of liberty, justice, and democracy for Mankind without killing anyone, without making a child an orphan, and without making anyone homeless.

At the core of every human being lies their innate desire to live a peaceful life. The greatest noble cause according to Gandhi was to display one's desire to bring about peace in this world by their own sacrifices and not of those who oppose their views. Gandhi sacrificed his own lucrative law practice in Durban, South Africa to lead a simple life and to share the pain of the powerless and destitute. He won over the hearts of millions without ever reigning power over anyone—simply with the power of altruism. We too can bring peace to our world by showing our willingness to sacrifice our self-centred desires. Gandhi taught everyone that one's utmost aim in life should be to win the hearts of others by showing his or her willingness to serve causes greater than their own. Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind."⁸⁰

History can attest to the fact that most human conflicts have been as a result of a stubborn/fundamentalist approach by our leaders. Gandhi thought that our history would turn out for the better if our leaders learn that most disputes can easily be resolved by showing a willingness to understand the issues of our opponents and by using diplomacy and compassion. He also said that no matter where one lives, what religion one practices or what culture one cultivates, at the heart of everything, all are humans and all are equal. Everyone has the same ambitions and aspirations to raise their family and to live life to its fullest. Cultural, religious and political differences should not spark conflicts. Such conflicts can only bring sorrow and destruction to the world.

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What were Gandhi's ideas on world peace?

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14.9 SUMMARY

Gandhi successfully demonstrated to a world, weary with wars and continuing destruction that adherence to Truth and Non-violence is not meant for individual behaviour alone but can be applied in global affairs too. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru gave an immortal tribute to Gandhi at the time of his passing, "The light has gone out of our lives." Now we have to try and see what we can do with our limitations to overcome what Gandhi described as the seven social sins: (1) Politics Without Principles, (2) Wealth Without Work, (3) Commerce Without Morality, (4) Education Without Character, (5) Pleasure Without Conscience, (6) Science Without Humanity and (7) Worship Without Sacrifice.

Gandhi's world was a spiritual and moral world where the establishment of 'Sanatan Dharma' was the binding force. Gandhi regarded all religions to be equal and simply different roads to the same destination. Peace and non-violence

were the core tenets of his policy. Dignity of labour was very important to him. Gandhi believed that nothing was too small so as not to be done too well. Coercion was never his choice of weapon, but a spiritual conversion was what he always desired. According to Gandhi one could judge the correctness of an action by holding it up to public exposure. An action or decision which was transparent would ultimately be just and benevolent. Gandhi could not separate rights and duties. For him they were the two sides of the same coin. Staunch resistance or non-cooperation to actions which were humiliating and dehumanizing was the first step in his path of Satyagraha. The upliftment and benefit of masses must be the aim of all actions. The meekest must be empowered. Fear according to him was simply a lack of faith, as faith grew fear would recede.

Physical might can never win over moral might. Gandhi said that if the people of India wanted their country to be free and under their own control, one needed to have a constructive programme to run it. Self-governance cannot be equated with good governance. His views on war and violence were clear. He pronounced these acts a 'wicked' and said that these stemmed from the spiritual weakness of the Western civilization. At heart, Gandhi's love for humanity and his belief in India's strength, ahimsa and Satyagraha won over even his enemies. He inspired other world leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela to seek higher plateaus in their lives.

To the Indian people, Gandhi gave a nation. To the world, he gave Satyagraha, arguably the most revolutionary idea of a long and ravaged century. He showed that political change could be affected by renouncing violence; that unjust laws could be defied peacefully and with a readiness to accept punishment; that 'soul-force' as much as armed force, could bring down an empire. He drew this lesson from his readings of the Bible and Tolstoy and the 'Bhagavad-Gita', and he taught it to Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and countless other political protestors who would follow his example in the years to come. In some sense, Gandhi's greatest achievement lay in his legacy; for his ideals, and the example he provided in living them out, inspired, and continue to inspire, people of all nations to take up the peaceful struggle for freedom from oppression.

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14.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Your answer should define truth and non violence explaining its political and spiritual spin offs.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Highlight the meaning through expanding the Gandhian principles of truth and non violence.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

- 1) Highlight the moral and spiritual dimension such as love, compassion and empathy, stealing and non possession.

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

- 1) Your answer should include expanding the idea of harmonious living through social harmony, mutual cooperation, and sacrifice for the poor.

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