

# Ethics entangles Metaphysics in Indian Philosophy

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## Introduction:

Whenever the term 'ethics' is uttered, there comes to mind about the norms of human behavior or subject of morality. Indian ethics is often considered metaphysical oriented because it is deeply intertwined with spiritual and philosophical concepts that emphasize a holistic understanding of reality, the self, and the universe. Influenced by traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, Indian ethical systems often prioritize the pursuit of ultimate truths (Brahman, Dharma, etc.) and the interconnectedness of all beings. This metaphysical foundation leads to ethical principles being viewed not merely as social or legal constructs but as reflections of deeper existential and cosmic laws encouraging individuals to act in harmony with both moral values and the nature of reality itself. Moral consciousness is a fundamental aspect of human existence, integral to fostering a peaceful society and guiding individual behavior, deeply rooted in religious beliefs and cultural traditions. In Indian ethics, this connection is especially pronounced, as moral codes are often derived from spiritual texts and practices, which not only prescribe community duties but also emphasize the importance of moral conduct in evaluating actions as right or wrong. The interplay between ethics and religion in India highlights the expectation that individuals live according to moral principles, bridging the gap between human instinct and higher ethical considerations, thus establishing a framework for distinguishing between mere existence and conscious, principled living. Ultimately, morality serves as a guiding institution that shapes human behavior, aligning it with a collective vision of what ought to be. In Indian philosophical systems, while the ideal of moksha (liberation) is central, it is often discussed in isolation from the numerous rational doctrines that are explored across various schools. Philosophies such as Vedanta and Samkhya have a direct relationship with moksha, while others like Nyaya, Vaisheshika, and Purva-Mimamsa only touch on it tangentially. Even works unrelated to spirituality, such as the Kama-sutra and Artha-shastra, recognize and strive for this ideal. Indian philosophers emphasize intuitive knowledge through logical discourse, considering philosophical wisdom itself as a form of religious truth, thus placing supreme value on theory and its inherent efficacy rather than subordinating it to practice. Indian philosophical thought is fundamentally centered around three core concepts: the self or soul (atman), works (karma), and liberation (moksha), which are interconnected but interpreted differently across various schools. While karma embodies the moral efficacy of human actions, it aligns somewhat with Western notions of a transcendental self, and moksha represents the ultimate goal, particularly significant in Hinduism. Indian philosophy notably lacks the Western focus on mathematics and history as philosophical concerns, resulting in a distinctive form of logic that intertwines with psychology and epistemology, aiming to explore the lived experiences of human cognition and knowledge. In Indian philosophy, the sacred texts play a pivotal role particularly in spiritual sciences (adhyatma-vidya) compared to logical systems (anvikshiki-vidya), with figures like Shankara advocating for prioritizing scripture over reasoning, as independent reasoning can lead to uncertainty about supersensible realities. While mythology's influence has waned with the emergence of systematic philosophical thought, interpretations of Vedic myths have persisted and evolved into metaphors, impacting philosophical frameworks. Additionally, the classification of philosophical systems into orthodox (astika) and unorthodox (nastika) does not strictly align with theistic or atheistic beliefs; astika philosophers may not necessarily be theists, as seen in the Samkhya and Yoga systems, while the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara posits a spiritual reality but views the concept of God as secondary to understanding the ultimate nondual reality of Brahman.

**Buddhist standpoint:** Metaphysical speculation is not so relevant in Buddhism. In the Shorter Mālunkya Sutta, the Buddha emphasizes the irrelevance of metaphysical speculation to the practical path of Buddhism, using the metaphor of a man wounded by an arrow to illustrate that concerns about existential questions distract from the urgency of addressing suffering. Just as the wounded man would be foolish to delay treatment by focusing on the identity of his assailant, so too is it misguided for practitioners to fixate on speculative views that do not lead to liberation from suffering. The Buddha's teaching here serves as a reminder that the essence of Buddhism lies in the practical application of the Four Noble Truths and the path to enlightenment, rather than in metaphysical debates. The Buddha's parable of the poison arrow illustrates

that certain metaphysical questions, while interesting, are ultimately distractions from the pressing concerns of alleviating human suffering and achieving enlightenment, which are central to his teachings. However, interpretations may over simplify the Buddha's stance on metaphysics, suggesting he is disinterested in deeper inquiries when, in reality, he acknowledges their relevance and importance within a broader ethical framework. This nuance is essential as many later Buddhist philosophers, including Śāntideva, integrate metaphysical insights with ethical living, indicating that while immediate practical concerns dominate, a rich interplay exists between metaphysical understanding and ethical conduct in Buddhist philosophy.

Then in the chapter of the Bodhicaryāvatāra (BCA), which focuses on prajñā, presents complex metaphysical arguments that serve as the foundation for Śāntideva's ethical claims. While it is often omitted or glossed over in introductory courses due to its difficulty, this chapter is pivotal, as it logically links erroneous perceptions of reality—such as the belief in independent agency and substantial existence—to corresponding inappropriate behaviors, ultimately guiding ethical practice. The richness of this chapter is underscored by its attentiveness from classical Indian and Tibetan commentators, suggesting its integral role in the broader context of the BCA, particularly in portraying the progressive journey of the bodhisattva through the cultivation of essential perfections.

In the Bodhicaryāvatāra, Śāntideva presents a distinctive metaphysical framework linking patient endurance with the principle of pratītya samutpāda (dependent origination), emphasizing that since all phenomena, including human actions and emotions arise from causal interdependence, responses like anger are unwarranted. His division of patience into enduring suffering, contemplating dharma, and enduring others' wrongdoings reflects this solidity in ethics derived from metaphysics; similarly, the deconstruction of the body in chapter five serves to dispel attachment and advocate for controlling one's physical existence, emphasizing that the body, like emotional responses, lacks intrinsic worth and is only valuable insofar as it alleviates suffering. Thus, both discussions illustrate a consistent theme: understanding the nature of reality should shape our ethical actions and sentiments.

### Jain Standpoint:

Jain ethics is centered around principles such as Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truthfulness), Asteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (celibacy or chastity), and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness). Ahimsa is the most fundamental tenet, urging followers to avoid causing harm to any living being, reflecting deep respect for life. Satya emphasizes honesty in thought, word, and action, while Asteya encourages respect for others' property. Brahmacharya promotes self-restraint, not just in sexual conduct but in all aspects of desire, and Aparigraha teaches detachment from material possessions to minimize harm and attachment. Collectively, these principles cultivate compassion, self-discipline, and a commitment to spiritual purity, guiding practitioners towards liberation (moksha) and harmonious living. Jainism presents a unique framework for spiritual-based morality that emphasizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and the interconnectedness of life. Central to Jain moralities is Ahimsa (non-violence), which urges practitioners to avoid causing harm in thought, word, or deed, fostering an attitude of compassion and respect for all forms of existence. This deep commitment to non-violence extends beyond humans to include animals and even micro-organisms, reflecting a profound awareness of life's sanctity. Their essential principle is Satya (truthfulness), which underscores the importance of honesty and integrity, promoting transparency in relationships and actions. Alongside this, Asteya (non-stealing) teaches respect for others' possessions, fostering community trust and harmony. Jain ethics also encompasses Brahmacharya (celibacy or chastity), which promotes self-control and purity of thought, essential for spiritual advancement. Lastly, Aparigraha (non-possessiveness) encourages detachment from material goods, highlighting the moral imperative to minimize attachment and greed, thereby reducing suffering. So, these principles guide Jains toward a moral life aligned with spiritual growth, urging individuals to practice self-discipline, cultivate virtues, and develop a compassionate mindset, ultimately leading to liberation (moksha) from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

**Karmafala:** Karma, a core concept in Indian philosophy, particularly within Hinduism, describes the intentional actions (karmāṇi) and their subsequent consequences (phala), shaping an individual's ethical landscape and karmic trajectory across lifetimes. The principles of karma categorize actions as sañcita (accumulated), prārabdha (currently affecting), and āgāmi (future implications), illustrating the continuity of moral causation that influences one's destiny (daiva). Central to this concept is Karma Yoga from the Bhagavad Gītā, which advocates for selfless action performed without attachment to outcomes, promoting spiritual liberation (moksha) through the fulfillment of duty (dharma) and detachment (vairāgya). This intricate framework encourages a meticulous exploration of ethical reasoning (śīla) and logical analysis (tarka) in understanding the implications of individual actions within the broader cosmological cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (saṃsāra).

The Mīmāṃsā school emphasizes on the inherent power of Vedic rituals, as articulated by Jaimini and further elaborated by Śabara, arguing that the efficacy of rituals operates independently of divine influence. It scrutinizes key concepts such as karma-sādhana (the practical execution of rituals), svataḥ-prāmānya (the intrinsic efficacy of actions), karta-vyāpāra (the responsibility of the performer), and śīla (ethical conduct), while also seeking to connect these traditional principles to contemporary practices and their relevance in

modern contexts. Mīmāṃsā philosophy emphasizes the intrinsic power and efficacy of Vedic rituals, positing that their meticulous execution directly yields desired outcomes without reliance on divine intervention. This ritual determinism marks a distinct contrast to theistic schools like Vedānta, which integrate divine will into the karmic process. Central to Mīmāṃsā is the unwavering authority of the Vedas, viewed as eternal and infallible, thereby necessitating strict adherence to Vedic injunctions to ensure successful ritual performance. Moreover, the concepts of karma phala (fruits of actions) foster a sense of personal accountability, encouraging ethical behavior across various life domains, including modern professional practices. Scholars have highlighted the relevance of these principles in contemporary contexts, underscoring Mīmāṃsā's enduring influence on moral and ethical considerations. The Mīmāṃsā school of thought emphasizes the intrinsic power of rituals and the cause-and-effect relationship between actions and their consequences, forming a robust ethical framework that highlights human agency and personal responsibility. This perspective encourages individuals to engage in ethical conduct and ritual precision, fostering spiritual growth aligned with Vedic principles. By asserting the significance of individual actions and their moral implications, Mīmāṃsā provides a structured pathway for personal development and spiritual progress, advocating for a responsible approach to life that intertwines ethical behavior with the pursuit of desired outcomes.

Advaita Vedānta presents a comprehensive view of karma that integrates divine will, moral order, and individual responsibility, positioning Ishvara as a facilitator of justice in the universe while emphasizing the importance of ethical motives behind actions. Unlike Mīmāṃsā, which focuses solely on the efficacy of rituals, Advaita Vedānta underscores the transformative journey towards moksha, wherein the doctrine of karma serves as a means to transcend dualities and realize the non-dual essence of Atman and Brahman. Additionally, scholars advocate for a re-examination of traditional doctrines, promoting an evolving discourse that acknowledges both divine oversight and personal accountability within the karmic framework, leading to a richer understanding of the complexities of ethical living and spiritual liberation in Indian philosophy.

Nyāya philosophy, particularly through the works of Udayana, asserts that rational inquiry and logical reasoning underpin the understanding of divine intervention in the realms of karma and moral order. By positing an omniscient God as the efficient cause of the universe, Nyāya not only emphasizes the necessity of divine oversight in implementing karma's law but also underlines the importance of maintaining ethical principles in the universe, which ensures justice and clarity in the consequences of actions. In the Nyāya framework, God plays a crucial role in maintaining both cosmic and moral order by acting as the enforcer of karma, thereby reconciling determinism with the need for divine justice. This rationalism effectively combines logic and theological concepts, as exemplified by Udayana's arguments for God's necessity in upholding moral order. Contemporary scholarship, including contributions from Bhattacharya and others, further illuminates the complexities of karma within the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika tradition, exploring the causal structures and perceptual theories that inform our understanding of ethical behavior and its consequences, ultimately reinforcing Nyāya's position against various philosophical critiques.

Hence the Indian philosophical dialogue on karma and phala reveals a profound divide among key schools: Mīmāṃsā advocates for an inherent efficacy within Vedic rituals, asserting that outcomes arise from the actions themselves without divine influence, while Vedānta, particularly Advaita-Vedānta, integrates a theistic framework that emphasizes divine oversight in the administration of karma for just outcomes. Nyāya complements this by positing God as a necessary enforcer of moral order and justice within the universe, showcasing varying perspectives on the interplay of action, knowledge, and divine intervention across these traditions.

The philosophical discourse between Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta, centered on karma and phala, illustrates a profound divergence in understanding the pathways to liberation, where Mīmāṃsā champions ritualistic pragmatism and the inherent sufficiency of Vedic practices, emphasizing that the correct execution of rituals determines outcomes independently of divine influence. In contrast, Vedānta, particularly Advaita Vedānta, integrates the concept of divine grace, positing that liberation is achievable primarily through knowledge and the realization of unity with Brahman, reflecting a more introspective approach to spirituality. This synthesis of knowledge versus action further reveals a spectrum of beliefs in Indian philosophy rather than a stark dichotomy, with Nyāya providing a theistic rational perspective that acknowledges divine oversight while grounding its arguments in logical reasoning. Ultimately, the interplay of these schools offers a rich tapestry of thought on the relationship between actions, knowledge, and divine involvement in the quest for liberation.

### Context of virtue:

Virtue ethics emphasizes the centrality of character over mere actions, positing that morality is rooted in moral dispositions that define an individual's character as good or bad. This approach prioritizes a theory of value, asserting that what is morally obligatory or permissible stems from understanding virtues and vices rather than being dictated by universal laws. Scholars across various traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, support the notion that virtues form the foundation of moral reasoning and moral

progress, arguing against the reduction of virtues to prescriptive rules and highlighting the significance of internal dispositions in moral development. In both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, concepts related to dispositionality—such as potency, capacity, and intrinsic nature—play a significant role in understanding virtue and moral qualities. Hindu texts emphasize the notion of "gunās" (virtues) as inherent properties that affect a person's actions, while various Buddhist scriptures explore the terms "sīla," "kuśalaguna," and their distinctions in moral versus neutral contexts. However, unlike Hinduism, which often links these concepts, the Buddhist tradition tends to adopt a more nominalist perspective, leading to a lack of direct correlation between concepts like "sīla," "śakti," and "gunās." This semantic complexity highlights differing views on the nature of virtues and intrinsic properties across these spiritual traditions.

In Jain ontology, substances (dravya) are immutable entities characterized by origin, persistence, and decay, while qualities (guṇa) are dynamic characteristics that manifest from the substance's intrinsic nature, yet neither are independent of each other—this perspective contrasts with the Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya schools, which maintain a strict separation between substances and qualities akin to Aristotelian ontology. Notably, while Siddhasena and Kunda Kunda emphasize their nonduality, suggesting that qualities do not exist apart from their substances, the Vaiśeṣika view qualities as attributes that signal the distinctions between different substances. This ontological discourse reflects deeper philosophical inquiries into the nature of existence, identity, and transformation, as underscored by the Śvetāśvatara Upanishad's portrayal of qualities as essential elements governing the material world and divine action.

The Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam and the Gītā explore the concept of tri-guṇa, which encompasses the qualities of sattva (purity and essence), rajas (energetic activity), and tamas (inertia and darkness), as fundamental forces of the universe that influence both nature and individual psychology. These guṇas are seen not only as characteristics within material existence but also as dispositions that manifest in human behavior, where sattva leads to knowledge and happiness, rajas is tied to action and pain, and tamas results in ignorance and lethargy. This understanding aligns with classical Indian philosophies, particularly within the Jain and Sāṃkhya traditions, which assert that effects are intrinsically linked to their causes, with potentialities or attributes contributing to this relational dynamic in material existence.

The Sāṃkhya Kārikā identifies kāranaguna, or causal qualities, which highlight a necessary connection between cause and effect, suggesting that manifestations are inherently linked to their dispositions, akin to Dharmakīrti's observation of smoke's dependence on fire. While both the Sāṃkhya and Buddhist frameworks appreciate the significance of potencies in causation, Buddhist schools diverge from the Vaiśeṣika view of powers as properties, maintaining a nominalist and anti-essentialist stance that denies intrinsic essences to things. Nonetheless, in Buddhist metaphysics, the attribution of reality to dispositions—acknowledged as defining features of existence—underscores their pivotal role in understanding causality, although these potencies themselves are not considered tangible entities.

In the context of contemporary dispositionalism, potencies are interpreted as causal activities that manifest in distinct forms, categorized into sustaining existence and producing effects. The Buddhist perspective distinguishes between "kāritra," associated with inducing a dharma's own fruit, and "efficacy," which refers to apotency's role in causally contributing to the emergence of different entities without pre-existing manifestations. Virtues, regarded as qualities promoting goodness and right action across various traditions like Jainism and Hinduism, underscore the importance of good dispositions and behaviors, linking them to happiness and moral conduct. Furthermore, in Buddhist texts, virtues like "sīla" signify virtuous behaviors and individuals who embody these qualities, reflecting a consistent emphasis on moral integrity across different philosophical frameworks. The exploration of virtues across the Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu canons reveals striking similarities, where each tradition emphasizes virtuous dispositions as fundamental to attaining an intrinsic good, be it spiritual enlightenment, ethical living, or worldly prosperity. While Jain virtues center on qualities fostering nonviolence and right faith, Buddhism promotes mindfulness and ethical conduct leading towards the arahant ideal, and Hindu texts vary uniquely, focusing on a diverse range of virtues that support both worldly success and spiritual fulfillment. Although there is a common understanding of virtues as dispositions benefiting individual and society, each tradition prioritizes different moral goods, illustrating a rich pluralism in Indian ethics that resists simplifying these complexities into a singular moral ideal or virtue list. Thus, while acknowledging shared virtues, it is essential to recognize the distinct moral ideals they serve within the unique cultural and philosophical contexts of each tradition.

The discussion emphasizes that mere possession of virtues without their active manifestation and moral discernment is insufficient for moral conduct. It highlights that morality is understood as an active engagement that involves thinking, feeling, and appropriate actions rather than a mere application of rules. This notion is echoed across various ethical traditions, such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Aristotelian thought, where virtues are seen to gradually develop through repeated practice and resistances faced in moral situations. The manifestations of virtues—moral (courage), emotional (caution), and cognitive—must be actively exercised in the right context to influence moral behavior positively. Thus, the right emotional responses and habitual practice significantly contribute to the cultivation and recognition of moral virtue over time. Control over one's virtue is essential because morality is not merely a theoretical construct but requires practical experience to navigate the complexities of ethical dilemmas. The Mahābhārata emphasizes that while scriptures provide guidance, they do not encompass every scenario, highlighting the need for reason and wisdom gained through lived experience to discern virtue from sin. Bhishma's teachings reinforce

this notion by asserting that true moral guidance comes from accumulated knowledge rather than solely reliance on sacred texts. Similarly, the Sāṃkhya Kārikā underscores the importance of both innate and acquired moral dispositions, suggesting that personal effort and experience are crucial for spiritual ascent. Ultimately, texts from these traditions collectively assert that moral discipline and experiential learning are integral to achieving higher states of knowledge and liberation, demonstrating that understanding virtue necessitates active engagement and control over one's ethical development.

**Vedanta holds spiritual morality:** All the sub-schools of Vedanta philosophy emphasized on spiritual morality and interconnectedness of all beings. This idea is rooted in the realization of individual selves (Atman) which are manifested from the ultimate reality. This idea leads to values like compassion and non-violence. In Vedanta, dharma is viewed as the moral and ethical duty that governs individual conduct, closely intertwined with the nature of reality as explored in metaphysics. This reconciliation occurs through the understanding that dharma represents the righteous path aligned with the ultimate truth (Brahman), guiding individuals towards ethical actions that contribute to spiritual evolution. Each individual's dharma is shaped by their circumstances and stage of life, yet it consistently reflects the underlying principles of unity and harmony inherent in the meta physical concept of Brahman. Thus, the adherence to dharma fosters not only social order and personal morality but also aligns one's actions with the metaphysical truth of interconnectedness, ultimately aiding in the realization of the self's unity with Brahman.

Adi Shankaracharya said, ***"The one who has realized the Self sees the same Self in all beings" (Shankara, n.d.)***. This underscores the interconnectedness of life and the moral imperative to treat all beings with compassion and respect. Another significant quote is: "Where there is duality, there is fear" (Shankara, n.d.), suggesting that a lack of spiritual understanding leads to moral dilemmas and fear-based actions. These insights highlight the essence of spiritual morality in Shankaracharya's philosophy.

In Vedanta philosophy, ahimsa (non-violence) and satya (truthfulness) are integral ethical principles that underpin both morality and spirituality. Ahimsa emphasizes compassion and the avoidance of harm to all living beings, fostering a sense of inter connectedness and respect for life, which is essential for spiritual growth. Satya, on the other hand, represents the pursuit of truth, aligning one's thoughts, speech, and actions with the ultimate reality, which leads to greater self-awareness and moral integrity. Together, these principles guide individuals towards living a righteous life, promoting a harmonious relationship with oneself and the universe, and ultimately facilitating the realization of one's higher spiritual nature. Ethical conduct is geared towards selfless action (karma yoga) and service to others, transcending selfish desires and fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility. In Vedanta, selfless action or Karma Yoga is deeply intertwined with both morality and spirituality. It posits that performing one's duty without attachment to the fruits of the action leads to spiritual growth and moral integrity. This selflessness fosters a sense of unity with all beings, promoting ethical conduct and compassion. By prioritizing the well-being of others and acting for the greater good, practitioners cultivate virtues such as humility and generosity, aligning their actions with a higher moral order. Thus, Karma Yoga serves as a pathway to spiritual liberation (moksha) while reinforcing ethical principles that guide personal and communal conduct. Vedanta teaches the importance of detachment from the fruits of one's actions, encouraging an approach to life that focuses on duty rather than personal gain, aligning one's actions with higher spiritual goals.

Similarly the Eightfold Path of Yoga, as laid out in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, intricately weaves ethics and metaphysics into a cohesive system for personal and spiritual development. The first two limbs, Yamas and Niyamas, represent ethical guidelines that promote righteous living and personal integrity. Yamas address our interactions with others through principles such as non-violence (Ahimsa) and truth fulness (Satya), while Niyamas focus on personal discipline and self-regulation, like purity (Saucha) and contentment (Santosha). By fostering ethical conduct, practitioners create a stable foundation for deeper meditation and self-awareness, essential for exploring meta physical concepts. The subsequent six limbs—Asana (postures), Pranayama (breath control), Pratyahara (withdrawal of senses), Dharana (concentration), Dhyana (meditation), and Samadhi (absorption)—facilitate inner transformation and higher states of consciousness. These practices help individuals transcend the ego and connect with a greater reality, promoting insights into the nature of existence and the self. In doing so, the Ethical principles serve as preparatory steps for metaphysical exploration, suggesting that the path to understanding ultimate reality begins with a commitment to ethical living. Thus, the Eightfold Path reconciles ethics with metaphysics by demonstrating how moral conduct fosters the inner peace and clarity needed for spiritual awakening and realization of universal truth.

### Conclusion:

Therefore, the moral views of Vedanta like all other schools of Indian philosophy are grounded in metaphysical principles that advocate for harmonious living in alignment with the greater reality. Indian philosophy encompasses diverse schools—such as Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa, and Vedanta—that often reconcile ethics and metaphysics by positing a relationship between the nature of reality and moral principles. For instance, the interplay of karma and dharma in Hindu thought illustrates how understanding the metaphysical structure of reality informs ethical conduct, while Buddhist philosophies

emphasize the ethical implications of interdependence and the nature of suffering. Each school emphasizes different metaphysical frameworks, but they generally agree that ethical behavior is a reflection of a deeper understanding of the universe and the self, leading to spiritual liberation or harmony. In his essay "Religion of Man, Rabindranath Tagore significantly remarks, **"The relation between man and man is not a relation of deities; it is the relation of men."** This highlights the essentiality of human connections grounded in compassion and understanding.

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