



## What Makes a Human Being Valuable?

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**Abstract:** Human beings are dependent on bonding and relationships, which renders them vulnerable and gives them the power to violate others. It is also true that we all value things. For example, we value friendships, careers, prosperity, environment and knowledge. These seem to be good and worthy of pursuit. Many things are valuable, not merely as things worth having for their own sake, but as things worth having for the sake of something else. The question remains, where does the chain of values end.

When it comes to Indian Philosophy, it offers *Puruṣārthas* and human creates value through *Puruṣārthas*. This bestows value on us as providers. That is the unique capability of the human being. Unlike animals whose bodies are consumed by their predators, humans create value that can be consumed by other human beings. Not only can we create value and exchange value, we can also enhance value. We can gather property. By gathering things, we give ourselves value. The more creative we are in adding substance to the list of values, the less likely we will be overcome by Gilgamesh's problem of death, Sisyphus's problem of futility, Boethius's problem of cosmic insignificance, problem of suffering, or any other

problem that undermines our sense of value/purpose or human life and happiness.

In this contribution, an attempt has been made here to show that we keep building and collecting more and more and become valued members in society as someone who possesses a lot of things with reference to the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads* and to some extent the *Purāṇas*. ‘Valuable’ here means being accountable to word and deed, and having a sense of duty means to fulfil the tasks with reliability, dependability. Because we think that we are not bound to solve all the problems in the world; our duty is only to avoid creating problems. We must not be responsible for evil to others; we must not harm others; if we harm, we must repair the damage. This is called *Ethics of Responsibility* and the answer to the question of what makes human beings valuable and meaningful.

Keywords: Ethics, Chain of Values, Responsibility, *Puruṣārthas*

## I

It is indeed true that we all value things. For example, we value friendships, careers, prosperity, environment and knowledge. These seem to be good things and things worthy of pursuit. They seem better and more worthy of pursuit rather than their opposites like enmity, stagnation, poverty, and ignorance. A notable fact about the things we consider valuable is that most of them appear to be valuable, not merely as things worth having for their own sake, but as things worth having for the sake of something else. The question still remains, where does the chain of values end? It seems that the chain of values must end somewhere, though some values can be values by virtue of being means to or constituent parts of further values, not *all* values can be values of this kind. If they were, all values would be values only insofar as they contribute to something further, in a justificatory regress. To get a chain of values off the ground, something will have to be valuable by virtue of itself, not by

virtue of that to which it contributes. Aristotle put forth this point in *Nicomachean Ethics* as follows:

... things achievable by action have some end that we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things ... we do not choose everything because of something else - for if we do, it will go on without limit, so that desire will prove to be empty and futile.<sup>1</sup>

What is ultimately valuable? There are many proposed answers. Some suggest that ultimate value can be found in developing oneself to the fullest or in cultivating one's character and one's virtues. Others argue that it is ultimately valuable to have one's preferences or desires satisfied, to act in accordance with one's sentiments, or to experience enjoyment or pleasure. Still, others argue that there are several things worth having for their own sake, without any of these being reducible to one supreme value: Perhaps pleasure, knowledge, friendship, and virtue are all ultimately valuable, or perhaps there is hardly any value reduction at all, and many or most values are ultimate values. In *The Objectivist Ethics* Ayn Rand writes:

What is morality, or ethics? It is a code of values to guide man's choices and actions – the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life. Ethics, as a science, deals with discovering and defining such a code.

The first question that has to be answered, as a precondition of any attempt to define, to judge or to accept any specific system of ethics, is: *Why* does man need a code of values?

Let me stress this. The first question is not: What particular code of values should man accept? The first question is: Does we need values at all – and why?

Albert Camus felt that human life is absurd, meaningless, and senseless. ‘What is the meaning of life?’ is the most urgent of questions, holds Albert Camus, because “I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that gave them a reason for living.” In absurdist philosophy, the absurdity of life arises out of the fundamental disharmony between needs and aspirations of human beings and the apparent meaninglessness of the universe. Arthur Schopenhauer asked expressly “what is the meaning of life?” struggling with personal misery and a sense of loneliness and isolation, and he tried to find some understanding of himself and the world around him that appeared to him as senseless. He was absolutely alone, with not a single friend; and between one and none there lies infinity. Nietzsche wanted to give an affirmative philosophy of life instead of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic, life-denying philosophy. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche speaks of “the creative strength is to create meaning.” The meaning of life is to be created, not discovered. The mistake lies in thinking that our meaning and values are present in “things-in-themselves.” It is created by us. All meaning is will to power.

In our everyday life we are mostly surrounded with discontent and suffering. Psychological problems are viewed as the result of inhibited ability to make authentic, meaningful, and self-directed choices about how to live. Existential approach can act as a therapy for solving the psychological problems too. This approach is based on client’s responsibility and freedom. Existential approach believes that people have the capacity for self-awareness and choice. The existentialist tries to help the client finding meaning in discontent and suffering choosing to think and act authentically. According to the existentialists, creativity, love, authenticity may enable people to live meaningful lives in the face of discontent and suffering.

## II

Indian philosophy right from the *Vedas* to the contemporary development is concerned with an enquiry into the nature of the human person, his destiny his place in the world, his personality

as a social being, religious being, ethical being, finite being, infinite being, cultural being, the relation of man to man, human welfare, i.e. humanism. Indian culture has given birth to humanism, and it is still nourishing for civilizational sustenance. Insisting on the supremacy of man, *abhayam*, the basic nature of man i.e. religious and spiritual, human values, goodness and welfare, universality and fraternity, spiritual integrity, moral uprightness, benevolence, unselfishness under all circumstances and condemning the crude technique of civilization i.e. Indian humanist are interested in the self of man. “*Ātmānān Viddhiḥ*”- “know thy self” is their direction. The fundamental aspiration of a man is to realize his best self. According to *Nyāya Darśana* a person’s soul according to Vedic scriptures has six characteristics: *Ichchhā, dveṣa, prayatna, sukha-dukha, jñāna-ātmeno, and liṅgāmiti*. (*Nyāya Darśana* 1: 1: 10) All the four *Vedas* *Rig, Yajur, Sāma* and *Atharva* investigate the nature of human and his destiny. The aim of human life is the search for perfect bliss along with perfect knowledge. The *Vedas* say: Man is the life Principle, (*Prāṇa*), Man is the Metabolic Fire (*Vaiśvānara Agni*), Man is processed in the mould of Time (*Samvatsara*), Man is the arch model of corporeal modality (*Prathama Paśu*), Man is concretized Mind (*Murta Marias*), Man is the child of the universal Mothers (*Apamgarbha*), Man is the measure of the Infinite (*Śahaswasya Pratimā*), Man is the scion of the collective progenitor (*Vairāja Manu*), Man is the harmony of the cosmic chant (*Udgitha*), Man is the Divine Mystery and will (*Yajña Kratu*).

Vedic philosophy emphasizes the spiritual nature of man. The four *Mahāvākyas* of the four *Vedas* expresses the spiritual character of the human person. The *Mahāvākyas* are *Prajñanām Brahman* (The intelligence is Divine), *Ayamātmā Brahman* (The soul is Divine), *Aham Brahmāsmi* (I am Divine), and *Tattvamṣasi*. To make the human person more human the *Vedas* mentioned so many special traits of man. The *Vedas* also prescribe some religious and moral duties. By the performance of these duties one can live in harmony with the world around Him. Truthfulness, inner purity, honour to parents, kindness to the

animal, love of man, abstinence from theft, murder and adultery - all these are the humanistic approach. The conception of man's duty is very high and noble. Man is said to perform some duties to gods, man and animals. The duties are distinguished into: those to God, those to seers, those to man and those to lower creation. *Vedas* do not consist of the mechanical performance of duties. The *Vedas* suggests that in all acts unselfishness should be practiced. The *Ṛig Veda* recommend the duty of benevolence without reference to God. Thus, in Indian philosophy, human life is validated or socially valuable through *Puruṣārthas*, i.e. *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kāma* and *Mokṣa*. *Dharma* refers to responsibility, *Artha* refers to success, *Kāma* refers to enjoyment and *Mokṣa* to freedom. In Indian philosophy, *Puruṣārthas* needs to be recognized in its standard formulation: success (*artha*), passion (*kāma*), virtue (*dharma*), and self-perfection (*mokṣa*). The famous verse of the *Ramāyaṇa* makes a similar assertion and states that:

*kāmārtha guṇa saṃyuktam dharmārtha guṇa vistaram |*  
*Samudram iva ratnādhyam sarva śruti manoharam || (Bāla*  
*Kāṇḍa- 1-3-8)*

means "It deals with the worth of *kāma* and *artha* and treats in extension of *dharma* and *Mokṣa*. The four *puruṣārthas* are often discussed in the context of four stages of life. In the *Mahābhārata*, *Dharma* is defined by Vyasa as:

ऊर्ध्वबाहुर्वरौम्येष न च कश्चिच्छृणोत मे ।  
 धर्मादर्थश्च कामश्च स कमिरथं न सेव्यते ॥

(*Mahābhārata*, *Swargārohanparva*, *Adhyāya 5*, *Shloka 46*)

With my arms raised, I am lamenting, yet no one listens to me. (O human beings) *Dharma* accomplishes both, earning of wealth and fulfilling of desires. Then, why do you not abide by *Dharma*? Patrick Hanks defines *Dharma* as righteousness and enumerates its other meanings too as: virtue, virtuousness, uprightness, decency, integrity, worthiness, rectitude, probity, morality, ethicalness, high-mindedness, justice, honesty, honour, hounourable-ness, innocence, blamelessness, guiltlessness,

irresponsibility, sinless-ness, saintliness, purity, nobility, noble-mindedness, piety, piousness etc.

### III

To appreciate this concept of *Puruṣārtha* and significance of nothingness, let us narrate a story of Indra, the King of *Swarga*, who one day called upon Vishvakarma to build a palace worthy of his splendour. So Vishvakarma built him a palace, but it didn't satisfy Indra for which Vishvakarma built another bigger and grander palace. But even this was not good enough for Indra, so Vishvakarma built another grand palace. But no matter what Vishvakarma built, Indra remained unsatisfied and felt that his glory was not matched by the luxury of the structures being built. Vishvakarma then went to Vishnu and asked for help. Vishnu appeared in the form of a child in front of Indra. Indra added that none of the palaces actually, matched with his greatness as those are though wonderful but not as wonderful as the palaces of the Indras who lived before him.

This comment worried Indra, and he asks what do you mean by before him: wasn't he unique? The boy laughed and mentioned that there were many Indras in the world, there were many Indras before him and there would be many after him. Right at that very moment, there were as many Indras in different realms, as there were grains of sand on a beach. Each one of them was trying to surpass the other by building a great palace worthy of his glory and none could achieve this. Indras came and went with the time and in the universe which is a canvas of infinity, each Indra is eventually reduced to nothingness. Indra realized that in the denominator of infinity which is the universe, he had no essential value or his existence meaningless.

Thus, the idea of existence/meaning or value bothered the seers or the *Rishis*. They kept asking what it was since nothing matters when placed against the canvas of infinity. They observed the nature (*Prkṛiti*) carefully and passed on their learning through the *Vedas* and *Purāṇas*. They observed, on the one hand, that the elements, fire, water and wind do not consume anything for they valued nothing. Plants, on the other hand, value the elements, as

they consume them in order to survive. Plants seek sunlight, they need air, they need water, they need the Earth to survive and seek out valuable nutrients. Thus, value is created when the consumer gives value to the commodity it consumes. Plants give values to elements by consuming them, animals give values to plants by consuming them, and animals give values to other animals by consuming them. Thus, the act of consumption or *bhoga* or eating, creates value.

It is true that as humans, we consume everything; we consume plants, animals, minerals. We find value in everything, and by consuming them, we give values to nature around us and transform them into various commodities. The question, therefore, is

- What gives value to humans?
- Who consumes humans?
- Who eats humans?

It is a fact that humans found an innovative way of creating value without being consumed physically, unlike plants and animals. They create value through goods and services that they exchange in the marketplace. This bestows value on them as givers or providers. That is the unique capability of human beings. Unlike animals whose bodies are consumed by their predators, humans create value that can be consumed by other human beings in the marketplace.

Not only can humans create value and exchange value, but they also accumulate value. They accumulate or gather property. By gathering things, they give themselves value. In most societies, one is valued for the value one gathers, in terms of material prosperity. I am, what I collect or gather. I am, what I possess/ have. Therefore, like Indra, we keep building and collecting more and more and become valued members in society as someone who possesses a lot of things/ properties. In the Vedas, it is said that *Artha* is about generating food, by creating goods and services. While *Kāma*, is satisfying this hunger. In *Dharma*,



we consider the hunger of others and, in *Mokṣa*, we outgrow our hunger. Only when we surpass/outgrow hunger, can we be generous and charitable. The problem with is that Indra has not outgrown his hunger for things and therefore he is seeking value for himself by building grand palaces or possession of material properties.

Therefore, Indra is unable to be generous. Indra seeks value from the things he possesses. But in the Indian philosophical thinking, ultimately all things must be consumed. Possessions do not give us value, but wisdom gives us value. The realization that nothing lasts forever must help us in outgrowing our hunger. Only by satisfying other people's hunger, do we truly bring value to society. Only when we surpass/outgrow our hunger can we be truly generous and valuable. In the *Narasimha Purāṇa* it is said that when Rama and Lakshmana were being educated by Visvamitra at his *Āśrama*, he imparted to them two kinds of knowledge – *Bala* and *Atibala*. These were potent enough to remove hunger and thirst. In this *Purāṇa*, also there is a description of the incarnation of *Kalki* who is said to be the 'portion' of God Vishnu. He would destroy all the *Mlechhas* and would engage in the *Bahukāñchana* sacrifice (where plenty of gold is distributed) and then would go to heaven<sup>4</sup>

#### IV

As per scientists, the world began thirteen billion years ago with the *Big Bang*. Earth came into being about five billion years ago. And about four billion years ago, life emerged on Earth. What we mean by 'life' is the appearance of sentience, the appearance of organisms, who can 'sense' the world around them in other words, the appearance of a mind. So, from a scientific point of view, matter comes first, then mind; the world comes first, then life; the world of physics precedes the world of biology. In *Purāṇic* metaphor, mind is male and matter is female. The world begins with Vishnu's wake-up. Thus, creation does not mean the creation of the material world, but the awareness of the material

world by the mind. This story of creation is very different from the Biblical concept of creation, in which God creates the world in six days, with life on the third day. Creation in *Hinduism* is psychological, not physical; it is about awareness of matter not the appearance of matter.

Mere awareness of the material world by the mind makes human beings dependent on bonding and relationships, which renders them vulnerable and gives them the power to violate others. But this essential human vulnerability only leads to victimization and violence under certain circumstances. Societies take precautions: they institutionalize, regulate, civilize or unleash collective or personal violence within institutionalized power relations. They define 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' violence and create institutions in order to enforce the formal or informal rules that apply to the use or prevention of violence. These processes are culturally and historically diverse. The gendered orders of violence are built through institutions such as the state, the military, the bureaucracy, the educational system and the family. They are enshrined in religious beliefs, language and symbolic orders. They are dynamic and they are organized along the lines of gender, class, race and other identities. The point is to seek a solution that best addresses a specific life circumstance or problem.

One may say that we can't criticize the lunatic's valueless/meaningless life if our lives are also meaningless. There is always a religious purpose for life. An Atheist can lead a meaningful life. But a lunatic's only hope for a valuable/meaningful life is to pursue happiness. Ethical Egoists pursue their own interests. Normal lives get happiness in the pursuit of something bigger - a religious as well as ethical life. Immoral acts are not necessarily irrational acts. Humans need to see that their best shot at a meaningful life is achieved by pursuing a religious life. Humans are responsible and it comes from the awareness of the material world created by mind. Here, 'responsible' means being accountable to thought (*mana*) word (*vakya*) and deed (*karma*). Having a sense of duty means to fulfil the tasks with reliability,

dependability and commitment. This sense of responsibility makes a human being valuable/accountable.

For humans, happiness is the ultimate benefit and the ultimate reason for living but depends on a pre-rational move in the sense that it depends on the recognition of the fact that happiness is better than suffering. This move is pre-rational in the sense that one cannot reason anyone into acknowledging it. In spite of the fact that this pre-rational move is required for practical reasons to occur, however, the view is mandatory for the reason that it depends on recognition rather than on choice. Insofar as one is a sentient being for whom happiness is better than suffering, no act of choice can remove an agent from the realm of normative reasons. The view is objective, moreover, since in any given situation, what is valuable and what is disvaluable to an agent is an objective fact. Happiness is neither mind-dependent, nor the fact that emotional reaction threatens objectivity.

According to Radhakrishnan, “Hinduism is more a way of life than a form of thought. While it gives absolute liberty in the world of thought, it enjoins a strict code of practice. The theist and the atheist, the sceptic and the agnostic may all be Hindus if they accept the Hindu system of culture and life. Hinduism insists not on religious conformity but on a spiritual and ethical outlook in life”. The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.

It is believed that ethical decision making is not merely the province of philosophers. It is human beings’ choices that reveal values to the world. These values are either unreflective and superficial or reflective and deep. Philosophical thought should help us to make our values and choices deep and thoughtful. Maybe this makes it more likely that our choices will be the right ones. Finding an appropriate list of responsibility or obligations may seem like philosophers’ game. But the business of making appropriate ethical decisions is not a game. Because we think that we are not bound to solve all the problems in the world; our duty

is only to avoid creating problems. We must not be responsible for evil to others; we must not harm others; if we harm, we must repair the damage. This is called *Ethics of Responsibility* and the answer to the question, What makes human beings valuable and meaningful. Osho, in *The White Lotus* says: One has to be aware; otherwise you can miss the obvious! And *dharma* is the obvious, godliness is the obvious. It is not a complicated, complex thing. It is not far away; it is very close by. It is *dharma* that beats in your heart; it is *dharma* that pulsates in your blood. It is *dharma* that breathes; it is *dharma* that lives in you. It is *dharma* that you are made of – the very stuff that you are made of – and yet you are unaware of it. Let me end with the following lines from the *Rig Veda* which may be significant here:

ॐ भद्रं कर्णेभिः शृणुयाम देवाः ।

भद्रं पश्येमाक्षभिरियजत्राः ।

स्थिरिङ्गैस्तुष्टुवाग्ँसस्तनूभिः ।

व्यशेम देवहितं यदायुः ।

*Om Bhadram Karnnebhiih Shrnnuyaama Devaah |*

*Bhadram Pashyema-Akssabhir-Yajatraah |*

*Sthirair-Anggais-Tussttuvaamsas-Tanuubhih |*

*Vyashema Deva-Hitam Yad-Aayuh |*

O Devas, May we Hear with our Ears what is Auspicious,

O (Devas who are) Worthy of Worship, May we See with our Eyes what is Auspicious,

With (Sense) Organs Steady and Body Praying (due to Hearing and Seeing the Auspicious)

... May we Attain (i.e. Spend) the Lifespan allotted by the Devas (thus finding fulfillment in our lives).

## Notes

- 1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd edition, trans. Terence Irwin, Indiana: Hackett Publishers, 2000, 1094a, p.18-21.
- 2 Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics" in *The Virtue of Selfishness* New York: Signet, 1964

- 3 Patrick Hanks, *The New Oxford Thesaurus of English*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.819.
- 4 *The Narasimha Puranam Kalyan*, 1970 and 1971, p. 159.

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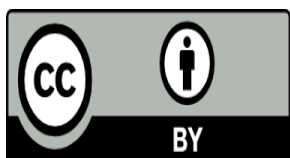
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