

Time for a New Avatar? Revitalising the Debate on Ethics for a New Global Vision

C. Suriyaprakash

Professor of Human Resources, Jansons School of Business, Karumathampatty, Coimbatore

Abstract

“For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I am born in every age,” says the Holy Geetha (Chinmayananda, 1996). The world is going through a series of crises unprecedented in the 'modern' times. The current scenario of economic and political instability in many regions questions many paradigms of development which were reigning supreme for decades: economic development over human development, growth based economy over sustainability, and capitalism over collectivism are to name a few. This paper argues how the erosion and compromises in organisational and professional ethics is an antecedent to these global phenomena and therefore raises the question if this is the time for a major revision of the fundamental premises upon which our world order is based that precipitated into the period of uncertainty we are in. In other words, is this the time for a new 'avatar' to set right the world order? Looking for answers to these questions in the Indian spiritual tradition, the paper espouses the relevance of the Vedantic philosophy to bring in a paradigm shift in the way ethics is discussed and followed in the business world.

Ethics is a process and is of significance irrespective of the results (Suriyaprakash, 2011). Inspired by the six paradigm shifts proposed by de Graff and Levy (2011), the paper explores the need for a shift from the end result to the process of how business is managed. It propounds the need to integrate the spirit of dharma-karma paradigm into the ethical discussions in business in order to draw a new sustainable global vision. Drawing from the Upanishads, Geetha and Chanakya Sutra, the urgent need to revive and revitalize the Indian spiritual tradition in the global economic domain for such a global vision is emphasized. The paper also argues for the need to find a balance between the western and eastern economic paradigms that influence our organisational and professional ethics and not for substituting one with the other.

Introduction

*Sukhasya moolam dharmah |
Basis of happiness is dharma (ethics/values).*

- Chanakya Sutra 1:1

In this opening sutra Chanakya (Garde, 2006) espouses the primacy of dharma in bringing happiness to humankind. He goes on to say that 'basis of dharma is resources'; 'basis of resources is enterprise'; 'enterprise is rooted in conquering organs'; 'conquering organs is rooted in moral training/humility/values'. When we look at the causes for the recent global economic crisis what stands at the forefront is the subprime lending by the investment banks in the US coupled with the growth of the housing bubble. When we look at the heart of the issue we find there are several subtle forces that precipitated into the recession. They were: weak and fraudulent underwriting practice, predatory lending, deregulation and over-leveraging. These are enough reasons to show how human behaviour that deviates from dharma leads to misery. Corporate decisions are based on short term profit for the stakeholders rather than considering the long term impact these decisions have on the wider ecology of society and environment. The current order of corporate governance is rooted in the Machiavelli doctrines of individual power and control rather than on the Vedantic precepts of collective dharma. Focus on economic growth based on industrialization and driven by the limited fossil fuels reserves, over the last two centuries has started showing signs of degeneration on our natural reserves like depleting forests, receding coastlines, melting polar icescapes, increasing water crisis and global warming. Its impact is also felt in socio-economic front like the US housing bubble, reverse globalisation and increasing subsidy by the developed world. What led to this regressive situation? Did we get our priorities wrong? As human beings, did we make the right choices? There are clear indicators that the root cause of all these malice is misplaced priorities governed by unethical value systems. Hence, there is a need to refocus on our traditional values that are based on the well-being of the collective whole.

Economic Development vs. Human Development

According to the International Monetary Fund (2012) the world economy grew by 5.2 and 3.8 percent respectively in the years 2010 and 2011. It is estimated to grow at a slower rate of 3.3 and 3.8 percent respectively in 2012 and 2013. The advanced economies will be expected to grow by a miniscule 1.2 and 1.9 percent respectively, while the developing economies are expected to grow by 5.4 and 5.9 percent.

Human Development Index (HDI), is “a composite index measuring average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development—a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living (HDR, 2011). While the global economy grew every year by close to 6% the world HDI grew on an average by a dismal 0.66% per year during the last three decades. This clearly exposes the lopsided priorities of the world in its way of development. And this would definitely reflect in all the decisions made by the business executives who are under pressure to improve productivity and increase revenue at any cost. In the long run the cost is human well-being and the very existence of humanity and the earth.

Growth based economic development does not guarantee higher level of happiness in people (Ban-Shahar, 2007). While the whole world is on a rat race for creating and accumulating more wealth, we seem to have forgotten the purpose for which we accumulate wealth. Wealth is seen as an end in itself whereas it is only the means for a higher purpose of happiness. As Gandhi said “earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed”. We have seen all around us that the whole system seem to place a premium on nurturing people's greed for more and more consumption, till we got to a point of collapse and now we hear governments struggling hard to sell the idea of 'austerity' to its own people. Wisdom for sustained and equitable development is to be austere even at the times of abundance and prosperity.

Business is as much a function of the societal norms as it plays a role in setting the norms for the society. Business houses initially focused on producing and selling goods that were needed by the consumers. But of late their focus is to produce first and then find ways to somehow thrust them on to the customers. In the process of creating demand, we as a whole seem to have put the carriage in front of the horse. Once the ball of consumerism is set to roll, there is no stopping it or rolling it back, as its track is all the way down the hill. This vicious cycle that we have set ourselves into has led to the business executives make serious compromises on ethical matters, both big and small. If we need to objectively look at the path to put on track the global economic and business machinery, we need to take a hard look into the ethical paradigms that govern our actions.

Current Business Ethics Paradigm

According to de Graff and levy (2011), the value proposition that defines the paradigm of ethical discourse in the business world today is based on the following six principles: reactive actions focus on symptoms, short term emphasis, individual focus, part orientation and position of knowing. Whenever a business executive is faced with an ethical dilemma, these are the basis from which the decisions are made. That has led to the mega industrial crises the world has seen like that of the Enron, Union Carbide, Lehman Brothers and Satyam. Every day, there are many more micro crises that our world is pushed into due to such myopic approach to ethical dilemmas. The effect of such crises can be neutralized and the world can be propelled into a trajectory of sustained growth only if the focus shifts to find a balance between these western paradigms and their eastern counterparts, namely, proactive actions, focus on structures and systems, long term emphasis, collective focus, whole orientation and position of learning. All these precepts can be derived from the Indian philosophy of Vedanta as reflected in the Upanishads, Bhagavat Gita and Chanakya Sutras. The World Economic Forum in its Global Competitiveness Report 2011-12 provides “a critical reminder of the importance of taking into account the consequences of our present

actions on future prosperity based on sustained growth.” On the other hand it also works with the premise that “a more competitive economy is one that is likely to grow faster over time”, while it defines “competitiveness as the set of institutions, policies, and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country.” Is this a balanced view of development? Should productivity alone be the yardstick to measure development and growth? Are we not doing more of the same that has brought us to the precipice of economic meltdown and near collapse of our global financial order? Are we not supposed to base our decisions on some other new robust framework that would ensure sustenance of human life and the wealth of nature? The means for a balance between the Satvic and Rajasic gunas is elaborated as follows.

Both Reactive and Proactive Behavior: The notion of karma emphasizes the need for proactive behavior and to take responsibility for our choices/decisions/actions as what we did in the past determine our state of affairs in the present. If we want our future to be different or better, we need to ensure that our choices/decisions/actions in the present are based on our dharma. The concepts of dharma and karma are the most popular in Indian philosophy, yet most misunderstood and underutilized, in modern times. Dharma is often reduced to day-to-day duties and karma is mistaken as fatalistic determinism. On the contrary these two are two sides of the same coin and they exemplify the power of human choice to determine our own destiny. Dharma has a wide spectrum of meaning with the basic 'duties' on one end of that spectrum and the very 'nature' of any being on the other end. Between these two extremes are a range of meanings including but not limited to righteousness, truthfulness, religion, code of conduct, moral, ethics, and values.

This paradigm places in the hands of human beings the power to shape our own destiny, which is intricately and inextricably interwoven with that of others around us, society at large, and the environment beyond. If the actions of people in an organization are guided by their dharma as individuals and leaders, then their enterprises would serve not only the immediate stakeholders but humanity and the planet at large. If the top leaders of Satyam took time to think of their dharma as the leaders of such a huge corporation, then the company would not have fallen into such an abyss of disrepute and shame. If the sea hunters of Japan were guided by their human dharma of protecting the wildlife, then we will have more whales in our oceans than we do today. If the corporate houses that approve felling of trees of the Amazonian forests were mindful of their dharma, we will have more green cover on this planet. If our economic policies are not dependent on fossil fuels, instead if we are willing to show patience in tapping the renewable sources of energy, we will be in a much safer tomorrow. All these acts of rampant and mindless consumption are possible only because business decisions are based on immediate reactive impulses to environmental stimuli that satiate instant gratification.

Both Symptoms and Structures and Systems: The Bhagavad Gita emphasizes the need for us to transcend our narrow predicaments and act according to what is expected of us for the development of the larger system: the family, the organization and/or the society. In Indian mythology, when Arjuna falls grief-stricken in the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Krishna urges him to get out of his personal volitions and do what is expected of him as a leader in the larger interest of the society. Even though the action is personal, the intentions are global. Contrary to allopath which is based on the Cartesian principle of dualism, the traditional healing system of ayurveda is built on the constitutional model, working with the whole body-mind system as a whole. When business leaders are faced with ethical dilemmas, instead of taking measures to kill the symptoms, if they could take a systemic perspective and decide based on what is appropriate for the larger good, all the aforesaid business and economic crises would not have occurred.

Both Short Term and Long Term: Again, the Gita emphasizes the need to act with the long term in mind rather than focusing on immediate benefits. It is impressive how the natural system will take care of itself through cyclic interventions. The philosophy of Gita is centered on the premise that whenever there is a decay of righteousness (ethics/dharma), and a rise of unrighteousness, then the Universe takes care of itself by divine intervention. Even though the divine aspect of this is debatable and subject to faith, the truth that nature finds its balance cannot be contested. The recent global economic recession is a clear example of how the system found its balance when corporate and societal greed exceeded a certain threshold. If only the corporate leaders who were responsible for the economic meltdown had been mindful of the long-term impact of their decisions, their choices might have been different.

Both I and We: One of the grand pronouncements of the Vedantic Sanatana dharma is “Tat tvam asi” (Krishnananda, 1984, p. 64), which translates as “You are that.” It means that the self in its original, pure, primordial state is the same in all of us. In other words, we are all parts of a larger Whole. This invites us to consider all people as OK with equal rights to their share of the resources of the planet. This does not extol a forced political system of wealth sharing, but a people-centered philosophy of sharing with fellow inhabitants of the earth. Failure to adopt this paradigm in our ethical decisions, will only widen the rich-poor gap which in turn historically has been the cause for all civil uprising, which we are witnessing currently in some of the North African nations and closer home in the red corridor of naxalism. The ever increasing levels of corruption in our public life and the fight against corruption on the streets of India we see almost every day nowadays is a clarion call for both political and business leaders to transcend beyond petty individual benefits and work ethically keeping the larger public interest at the forefront.

Both Parts and Whole: When dealing with ethical dilemmas, often when economic factors

push us to consider ourselves at the expense of others; we lose sight of the fact that we are interdependent with every living being and nonliving thing in this universe. When we are mindful of this truth, millions of acres of forests and thousands of miles of coastlines can be protected. The Upanishad extols this beautifully when it says “that origin of all things is full; this entire creation that has come from that origin of all things is also full; from that Full this Full has come; having taken away this Full from that Full the Full still remains unaffected” (Krishnananda, 1991, p. 93). This is in line with the notion that nature—or any large ecosystem, such as the economic system or the political system—replenishes itself. So, ethical decisions need to consider the whole and not just the parts. Any ecological system is not just a mechanic sum of all its parts, but an organic living system. This is applicable for business organisations and the larger economic system alike.

Both Knowing and Learning: The recent disaster in Japan has reignited the debate about nuclear energy for power generation around the world. This is a typical example of the need to approach ethical dilemmas and not necessarily attempt to resolve them. As rightly put by de Graaf and Levy, it is futile to look for an answer or solution to ethical questions; instead, we need to garner the courage to grapple with them on an ongoing basis and to learn from each experience. In their article, they have highlighted the potential danger of claiming to know the right answer to such ethical dilemmas. The Upanishads (Roebuck, 2000) say, “They who worship ignorance enter blind darkness; they who delight in knowledge enter darkness, as it were, yet deeper” (p. 5). This emphasizes the need for balance. Ignorance is conceived as a result of attachment to material, worldly affairs while knowledge is meant to liberate from material attachment and to help one become closer to one's inner self. One is expected to stay within the material world yet pursue divine consciousness by performing one's ordained duties, one's own dharma.

Conclusion

Ethics is a process and is of significance irrespective of the results. As Kant (1963) said, “It is characteristic of the moral imperative that it does not determine an end, and the action is not governed by an end, but flows from the free will and has no regard to ends” (p. 5). This requires us to act ethically for its “inner goodness, irrespective of its end,” which gives us “an immediate, inner, absolute moral worth” (p. 5).

As Tolle (2005) asked, “Is humanity ready for a transformation of consciousness...? Can human beings lose the density of their conditioned mind structures and become like crystals or precious stones... transparent to the light of consciousness? Can they defy the gravitational pull of materialism and materiality and rise above identification with form that keeps the ego in place?” In other words, are we ready for a new avatar?

In those days God was believed to take birth as an avatar to deal with rising adharna in the form of some tyrant who was ruining the lives of the masses and nature itself. Mythology across cultures talk of several such avatars: Rama to slain Ravana; Krishna to deal with the Kauravas; Vamana to push Mahabali to the underworld. Those were the days where the world was limited to the geographical boundaries of one's nation. But the demons we are facing in this era of globalisation and liberalization is widespread all over the planet, not confined by physical or political boundaries. Also the vices that plague us are subtle hitting at the soul of the masses. So the avatar that could remedy this situation cannot be in the form of a person or a set of persons. The avatar that could liberate us in this 21st century from the clutches of adharna is a paradigm shift in our collective consciousness that is willing to learn from our past and boldly face the future with renewed vigour and direction? It is in the best interests of every individual, our society at large and the whole earth that we gear ourselves up for such a transformation. Or else, nature will find its balance in its own way, as it has done time and again in the millennia gone by!

“For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I am born in every age,”

- Holy Geetha (Chinmayananda, 1996).

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