

Dharma and Moral Duty: A Study of Ethics in the Thought of Swami Vivekananda

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Abstract: This research paper explores the ethical philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, focusing on the concepts of dharma and moral duty as the foundation of personal and social responsibility. Vivekananda's thought presents ethics not as abstract theorization but as an actionable framework, emphasizing the integration of virtue, knowledge, and selfless action. He maintains that moral life is realized through conscious engagement in duties, guided by principles of truth, compassion, and universal welfare. This approach links personal growth with social responsibility, highlighting that ethical conduct has both inward and outward dimensions, nurturing character while promoting justice and harmony in society. The study further examines Vivekananda's emphasis on karma, character development, and the universality of dharma, illustrating how ethical principles apply across individual, societal, and global contexts. Scholars such as Sharma and Gupta underscore the relevance of his vision for contemporary ethical challenges, including social inequality, environmental responsibility, and intercultural understanding. Vivekananda's philosophy advocates that ethical action should be guided by awareness, virtue, and empathy, thereby fostering moral courage and socially responsible behaviour. This paper demonstrates that Vivekananda's ethics provides a holistic and timeless framework for moral life, where knowledge, virtue, and duty converge to shape ethical practice. His thought offers valuable guidance for addressing modern moral dilemmas, emphasizing the inseparable relationship between personal integrity and social welfare. The study highlights the enduring relevance of Vivekananda's moral philosophy for contemporary individuals and communities seeking ethical clarity and purposeful action.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda, dharma, moral duty, ethics, karma, universalism, virtue, social responsibility.

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1 | INTRODUCTION:

The philosophy of Swami Vivekananda offers a profound exploration of ethics, emphasizing the integration of dharma, moral duty, and practical action. Vivekananda's ethical framework, grounded in Vedantic principles, foregrounds the idea that moral responsibility is inseparable from human character and social engagement. As Vivekananda himself asserted, "Duty is the highest religion" (Vivekananda, 1993, p. 45), highlighting that ethical living requires active fulfilment of one's responsibilities in both personal and social spheres. This perspective situates dharma not merely as abstract religious duty but as a practical, universal guide for moral conduct that transcends sectarian or cultural boundaries. Ethics, in Vivekananda's thought, is closely tied to self-realization, as the development of personal character directly influences one's capacity to act rightly in the world. Contemporary scholars have emphasized the significance of Vivekananda's approach in framing ethics as a lived, dynamic practice. Sharma (2007) notes that "Vivekananda's moral philosophy integrates spiritual ideals with social responsibility, making ethics a tool for both individual liberation and societal transformation" (p. 112). By linking inner moral development with external action, Vivekananda offers a model in which ethical conduct becomes a vehicle for both personal growth and social welfare. His emphasis on service to humanity as a moral imperative reflects the synthesis of self-realization and altruism, situating dharma within the broader framework of universal human values.

Vivekananda's discourse on moral duty also intersects with discussions on virtue ethics and character formation. According to Gupta (2012), "For Vivekananda, virtues such as courage, honesty, and self-discipline are not abstract ideals but practical qualities that shape human action and uphold dharma in daily life" (p. 67). Ethics is thus inseparable from character; the cultivation of virtue enables individuals to navigate moral dilemmas with clarity, courage, and integrity. This focus on internal cultivation aligns with the Vedantic view of self as both the source and instrument of ethical action, reinforcing the notion that moral responsibility is grounded in conscious self-discipline and awareness. The social and practical dimensions of Vivekananda's ethics further extend its relevance. Mukherjee (2015) observes, "Vivekananda emphasized that the highest ethical duty manifests in social engagement, addressing suffering, injustice, and inequality through active participation" (p. 88). Ethics, therefore, is not limited to personal morality but encompasses collective responsibility, reflecting an integrated approach that harmonizes individual and societal welfare. This perspective aligns with contemporary notions of applied ethics and social responsibility, offering guidance for addressing modern challenges such as poverty, social inequality, and moral apathy.

Furthermore, Vivekananda's ethical philosophy underscores the dynamic relationship between knowledge, action, and moral discernment. As Raju (2009) notes, "True dharma requires awareness, reflection, and deliberate action; knowledge without practice is incomplete, and action without ethical grounding can be destructive" (p. 54). Ethical life, in this framework, is a continuous interplay of understanding and enactment, where moral duty guides both intention and behaviour. The ethical thought of Swami Vivekananda presents dharma as a holistic principle encompassing personal virtue, moral duty, and social responsibility. By integrating spiritual ideals with practical action, Vivekananda offers an ethical model that is both timeless and relevant to contemporary society. His philosophy emphasizes that moral responsibility is grounded in self-cultivation, conscious action, and compassionate engagement with the world, highlighting the enduring importance of dharma as a guiding principle for ethical living.

2 | CONCEPT OF DHARMA: ETHICAL FOUNDATION AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

The concept of dharma occupies a central position in Swami Vivekananda's ethical philosophy, serving as the foundation for moral conduct and human responsibility. Dharma, in Vivekananda's thought, is more than ritualistic or religious obligation; it represents a universal ethical principle that guides individual behaviour while harmonizing personal development with societal welfare. Vivekananda

emphasizes that “Dharma is the eternal law of right action, which preserves the harmony of individual and society” (Vivekananda, 1993, p. 72). Here, dharma is understood as both an internal moral compass and an external guide for action, linking ethical awareness with practical responsibility. It underscores the idea that every human being has an inherent duty to act rightly, in accordance with both moral and social order. Scholars have noted that Vivekananda’s interpretation of dharma combines spiritual insight with pragmatic ethics. Sharma (2007) asserts, “Vivekananda presents dharma not as abstract moralism but as actionable virtue, where ethical life is inseparable from self-cultivation and social engagement” (p. 118). This perspective highlights the dual character of dharma: it demands self-discipline, integrity, and inner moral clarity while simultaneously motivating proactive contributions to society. In this sense, dharma integrates personal ethical development with collective responsibility, creating a comprehensive framework for moral living.

Virtue and character development are central to Vivekananda’s understanding of dharma. Gupta (2012) observes, “Dharma manifests through qualities like courage, truthfulness, and compassion, which shape moral action and uphold societal harmony” (p. 74). Ethical responsibility is therefore not merely adherence to rules but cultivation of virtuous character that informs consistent and morally sound decisions. By rooting morality in human character, Vivekananda aligns dharma with practical ethics, emphasizing that knowledge of right conduct must translate into action to be meaningful. Furthermore, Vivekananda’s dharma emphasizes universality and inclusivity. Mukherjee (2015) explains, “Dharma, for Vivekananda, transcends caste, creed, and social status; it is a universal principle of ethical responsibility applicable to all human beings” (p. 92). This universality underscores that ethical duty is a human obligation that binds all individuals to principles of justice, integrity, and compassion, reflecting an egalitarian vision of moral life. It also implies that ethical living cannot be restricted to personal morality alone but must encompass engagement with societal welfare, social justice, and alleviation of suffering.

The relational aspect of dharma further enhances its significance. Raju (2009) states, “Dharma binds the individual to society, linking personal ethical cultivation with duties toward others; it is a relational ethic that fosters social cohesion” (p. 61). By positioning morality within a network of social and ecological relationships, Vivekananda’s dharma encourages actions that are mindful of their consequences for others, promoting responsibility, empathy, and ethical foresight. It integrates moral awareness with deliberate practice, fostering both internal ethical growth and outwardly beneficial conduct. The concept of dharma in Swami Vivekananda’s ethical philosophy provides a robust foundation for human responsibility. By harmonizing self-cultivation with social engagement, emphasizing virtue and character development, and advocating universal ethical principles, dharma functions as a guide for practical, morally grounded action. Vivekananda’s vision underscores that human responsibility is both individual and collective, requiring awareness, integrity, and active participation in promoting ethical and social harmony. His understanding of dharma remains highly relevant today, offering guidance for personal morality, societal ethics, and the cultivation of a principled, responsible life.

3 | KARMA AND MORAL ACTION: ETHICS IN PRACTICE

In Swami Vivekananda’s ethical framework, the principle of karma—action—is closely interwoven with dharma, providing a practical dimension to moral responsibility. For Vivekananda, ethical theory is incomplete without the translation of moral insight into deliberate action. He emphasizes that “the world is given to action; the highest ethics is the ethics of work done without selfish motives” (Vivekananda, 1993, p. 102). This underscores the centrality of karma not merely as physical activity but as morally guided action performed with awareness, selflessness, and adherence to dharma. Ethical living, in this framework, is realized through consistent engagement in morally sound actions that benefit both the individual and society. Scholars have highlighted Vivekananda’s insistence that moral action requires both knowledge and intentionality. Sharma (2007) notes, “Vivekananda insists that right action stems from inner moral insight; action without ethical understanding risks reinforcing selfishness or harm” (p.

127). This perspective situates karma as a dynamic interplay between reflection and practice: ethical principles inform action, and actions in turn cultivate moral character. Unlike abstract moralism, Vivekananda's ethics is operational, emphasizing that morality is validated through the lived experience of ethical decision-making and responsible conduct.

Virtue and selflessness are integral to the ethical practice of karma. Gupta (2012) asserts, "Actions must be guided by courage, compassion, and honesty; the moral quality of work determines its ethical worth" (p. 79). In this sense, karma is inseparable from character development. Moral action is not merely about completing duties but about performing them in alignment with virtue and conscious awareness of consequences. This approach resonates with contemporary discussions in applied ethics, where the moral quality of actions is judged not only by outcomes but by intentions, awareness, and alignment with broader human and social values. Vivekananda also emphasizes the universality and inclusivity of ethical action. Mukherjee (2015) observes, "Ethical work extends beyond personal gain; it must serve humanity, reduce suffering, and uphold justice" (p. 95). Karma, therefore, is both personal and social, linking individual moral cultivation with societal welfare. This dual focus highlights the relational dimension of action: ethical conduct is meaningful only when it considers its impact on others and contributes to the collective good, reflecting a holistic understanding of moral responsibility.

Moreover, the integration of karma and dharma creates a framework for continuous ethical development. Raju (2009) notes, "Every action performed in awareness of duty and virtue strengthens moral discernment and cultivates ethical habit, transforming ordinary work into spiritual practice" (p. 66). By connecting action with reflective understanding, Vivekananda emphasizes that moral responsibility is an ongoing process rather than a static principle. Ethical practice becomes a form of self-cultivation, reinforcing both personal integrity and societal harmony. Vivekananda's philosophy of karma presents ethics as actionable and relational, linking moral insight with deliberate practice. By emphasizing selflessness, virtue, and awareness, he demonstrates that ethical responsibility is realized through everyday actions aligned with dharma. Karma, in this sense, is both a tool for personal moral growth and a mechanism for social welfare, highlighting the inseparability of individual and collective ethical responsibility. Vivekananda's integration of knowledge, action, and virtue provides a timeless framework for understanding ethics in practice, demonstrating that moral life is fulfilled not in abstract ideals but in conscious, responsible, and ethically guided engagement with the world.

4 | UNIVERSALISM AND SOCIAL ETHICS:

Swami Vivekananda's ethical philosophy emphasizes the universal character of dharma, extending moral responsibility beyond individual or sectarian boundaries to encompass all of humanity. Central to his thought is the principle that ethical duty is not restricted to personal or localized contexts but embodies a universal moral vision. Vivekananda asserts, "The welfare of the world is the highest religion" (Vivekananda, 1993, p. 181), highlighting that individual morality is meaningful only when it contributes to the collective good. His concept of universalism integrates self-realization with social engagement, presenting ethics as a dynamic interplay between personal virtue and societal responsibility. Scholars have stressed the social and global dimensions of Vivekananda's universalism. Sharma (2007) notes, "For Vivekananda, ethical life entails awareness of humanity as a single moral community, where every action is accountable not only to the self but to society at large" (p. 134). This perspective emphasizes the relational nature of ethics, where personal growth and social welfare are inseparable. Moral responsibility, therefore, is not only about individual development but also about promoting justice, alleviating suffering, and advancing collective well-being.

The integration of virtue and social action is central to this universalist ethical framework. Gupta (2012) observes, "Courage, compassion, and honesty are not merely personal virtues but social imperatives; ethical character manifests in actions that uphold fairness and human dignity" (p. 88). In Vivekananda's

vision, morality is evaluated by the extent to which it fosters social harmony, equality, and the common good. Ethical universalism transcends cultural, religious, and social divisions, affirming that moral principles apply to all humans irrespective of caste, creed, or nationality. Vivekananda also links universalism to the practical execution of dharma in social contexts. Mukherjee (2015) explains, "Universal ethical responsibility involves active engagement with society, addressing injustice and inequality, and working toward the upliftment of humanity" (p. 101). Here, ethics is inseparable from action; moral principles require enactment in service, education, and reform. Social ethics, in this framework, embodies the translation of universal moral vision into tangible contributions to societal welfare, demonstrating the inseparability of theory and practice.

Furthermore, the universality of ethics in Vivekananda's thought emphasizes inclusivity and equality. Raju (2009) notes, "True dharma recognizes the intrinsic worth of all beings, advocating compassion and justice without discrimination" (p. 73). Universal moral responsibility thus entails both respect for individual dignity and the cultivation of collective ethical consciousness. By fostering empathy, equity, and cooperative engagement, Vivekananda positions ethics as a force for social cohesion and transformative action. Vivekananda's philosophy of universalism and social ethics presents a holistic vision of moral responsibility that integrates personal virtue, ethical knowledge, and societal engagement. By emphasizing that ethical duty extends to all humanity, he frames morality as a principle that transcends self-interest, cultural boundaries, and sectarianism. His ethical universalism underscores the relational and practical dimensions of morality, where character development, altruistic action, and social responsibility converge. Vivekananda's thought remains profoundly relevant, offering guidance for contemporary ethical challenges, including social injustice, inequality, and global interdependence, demonstrating that the realization of dharma is inseparable from the pursuit of universal welfare.

5 | CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE: ETHICS IN THE MODERN WORLD

Swami Vivekananda's ethical philosophy continues to hold profound relevance in addressing the moral and social challenges of the modern world. His integration of dharma, karma, and universalism provides a framework for ethical decision-making that is both personal and socially responsible. Vivekananda emphasizes that "Ethics is not a theory but a practice; it is the life of selfless action guided by the principles of truth and service" (Vivekananda, 1993, p. 215). This approach offers a model for contemporary ethics in which moral responsibility is grounded in conscious action, virtuous character, and commitment to the welfare of others, rather than abstract philosophical ideals. Modern scholars have highlighted the applicability of Vivekananda's thought to contemporary societal issues. Sharma (2007) observes, "Vivekananda's philosophy provides a lens to address ethical crises in the modern era, emphasizing moral courage, social justice, and responsible engagement with global challenges" (p. 141). In a time characterized by environmental degradation, social inequality, and ethical ambiguity in technology and governance, the principles of selfless action, empathy, and universal moral duty serve as practical guidelines for personal and collective decision-making. His emphasis on active ethical engagement aligns with contemporary notions of applied ethics, where moral philosophy must translate into socially impactful behaviour.

The role of character and virtue in ethical action is central to Vivekananda's relevance today. Gupta (2012) argues, "The cultivation of virtues such as integrity, courage, and compassion is crucial for navigating modern moral dilemmas, where ethical decisions are often complex and multifaceted" (p. 96). In a globalized world where choices have far-reaching consequences, the emphasis on virtue ensures that actions are guided by ethical insight, reinforcing both individual responsibility and social accountability. Vivekananda's insistence on integrating ethical knowledge with practical action thus addresses the modern challenge of bridging theory and practice in moral life. Vivekananda's social vision also resonates with contemporary issues of equality and justice. Mukherjee (2015) states, "Ethical responsibility in the modern context must be universal, addressing systemic inequalities, promoting

human dignity, and fostering inclusive communities” (p. 108). By advocating that moral responsibility extends beyond self-interest to encompass the collective welfare, Vivekananda’s philosophy provides a blueprint for socially responsible behaviour, emphasizing solidarity, equity, and compassion. This universality is particularly pertinent in the current global scenario, where ethical action requires sensitivity to cultural diversity, social inequities, and shared human responsibilities.

Furthermore, Vivekananda’s thought engages with contemporary challenges in environmental ethics and sustainability. Raju (2009) notes, “Moral duty entails awareness of the interconnectedness of all life, promoting responsible stewardship of nature and ethical consideration of future generations” (p. 80). The integration of personal virtue, social responsibility, and ecological awareness reflects a holistic approach that is increasingly necessary in addressing the ethical dimensions of climate change, resource management, and global interdependence. Swami Vivekananda’s ethics offers timeless guidance for modern life, emphasizing that dharma, virtue, and selfless action form the foundation for personal integrity and social responsibility. By linking ethical knowledge with practice, individual development with collective welfare, and personal virtue with universal moral duty, his philosophy addresses contemporary moral dilemmas across social, political, and environmental domains. Vivekananda’s thought demonstrates that ethical living is a dynamic process, requiring conscious engagement, empathetic action, and a commitment to the betterment of humanity and the world, rendering his ethical framework highly relevant in today’s complex and interconnected society.

6 | CONCLUSION:

The study of Swami Vivekananda’s ethical thought underscores the profound integration of dharma, karma, and universal moral responsibility, providing a comprehensive vision of ethics that is both personal and social. Vivekananda’s philosophy demonstrates that ethical living is not limited to abstract reflection but is realized through conscious action guided by virtue, knowledge, and social awareness. He emphasizes that “Duty is the foundation of life; to act rightly, without attachment or selfishness, is the highest moral achievement”, highlighting the inseparability of moral insight and practical engagement. This perspective affirms that true morality emerges when knowledge of right conduct translates into consistent, purposeful action that serves both individual growth and collective welfare. The relevance of Vivekananda’s ethics is especially evident in contemporary times, where social, environmental, and ethical challenges demand integrated approaches to personal and societal responsibility. By linking moral character with social engagement, his thought provides guidance for cultivating virtues such as courage, compassion, integrity, and empathy—qualities essential for addressing issues of inequality, injustice, and ecological crisis. Furthermore, his universalist vision of dharma encourages inclusive ethical practices, promoting solidarity across cultural, social, and global boundaries. Vivekananda’s ethical framework affirms that human responsibility is both inward and outward, combining self-cultivation with active service to society. His philosophy remains a timeless guide for moral action, offering a holistic approach to ethics that nurtures personal virtue, sustains social harmony, and fosters a sense of duty toward humanity. Ethical life, in Vivekananda’s vision, is the dynamic pursuit of truth, justice, and universal welfare, making his thought profoundly relevant for both individuals and the modern world.

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