



Moral Imagination and Liberation: A Sāṃkhya-Yoga Perspective on Dharma and Ethics

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Abstract

By giving a strong background of metaphysics, in Indian knowledge tradition, the philosophical system of Sāṃkhya exclusively posits two fundamental principles (tattova-s): pure consciousness (puruṣa) and primal matter (prakṛti). The ethical point here rooted in cultivating of buddhi (intellect), and moral imagination from this standpoint is not an abstract faculty, but a dynamic emergence of clarity (sattvic nature) within the intellect which enables one to discern right from wrong not through social conventions, but through deep insight into the true nature of reality. The Yoga system extends this insight by incorporating ethical precepts such as yama-s and niyama-s etc.; and moral imagination is cultivated here more effectively with the practices of ahimsā (non-violence), satya (truthfulness), svādhyāya (study of self) etc. These disciplines refine the citta (mind-stuff) and stabilize one towards a life rooted in dharma. However, the object of this article is to bring up that how the classical Indian philosophical school of Sāṃkhya-Yoga conceptions of moral imagination transcends conventional normative ethical theories, and sets forth a transformative and inward vision that guides individuals to go beyond to experience the highest goal of human life – liberation (apavarga/mokṣa).

Keywords: Ethics, Moral imagination, Buddhi, Reality, puruṣa, Liberation (kaivalya)

Introduction:

In Indian knowledge tradition we find a holistic vision about life and reality that encompasses ethics and *dharma* on the one hand, and the ultimate goal of human existence i.e. liberation (*mokṣa*) on the other. This tradition is very rich especially for its metaphysical and ethical abstruseness, gives valuable insights for cultivating moral imagination, which in turn brings up a life aligned with *dharma* principles. In this profound tradition, the philosophical framework of Sāṃkhya-Yoga delves into a unique approach to understand moral imagination. It extends beyond conventional ethical reasoning or social norms, instead emphasizes an intuitive and discriminative insight that enables a transformative vision of life which align our self to a higher cosmic reality.

Moral Imagination Defined:

The term *moral imagination* refers to the ability to empathize with others, imagine alternative ethical possibilities, and creatively resolve difficult moral dilemmas. It is commonly viewed as a supplement to rationalist ethical framework, defining a dimension

of creativity and empathy to concepts like duty/responsibility or utility. Mark Johnson defines moral imagination as “an ability to imaginatively discern various possibilities for acting within a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given action.”¹ However, from the view of the Sāṃkhya-Yoga, this definition remains confined to the transactional level of the mind and society. Additionally, while the western ethics is limited itself in utilitarian (consequence-based), Aristotelian (virtue-based), and deontological (rule-based) methodologies; the system of Sāṃkhya-Yoga adheres to a supplementary third way approach, which views ethics as the development of discriminative insight (*viveka-khyāti*) or inner transformation in order to align with the transcendental goal i.e. liberation (*apavarga*).

This article posits that the Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition offers a deeper and more transformative understanding of moral imagination. Here, moral imagination is reframed as a type of metaphysical insight rather than just a psychological ability for ethical problem-solving method. It is the emergent capacity of a purified intellect (*buddhi*) to intuitively perceive and align with the fundamental structures of reality (*tattva*-s). This alignment is what constitutes *dharma*² in its truest sense—not as a rigid, socially imposed law, but as the inherent order and obligation that upholds the universe and guides individual consciousness back to its origin.

There are three steps in this article’s journey. First, it will establish the metaphysical foundation laid by Sāṃkhya, showing how its radical dualism of *puruṣa* (pure consciousness) and *prakṛti* (primal matter) reorients the very source of ethical knowledge from external authority to internal, intuitive clarity. Second, it will explore how the practical path of Yoga, particularly through the ethical observances of the *yama*-s and *niyama*-s, functions as the applied technology for cultivating the moral imagination by systematically purifying the mind-stuff (*citta*). Third, it will argue that the classical Sāṃkhya-Yoga system provides an ethical import through metaphysics, despite being less explicit about normative western ethical discourses of deontology or teleology; in addition, it contends that the moral imagination culminates in a complete transformation of vision that enables to achieve the ultimate goal: freedom (*apavarga*) from the bondage of misidentification, rather than merely from moral or ethical concerns.

Metaphysical Foundation of Sāṃkhya: Reality, Self, and the Source of Dharma:

To understand the Sāṃkhya-Yoga view on moral imagination, one must first grasp its non-theistic and dualistic metaphysics. As per this system, reality is composed of two eternal, independent realities: *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. *puruṣa* is pure, unchanging, contentless consciousness. It is the spectator, silent witness, who is without any attributes, traits, or

¹ Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). 202.

² In the Indian philosophical tradition, the term *dharma* used is many significant senses viz. cosmic order, moral law, duty, righteousness etc. Often used in the sense of *ethical* or *moral* within the schema of *puruṣārtha*—*dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*. But in the context of Sāṃkhya, *dharma* does not primarily mean *ethics* as understood in western or general Indian ethical studies, but as one of the *bhāva*-s (attribute/natural disposition) of the *buddhi*; in *Sāṃkhyakārikā*-XXIII stated eight types of *bhāva*-s viz. *dharma*, *Jñāna*, *vairāgya*, *aiśvarya*, *adharma*, *ajñāna*, *avairāgya* and *anaiśvarya*. So, in this system, *dharma* is more like a psychological and ontological category, the virtuous or inner moral tendency of the intellect, not as a system of moral laws or duties.

activity.³ It is plural; there are infinite numbers of *puruṣa*-s, each representing an individual sentient being's true self. *prakṛti* is the primordial, uncaused cause of the material universe. It is dynamic, unconscious, and composed of three interdependent strands or qualities (*guṇa*-s): *sattva* (lucidity, harmony, intelligence), *rajas* (activity, passion, energy), and *tamas* (inertia, darkness, stability). The entire manifested universe, including the human mind, intellect, and senses, is the evolution (*parināma*) of *prakṛti*.⁴

According to Sāṃkhya, *avidyā* (ignorance) or the inability to distinguish between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, is the root of the human predicament. The psycho-physical apparatus—the mind, body, and intellect—which are products of *prakṛti*, is incorrectly associated with *puruṣa*. All pain, desire and immorality, is the cause of this misidentification, the root of all suffering.⁵ When one thinks that “I am the mind” or “I am my desires,” actions arise from the interplay of the *guṇa*-s, which leads to *karmic* consequences and further bondage. According to this schema, the *buddhi*, or intellect, which is the most subtle evolution of *prakṛti*, is the seat of moral discernment rather than a socially conditioned superego. The *buddhi* is capable to reflect the light of *puruṣa*, and when it is predominantly composed of the *sattva guṇa*, it becomes transparent, calm, and luminous. A *sattvic buddhi* may discriminate between *puruṣa* (self) and *prakṛti* (matter) with a process which known as *viveka-khyāti* in Sāṃkhya system.

Moral imagination in this very capacity of a *sattvic buddhi* to see reality as it is. In order to comprehend the silent *puruṣa* amidst the manifestation of *prakṛti*, one must imagine a reality beyond the apparent, which makes it an imaginative act. This discernment is an intuitive, immediate apprehension rather than a rational deduction. A person with such a cultivated *buddhi* does not follow *dharma* because it is written in scripture or enforced by society, but because their very mode of perception is aligned with the cosmic order. Since their inner instrument is clear and balanced, their actions naturally represent truth, non-harm, and purity. *Dharma* becomes a reflection of their realized essence, not an external imposition. Thus, the ontological distinction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* becomes the foundation or base of the ethical discrimination between right and wrong action.

³ In *Sāṃkhyakārikā*-XIX defined the nature of *puruṣa* as *tasmācca vipāryāsātsiddham sāksitoamasya puruṣasya. kaivalyamādhyasthyam draṣṭṛtvam-akarṭṛbhāvaśca*”

⁴ In *kārikā*-III & X stated that the *prakṛti* is the uncaused cause of the manifested world; and in *kārikā*-XI & XII defined its three inherent qualities. In addition, *prakṛti*, in its unmanifested form, is in an perfect equilibrium of the three *guṇa*-s. With the disruption of this equilibrium, the evolution (of the world) occurs; and for Sāṃkhya the cause of this disturbance is the close proximity of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. Surprisingly, it is still an underlying mystery that why this proximity happens, remains unexplained in this tradition. Though later interpreters like Īsavarakṛṣṇa (in *Sāṃkhyakārikā*-XXI) and Vijñānabhikṣu (in *Sāṃkhyapravacanabhāṣya* IV.67) drew some inadequate explanations on this mystery. Strikingly, Yoga system addresses the conception of God (*Yogasūtra* 1.19) to solve this deficiency. For Yoga, God is responsible for disrupting the balance of the *guṇa*-s in *prakṛti* and subsequent evolution of the universe.

⁵ When *puruṣa* is in close proximity to *prakṛti*, the very nature of *puruṣa*'s consciousness associates with *buddhi*, which is an evolute of *prakṛti*, and conscious mind is formed. During this process, the unconscious *buddhi* becomes conscious, and a person loses the ability to discriminate between *puruṣa* and the manifestation of *buddhi*, which is called mind. With it, person creates a false identity with it, and loses the ability to recognize his true nature/actual self, and becomes the subject of suffering.

Yoga on Cultivating Moral Imagination:

While Sāṃkhya offers the theoretical framework, Patañjali's Yoga system provides the practical path for purifying the *buddhi* and realizing the metaphysical moral imagination. If Sāṃkhya is the theory of discriminative knowledge, Yoga is the technology for achieving it. In Yoga, the primary obstacle is the fluctuating, often turbulent, *citta* (mind-stuff), which is dominated by *rajas* and *tamas* and obscures the inherent *sattva*. Patañjali's *aṣṭāṅga yoga* (Eight-Limbed *yoga*) begins with a foundational ethical framework: the *yama*-s (restraints) and *niyama*-s (observances). These are not esoteric or commandments of a deity, but offered as a necessary prerequisite for stabilizing the *citta*.⁶ They are the practical tools or methodologies for cultivating moral imagination by which one systematically reorienting their habits, thoughts, and very being.

The *yama*-s are the great vows; practicing them are not merely refraining from physical harm, but they involve an imaginative cultivation of empathy and a constant, vigilant awareness of how one's thoughts, words, and actions impact other beings. It requires imagining the world from the perspective of others, recognizing the *puruṣa* within them, irrespective of the external *prakṛtic* form it inhabits. Similarly, *satya* is an alignment of one's whole essence with truth rather than merely factual honesty. So, it advocates the imagination to see the consequences of one's speech and the courage to express what is real and what is unreal. The *niyama*-s are the internal and external disciplines that further refine the individual. Among them, *svādhyāya* is particularly crucial for moral imagination since it involves the study of sacred texts and, more importantly the study of the self. It assists in envisioning an imaginative introspection that deconstructs the true self (*puruṣa*) over the false self (the ego).

Therefore, through the sustained practice of *yama* and *niyama*, the *citta* becomes gradually purified and *sattvic* quality predominates over the *rajasic* (impulses of greed and aggression) and *tamasic* tendencies (laziness and delusion). With this, the *citta* becomes calmer and clearer, and *buddhi* naturally starts to manifest its innate capacity of discrimination. In this way, the moral imagination becomes a faculty of perception. And the tranquil *citta* becomes both the source and result of ethical life.

Conclusion:

In the Sāṃkhya-Yoga system, the ultimate goal of cultivating moral imagination is liberation (*kaivalya*); and ethics is a necessary but preliminary stage towards the transcendent goal. The pinnacle of moral imagination is *viveka-khyati* (the discriminative discernment of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*), which is developed by ethical practice and meditative discipline. At this stage, imagination transforms into direct perception, and one does not just imagine the true *Self* but realize it, and see with unwavering certainty that he is the silent, witnessing *puruṣa*, completely distinct from the body, mind, and intellect. This realization has profound moral implications since all the actions previously rooted in egoistic identification now cease to arise. In this way, moral imagination becomes the key to unlock the door of the realm of ethics (*dharma*) to attain absolute freedom (*kaivalya*).

⁶ Patañjali's considered *yama*-s, and also other disciplines are the great vows. They are universal and not confined in any class, time, place, and circumstances. As *Yogasūtras*- 2.31 echoes – “*jātideśakālasamayānavacchinnāḥ sāvabhaumā mahāvratam.*”

Therefore, it can be said that a profound and radical view of moral imagination is presented by the Sāṃkhya-Yoga as it advocates a transforming ability to engage with the nature of reality, which not merely a tool for ethical discussion. By grounding ethics in the metaphysics (of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*), it provides a solid foundation for *dharma*, which is independent of any fluctuation of social norms and personal preferences. Furthermore, this is solely facilitated with the ethical/practical disciplines of Yoga and its pragmatic process of purifying of the mind, which enables for cultivating moral imagination to envision a life beyond egoistic desires. Fundamentally, the ultimate discriminative knowledge (*viveka-khyāti*), the very essence of liberation, is cultivated from this imagination. However, in the era of complex moral dilemmas and existential uncertainty, the Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition offers a timely reminder, enunciating an ethical discourse that not merely about choosing between right and wrong, but about to becoming a person for whom right action is a spontaneous expression of self-knowledge.

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