

Existence, Experience and Ethics

Existence, Experience and Ethics: Essays for
S.A. Shaida
Edited by A. Raghuramaraju
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The book under review is a Festschrift for Professor S.A. Shaida, who superannuated from IIT, Kanpur in 1996. It is a compilation of essays written by his friends, students and admirers. As the title of the volume suggests, it covers issues and topics in the areas of existence, experience and ethics. Both philosophically and from the common sense viewpoint there is a close relationship between existence, experience and ethics in the sense that the existence of the autonomous individual is closely connected with the experience and ethics in normative and contextual terms. However, the objective of the book is not to bring out the interconnections among the three elements in a coherent way. In other words, the book includes articles covering the following four issues without earnestly working out any close connection among them: (a) critical evaluation and alternative construction of the autonomous individual's existence; (b) an examination and explication of various issues concerning aesthetic experience; (c) articulation of various ethical questions, particularly those concerning the notions of rationality, objectivity and universality; and (d) clarification of religious ethics free from dogma. In the light of these four stated objectives, the book is accordingly divided into four parts and has twenty-one articles. It may be pointed out that each part of the book is thematically independent from the others. This, however, does not affect the merit of the book. It may be reminded that this volume has been brought out in honour of a professor of philosophy at the time of his superannuation.

The first part of the book on existence consists of seven essays. Most of these essays draw our attention to the question of the plausibility of the existence of the autonomous individual as it has been articulated in the discourse of modernity.

Margaret Chatterjee has explored the issue of intersubjectivity as it exists in the German philosophical tradition. Her exploration begins with Kant and concludes with Buber and the Jewish tradition. She has explicated three forms of existence as "I", "we" and "you". It is the existence of "you" in relation to "I", which becomes central in the discourse. Amitabh Das Gupta examines the issue of existence by identifying what mental states are not. In this regard he argues that there are 'two conflicting intuitions regarding what mental states are and are not'. The first intuition is that mental phenomena are actually physical, whereas the second is that mental phenomena are not physical. Following Searle's distinction between micro and macro properties of the system, Das Gupta argues that mental phenomena are not effects of the brain, but 'the events realized in the central nervous system'. 'Consciousness is the emergent property of the brain' (p. 89), and must not be reduced to a product of the physical. Bhargavi V. Davar, while exploring the phenomenology of mental illness, argues that notions of rationality, health and mind are reductionist properties of mind. Her paper also provides rich insights into the sociology of mental health.

Shasheel Hegde has taken upon himself the difficult task of examining 'self' and 'identity' in the Indian philosophical tradition. It may be pointed out that the identity of a distinct Indian tradition does not imply that Indian philosophy has a tradition of exploring the issues of self and identity the way the western philosophy has done. This essay rather brings out the weaknesses of the Indian thinking in exploring such ontological issues. A. Raghuramaraju's lucid description of the dark womb of rights provides us with political genealogy of their origin. He traces the origins of the human rights from the dark ages to the modern period

through eight stages. The origin of the rights may be seen in terms of the discourse of natural rights in which man's dominium over earth was regarded as a corollary to the God's dominium. An alternative view that emerged visualized the centrality of the society in contradistinction to nature. Nature was replaced by society. What is important to note is that the origin of the contemporary discourse of human rights may be traced back to the notion of man as having natural rights. Ahmed Nizar's essay on identity and the ontology of the self, and Prasenjit Biswas's 'critical reading of Emmanuel Levinas' concept of 'Other' are useful contributions to the issue of the nature of existence.

The second part of the book seeks to explicate the notion and varieties of existential experience. All the five essays in this part are interesting and highly analytical, but these should be read independent of the previous part. Bijoy H. Boruah argues for the examination of literary texts as philosophical discourse. He comments, "Literary fictions are an exploration of the human psyche, the soul, in the sense in which a sculpture or a drawing may be a study of the human form, the human body in its visible aspect" (p.162). Coined by A.A. Baumgarten in 1735 and followed by his book in 1750, "aesthetics" is now a dominant field of study in both literary criticism and philosophy of art. Rekha Jhanjhi has lucidly analysed two major perspectives in aesthetics, namely, purist and integrationist. The former views art as separated from life, whereas the latter combines the two together. Jhanjhi has criticised the purist perspective by arguing that art cannot be isolated from life. B.N. Patnaik has described the notion of miscommunication on the basis of two stories of Milan Kundera and his essay makes an interesting reading. The important contribution in this volume is

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The third part of the volume consists of six essays, focusing their analysis largely on the issues of moral values, objectivity, duties, facts and values, and universality. P.R. Bhat has elucidated the question of universalisability of the moral principles by exploring the literature on the subject. S.P. Gautam's essay 'Resituating Duties in their Rightful Place' is notable on two counts. First, it explicates the strength and limits of liberalism as it has evolved in the West. Second, it argues strongly for the analysis of the nature of society before posing the question of duties in a blind manner. He rightly points out, "Recognising the normative character of our social being, we learn to respect our duties without any fear of losing our rights" (p.258). In his article Jagat Pal argues that in the theory of perscriptivism of R.M. Hare the notion of objectivity has no logical place. Vanlalnghak examines whether values can be derived from fact as the two belong to different logical orders. I think the statement of facts may not necessarily be independent of their

value contexts in certain language games. For example, if the prosecution establishes that a person has committed a murder, then the statement of the fact is inseparable from values attached to violating somebody's right to live. The circumstances in which this act could be just or unjust is also a question of how you frame your 'ought' statement. V.T. Sebastian has overviewed phenomenology on the issue of the relationship between life-world and values. Pabitrakumar Roy has compared the ideas of Plato with those of Gandhi on ethics by distinguishing between act-centred and agent-centred ethical theories. He contends that so far as the question of justice is concerned, Gandhi's agent-centred moral philosophy is better than the views of Plato.

The final part of the book takes cognizance of the religious ethics. Of the three articles in this section Asghar Ali Engineer's contribution seems to have made a convincing case for isolating dogma from ethics in the analysis of religion. Syed Wahiduddin has made a significant point on the diversity of religious life, but he has not properly worked out his paper. Thus Engineer demands some attention from the reader, particularly in the light of the recent occurrences in Gujarat. He argues that contrary to the contention of rationalists, faith and belief are essential for the development of scientific knowledge, as these constitute an inseparable element of humanity. Religion is not what the vested interests make it out to be. He goes on to interpret Quran to explain that Islam is essentially a religion which emphasizes equality. Similarly, untouchability, which is an unethical practice, must not be confused with Hinduism. Every religion has both normative and contextual dimensions. It is the contextual dimension that brings in dogma. However, one may caution Engineer that such a defense of religion

may not be substantiated by the empirical facts, which begin with a distinction between religion and community. Gautam Biswas in his interpretative essay on the plausibility structure of inter-religious dialogue finds Maurice Friedman's ideas suitable in handling the complexity of the situation. Interestingly, the first article concluded with Buber's views and at the end of the last chapter we again encounter the ideas of Buber through Friedman.

In sum, the book is a useful addition to the literature on philosophy. The editor has done his work really well. The part on ethics and some papers in other sections are outstanding. This work will be useful to students and researchers working in the areas of ontology, aesthetics and ethics.

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Numerals in Orissan Inscriptions

by Subrata Kumar Acharya

The book aims at discussing different systems of numeration prevalent in early Orissa. That the typologies of the numerical symbols are part of an evolutionary process has been well defined and illustrated. The polemic about the earliest epigraphic evidence of the use of the decimal system in India has been resolved. The systematic displacement of the numerical symbols by the decimal figures and the experiment with the application of positional value and the potential zero in Orissan records form an interesting dimension of study. It further addresses the problem of the advent of modern Oriya numerals and examines how the geo-political and linguistic-paleographical forces operated in determining and standardising them.

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