




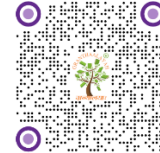
Original Article

ACTIONABLE ETHICS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEISTER ECKHART AND NARAYANA GURU

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ABSTRACT

Despite belonging to distinct religious traditions, temporalities and geographic locations, Oneness or non-duality of the self and the divine remain the one defining element of the philosophical pathways put forth by Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) and Narayana guru (1856-1928). These philosophers belong to a rare category of Karmayogins who, in spite of their spiritual enlightenment, chose not to espouse a life of world-denial (parityaga) but strived for actionable human ethics guaranteeing human dignity. This article argues that, apparent divergences notwithstanding, it is possible to arrive at a practical and universal scheme of actionable ethics through a synthesis of their metaphysics and praxis.

Keywords: Eckhart, Narayana Guru, Detachment, Compassion, Anukamba, Godhead, Vedanta, Actionable Ethics, Actionable Human, Parityaga, Mysticism, Karmayoga

INTRODUCTION

The theologians may quarrel, but the mystics of the world speak the same language, argued Meister Eckhart in the 13th century. Centuries later, another exponent of “perennial philosophy” Huxley (1945), Narayana Guru exhorted that the essence of all religions is one and the same. As true mystics who shared the same divine ground despite their different religious backgrounds, Eckhart and Guru rejected the exoteric aspects of religion and culture and espoused the esoteric elements of all religions which point out the fundamental oneness of humanity. Their thinking manifests an “astonishing conformity in the deepest impulses of human spiritual experience” Otto (2016). As spiritually realized mystics who believed in a spiritual Absolute, they constantly quarreled with the antihuman and obsolete doctrines within their own traditions, often reinvesting them with a humane face.

Although separated by almost six centuries, the lives of Eckhart (a Dominican) and Guru (an Avarna who mastered Vedanta) were marked by certain shared common contexts. Both were trained in their respective religious traditions, but both ultimately questioned these very traditions because of their contemplative knowledge of the spiritual Absolute— the oneness of all. Their journey from being religious insiders to radical outsiders is both spiritual and social in nature. While Eckhart’s Rhineland mysticism was a revolt against the papal hierarchies of the medieval church, Narayana Guru battled with the religious, social and caste hierarchies in Travancore which rendered human beings untouchable, unapproachable or even unseeable. Eckhart used Middle high German, the vernacular language in his sermons, rejecting the Latin language. Through this he essentially removed the role of the priests as interpreters of religion and in a way democratized Christianity for the common laity. Guru also taught the untouchables

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(Avarnas) and wrote in the local Malayalam language making the complex Vedantic idea of oneness and equality of all human beings more accessible to them. Guru's installation of a Shiva idol at Aruvippuram (1888) was nothing short of a social revolt that rocked the very foundations of Hindu orthodoxy in the region as consecration of a temple was an act exclusively reserved for the priestly class.

A comparison of the architecture of the metaphysics of both the mystics further reveals their shared spiritual ground. Both the scholars rejected the traditional belief of God as the Creator. Instead, they stood for the oneness of the Creator and the creations, thus bringing God closer to the self; they saw God as a common ground, an absolute nothingness from which all things emerge. As a perennial philosopher, Eckhart distinguished between God and Godhead. In sermon 52, he says: "God and Godhead are as different as Earth and Heaven" (277). By God he meant the Creator as he is understood by his creations whereas Godhead signifies God in His own absolute essence. In the same sermon, he famously wrote: "I pray God to rid me of God," (278) suggesting his constant yearning to realize the Absolute Oneness of the divine nothingness which is likened to a still desert where all differences vanish. He says: "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which the God sees me," shattering the subject-object relationship and reducing everything to a divine singular.

The same non-dualistic metaphysical architecture is reflected in the writings of Guru who conceived the Absolute as "Arivu," a pure consciousness which erases all distinctions. As an Advaita philosopher, Guru repeatedly used in his poems the classic analogy of the ocean and the wave to reiterate the relationship between the individual (Atman) and the Absolute (Brahman) selves. Guru argued that every pair of eyes is endowed with an identical vision of awareness despite the differences in caste, class, gender and religion. In verse 24 of "Atmopadesasatakam" (One Hundred Verses of Self Instruction), Guru wrote:

"What is known as 'that person' or 'this person',
when carefully considered, is the one undifferentiated form of the primeval Self.
Whatever one does for the happiness of one's own self,
should also include the happiness of others."

It is evident from the ongoing comparative analysis that both Eckhart and Guru were anthropological monists. What differentiates them from traditional mystics is the ethical turn in their metaphysical thinking. It is a deeply rooted misconception that true mystics are those who are absolutely withdrawn from the real world and are bound to lead a passive existence. On the contrary, the attainment of self-realization of the Absolute did not lead Eckhart or Guru to an apathy towards material world and human suffering. Instead, it propelled them to seek and formulate a universal framework for ethical action and selfless service.

Both the mystics disagreed to the traditional idea of detachment practiced by mystics. For them, detachment is not any kind of inaction or worldly withdrawal, but a more qualified mode of selfless action that annihilates all ego. It is less about human idleness and more about love and service of humanity. For Eckhart, true detachment is acting "without a why" (âne warumbe). Eckhart's most penetrating insight in this regard is revealed in his sermon 86, a radical reimagining of the biblical story of Martha and Mary. While most biblical scholars consider Mary's mystical idleness and passivity as adorable traits, Eckhart sees true mystical enlightenment in the character of Martha—a radical inversion of the theological interpretation of the Mary-Martha story (Luke 10:38-42). Mary and Martha represent the two aspects of Christian life— one contemplative and the other active. Eckhart argued that Martha's contemplative action of serving others even when deeply moved by the presence of Jesus is superior to an emotionally and spiritually overwhelmed Mary's devotion in idleness. Martha is considered more spiritually ripe as she continues with her daily routine even while she is immersed in her faith.

In a conversation, Chattampi Swamikal, a contemporary sage-philosopher curiously quizzed Narayana Guru about his social reformation initiatives, referring to him as "Pravarthiyaar," a Malayalam term for an officer which can be translated as an "activist in this context." Punning on the same word, Narayana Guru is said to have replied in a jocular vein, emphasising inaction in action: "Pravrithi undu; Aaru illa" meaning it is action that matters and the doer-ship just vanishes. It was this epistemological awareness of the Absolute that made Guru a Jnani of Karma. He could have easily continued his life as a Parivrajaka after attaining enlightenment at Maruthwamalai following eight years of severe penance in the Pillathadam cave. Instead, he chose to launch himself on a path of active social reform to bring solace to the people reeling under the cruel system of casteism in Travancore.

Endowed with the supreme knowledge of oneness of the Absolute, Guru could easily see through the various divisions prevalent in Travancore of his time, a place Swami Vivekananda had described as a "lunatic asylum" because of the rigidities of casteist practices. Like the biblical character Martha, Guru deliberately chose the path of action which was always rooted in love, compassion and devotion. He understood that mere prayer and solitary penance would bring no betterment to the lives of millions dehumanized by casteism. He democratized Hinduism by establishing temples across the region and opened them to all sections of society. The historic installation of a stone (Siva linga) in Aruvippuram along the banks of the serene river Neyyar in 1888 changed the course of social life in Travancore in unimaginable ways. This act of defiance was followed by a series of idol installations across the Malabar coast. Interestingly, the later temples Guru consecrated had mirrors for inner reflection instead of stone idols, clearly showing the maturation of Guru's ideals and its impact on society. Subsequently, Guru stopped consecrating temples and urged his followers to establish educational institutions open to all that would serve humanity as true temples of knowledge. He believed in liberation through education and strength through organization. It was this belief that inspired Guru to form one of the earliest labor

organizations in the country (Travancore Labor Association). Guru foresaw the importance of technical education and women empowerment and initiated technical training institutes and schools for girls.

Guru thus reinterpreted the age-old abstract philosophy of Advaita Vedanta and transformed it into a potent tool that would catalyze a social renaissance in Kerala. As Shashi Tharoor has observed: “A philosopher, poet, mystic and social revolutionary, the Guru’s life was a testament to the transformative power of wisdom rooted in compassion and action grounded in moral reality” (ix). Classical Vedantins like Sankara failed to problematize the inequalities embedded in social structures as they primarily looked at Vyavahara (empirical world) as Mithya (an illusion). Narayana Guru hardly accepted this mode of thinking as it only helped institutionalize dehumanizing practices like casteism. Guru posited the idea of the reality of the one world (Ekalokasrsti) and argued that non-dualism should manifest itself in the society as equality sans discrimination. He cleverly employed the Advaitic idea of Ekatma vada (Absolute Oneness of Brahman) to critique institutionalized casteism. In his Jati Nirnayam, Guru maintained that just as “cowness” defines a cow, all humans are defined by humanness, at once dismissing any privilege that ensues from one’s birth. While Sankara focused on Moksha (ultimate liberation of the soul), Guru could blend Advaita (non-dualism) with Anukamba (compassion), arguing that spiritual enlightenment should be integrated with the physical well-being of the entire humanity.

For instance, in verse 24 of Atmopadesasatakam Guru explains that there is no real distinction between Self and the Other. It is sharing that leads to true happiness: “What here we know as ‘this man’ in essence is but the one primordial self; What one does for one’s own sake should also be for the sake of others.” In verse 25, Guru cautions us not to harm anyone else as it is ultimately an act of self-annihilation because of our oneness: “What is good for one, but brings misery to another such action should be known as contrary to self; Those who inflict deep sorrow upon others/Will fall into the burning ocean of grief.” Guru further elaborates on this idea of compassion in Anukambadasakam (Ten Verses on Compassion). To him, compassion is the one defining attribute of all living things and those without compassion may be considered living corpses: “The content of the three, knowledge, love and mercy is the same, and it is the leading star of life that only the ‘the wise lives’ chant these nine letter hymn again and again” [Sasidharan \(2020\)](#).

Guru and Eckhart thus emphatically refuted the popular belief that mysticism is all about self- withdrawal, detachment and social alienation. Guru saw compassion as a vital spiritual experience that motivates one to be responsible towards others. Eckhart’s idea of detachment (Abegescheidenheit) was rational and intentional and fundamentally diverged from the asceticism of his contemporaries. It involved an annihilation of one’s ego or possessive will and letting the God act through oneself. Like the principle of Nishkama karma in Bhagavat Gita, Eckhart posited an idea of desireless action that refuted the transactional virtues of the medieval society and stood for the ideal of spontaneous virtue [Holt \(2004\)](#). Eckhart argued that a physically active life of hard labor like Martha’s is more adorable than one of contemplative spirituality like Mary’s as the former is marked by deep inner detachment.

Thus, Eckhart and Guru can be seen as two colossal philosophers who creatively transformed abstract metaphysics into actionable ethics. Though their thinking converged on the ideal of oneness of the Absolute, they also diverged with respect to their praxis. While Guru stood for expanding one’s self to accommodate the other (Anukamba), Eckhart’s approach was one aimed at removing the self from the action through inner detachment. Eckhart’s sermons were meant for the internal liberation of the laity through inner purification whereas Guru’s actions like the founding of temples, labor unions, social organizations and educational institutions were aimed at changing the very fabric of the society through socio-religious reformation. Together, their metaphysics constitute the complementary halves of a universal system of actionable ethics putting forth the ideal of an actionable human. Eckhart’s detachment contributes to the inner discipline and core of this system, and Guru’s selfless love and compassion for the other contributes to its extensive structure. Eckhart suggests that self-centred activism can not only be self-destructive but also socially retrogressive. Guru’s ideas of compassion serves as a timeless reminder that any mysticism that blinds one to societal injustices and suffering of the other is worthless. Complementing each other, Eckhart and Guru conceive of an actionable human: one who is an embodiment of detachment and compassion, one who is enlightened enough and grounded in divinity to serve the One world in all its Oneness.

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