

The Mask of Morality: Public Virtue, Private Desire, and the Problem of Ethical Authenticity

Nikumoni Phukon

Research Scholar, Dept. of Philosophy, North Eastern Hill University (NEHU)

Abstract

Human beings often present themselves as moral, responsible, honest and compassionate. Still, their behaviour may alter when they move from public situations to private spaces where social observation and judgment are absent. This gap between public morality and private conduct raises a profound philosophical question: are human beings truly moral or do they merely behave morally under social pressure? Thus, this paper will explore the question of ethical authenticity through the philosophies of Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and Jiddu Krishnamurti. This research aims to demonstrate that a distinction exists between public and private morality, and we must acknowledge certain constraints that prevent us from simply dismissing this distinction as hypocrisy. It reflects deeper problems of freedom, conditioning, self-deception and self-knowledge. Authentic ethicality, then, is more than a matter of conforming to moral rules or of projecting a moral image; it is an awareness of the psychological and social forces that influence human action.

Keywords: public morality, private conduct, ethical authenticity, hypocrisy, society.

Introduction:

In a general sense, we often see Morality as a means or as a tool for determining something, like right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. We are constantly surrounded by moral expectations. People are taught from childhood to tell the truth, respect people, do not hurt people, be responsible, and keep unacceptable desires in check. These expectations are embedded in our everyday lives, reinforced by family, religion, education, law, culture and social institutions. But the central philosophical problem is when we compare what people say about morality with what they actually do. A person may be a vehement denouncer of lying, but may lie when the truth is against his or her interests. One may condemn selfishness, but when his or her own interests are concerned, he or she may be very selfish. One person may appear to have compassion for others; inwardly he or she may be indifferent to those from whom he or she can expect no recognition or benefit. Likewise, a person may act honestly in a workplace because dishonesty may harm his or her reputation but act differently when he or she thinks that no one can find out what he or she did. It distinguishes between

*Corresponding Author Email: nikuphukon2023@gmail.com

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public virtue and private desire. The tension is not merely with the human being that human beings sometimes act inconsistently. We humans are very complicated psycho-physical beings, and inconsistency is sometimes inevitable in some particular cases. The main philosophical tension is this: what can these kinds of inconsistency tell us about the very nature of morality itself?

If someone acts morally only when someone else is watching, is that person moral? If a person does what is right because he or she wants praise, is his or her action really moral? And if a person really believes that he or she is a good person, even if he or she is hiding selfish motives from himself or herself, can he or she be considered morally authentic? What then makes morality real, in a world where human beings can behave differently in public and in private? And the problem is made worse by the fact that morality itself can become part of one's social identity. People don't just want to do good. They may want to be seen to do good as well. A good reputation for morality can lead to social approval, respect, authority, and positive self-image. The desire to seem moral can therefore become as important as morality itself.

This paper discusses the problem through the works of Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Sartre, Foucault and Krishnamurti. These thinkers do not give us one theory. Rather, they reveal different dimensions of the problem. Aristotle looks to character; Kant to moral intention; Nietzsche to the hidden origins of values; Sartre to bad faith and responsibility; Foucault to surveillance and the production of disciplined subjects; Krishnamurti to conditioning, psychological conflict, identification, and awareness. The important question is whether social expectations and unconscious psychological motives make ethical authenticity impossible.

Aristotle: Is moral conduct identical with moral character?

The first philosophical question is: If a person does a morally good deed, does it follow that the person is morally good? At first sight, the answer may seem obvious. When a person helps another person, tells the truth, or acts generously, we call the act moral. But things get more complicated when we ask about the person's character and motive. The picture of two people can give charity. Their outward behaviour is the same. One gives anonymously, because he or she really wants to help; the other gives publicly, because he or she wants recognition. Both of them have done the same thing. But the question is: is it morally equal?

The problem takes us directly to Aristotle. Aristotle, in his virtue ethics, does not define any morality specifically in terms of individual actions. Instead, it asks what sort of person you become by your actions. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that virtues are acquired by habituation. One becomes courageous by performing courageous things, over and over again, just as one becomes just by practising justice. This is crucial to the problem of public and private morality because it suggests that genuine morality cannot be reduced to occasional performances. An individual who is dishonest can tell the truth at one time or in some cases. A generous donor can be a selfish person. An arrogant person can be civil in public. Such acts are not evidence themselves that the corresponding virtue has become part of the person's character. Thus, it can be said that Aristotle helps people to make a distinction between doing a virtuous action and being a virtuous person.

In simple words, we can say moral performance has to do with our doings. Moral character is about the person one becomes. This makes private behaviour philosophically interesting; If a person's behaviour is completely different when there is no social pressure, this may indicate that the public behaviour was not a stable expression of character. But Aristotle's position poses another important question: If character is the product of social habits and education, how do we know that what we call "virtue" is not simply socially approved behaviour?

A child learns the meaning of good behaviour from parents, teachers, religious traditions and society. These children form habits a long before the individual is able to examine them critically. Thus, stable moral character may even consist of elements of social conditioning. Aristotle's theory provides us with an important account of moral development, but it does not fully address the problem of whether the values through which character is formed are themselves authentic.

Kant: Is doing the right thing enough?

Kant takes the focus from character to moral intention. For Kant, morality is closely linked with the good will and the principle on which an action is done. The man who does his duty only because it is for his advantage is not the same as the man who does it out of a sense of duty. Consider the businessman or businesswoman who doesn't cheat his or her customers for fear of losing them. He or she is honest in his conduct, but selfish in his or her motive. Now think about another businessman or businesswoman who will not cheat because he or she knows cheating is wrong. The outward behaviour is identical. So, we can say Kant's distinction shows a very serious issues in public morality. Social conformity is not necessarily a moral one. A person may do right from the wish to be praised, or from the fear of punishment, or from the wish to guard his or her reputation.

The moral question then is not simply: "What have you done?" but, "why did you do it?" There is another difficulty. Can an individual ever be certain of his or her own motives? Most of the time we see, human beings offer morally acceptable explanations for their behaviours. One may say he or she helped because he or she cared, but he or she may have also unconsciously enjoyed the adulation that followed. One may defend another in public because he or she believes in justice, but privately he or she relishes the opportunity to attack an enemy. Thus, it can be said as motive are mixed by their nature. Thus, Kant provides us with a very normative distinction between 'acting from duty' and 'acting only in accordance with duty'. But the psychological question of whether people can ever know their own motives completely remains hard.

Nietzsche: The Lies Behind Morality

Nietzsche's concern is more than whether people follow moral rules or not. He wonders where these rules come from and what psychological forces might be at their root. Nietzsche does not take morality as transparent, but invites us to interrogate its genealogy. Why do we human beings classify actions or things as "good" and others as "bad"? Why does desire make us feel guilty? Why do some people get a feeling of superiority because they are thought to be morally good?

This approach gives rise to the uncomfortable possibility that morality is a way of satisfying non-moral desires. A person may condemn another person, not merely because the behaviour is wrong, but because condemnation gives him or her a feeling of superiority. One may seem humble but want credit for his or her humility in private. Someone might extol selflessness because it gives him or her a moral high ground over those, he or she deems selfish.

So, the problem is more than just plain old hypocrisy. One should not only avoid telling a lie to others. He could be building a moral explanation of himself that conceals his actual psychological motives. Nietzsche's contribution is particularly important here in that he forces moral philosophy to become suspicious of its own language. The word "good" does not automatically guarantee the goodness of the desire behind it.

But Nietzsche also causes a problem. If all moral motives are to be regarded as suspect, how do we tell authentic moral action from self-interested disguise? If all acts of love can be read as concealed weakness or desire to dominate, does moral judgment become impossible? Nietzsche's genealogy is a powerful critique, but critique alone cannot yield a complete ethical foundation. Now the issue is relationship: the relationship between self-image and self-deception.

Sartre: When the Moral Identity Becomes a Mask

The existential philosophy of Sartre begins with the freedom and responsibility of humans. Human beings are not simply static objects. They cannot get away with what they do at all, because they are always making choices. But the issue is that human beings always try to avoid this responsibility. Sartre calls this "bad faith". Bad faith is when one tries to escape from his or her freedom by treating himself or herself as if he or she were something fixed and predetermined. He or she does not take responsibility for his or her choices, but identifies with a role, identity, or circumstance. It can happen with morality, too. Let us say: "I am a good person." The statement sounds good. However, it can be problematic when the identity takes precedence over the actual conduct.

If a person thinks that he or she is basically good, he or she may have difficulty accepting evidence that is inconsistent with that identity. He or she may justify himself or herself when he or she acts selfishly. If someone criticises him or her, he or she can get defensive. He or she doesn't defend the behaviour or what they are doing; he or she defends the very image of being good. The moral identity becomes a mask, therefore. This gives rise to the following important question: Can the desire to be good prevent one from seeing one's own misdeeds in the truth? The answer seems to be yes. Sometimes the best way to avoid self-knowledge is not the desire to be bad but the desire to think one is good.

This creates an interesting paradox: The moral self-image can be an obstacle to morality. The person is so dedicated to being "good" that he or she cannot look at himself or herself honestly. Sartre thus amplifies the problem of ethical authenticity. Being authentic is more than just having a good self-image. It implies confronting one's freedom and responsibility, not hiding behind a fixed identity. But Sartre's main concern is with the individual's relation to freedom.

Michel Foucault: When Society Enters the Individual

Foucault lets us ask another question: But whence the moral identity itself? Michel Foucault's analysis of discipline and surveillance offers a peculiar way of understanding public and private conduct. One of the most basic understandings of surveillance is that when people are being watched physically, they act differently. But Foucault shows us that modern power can work more subtly. Individuals can start to watching own self, because they have already learned that they are being watched. That is why Surveillance is important. The effect is that the individual begins to act as if he is always possibly being watched.

This idea is directly relevant to morality. People do not steal because he or she knows there are cameras or they are under surveillance. He or she might act politely because he or she thinks others will judge him or her. He or she might avoid socially unacceptable behaviour because he or she fears that it will damage his reputation.

External surveillance can turn into internal self-discipline. Because there is a possibility that the person becomes the observer of himself or herself. This raises a difficult philosophical question: If someone acts morally because they have internalised social surveillance, is that morality or is it simply successful discipline? The answer is not simple. Social discipline is good, obviously. In most of the cases, laws, social institutions and other social expectations prevent harmful behaviour and make social and collective life possible. Thus, we cannot conclude that social regulations are morally bad. But we have to understand that ethical freedom and social conformity are not the same. It is very obvious that a person may not steal because he or she is aware that he or she will be punished. Another might abstain because he or she realises that theft harms another person. Their behaviours are the same, but both of them are related to their behaviour in different ways.

Foucault thus allows us to understand that morality is never completely independent of social power. His later work is important, however, because it turns to how individuals actively form themselves as ethical subjects. The person is not merely the passive effect of power. And there are ways of relating to oneself and of changing oneself. This allows for a deeper type of ethics. But it also takes us to the most difficult question: Can the self examine itself if it has already been conditioned by society?

Krishnamurti: The Moral Problem as a Problem of Consciousness

Krishnamurti does not approach the issue of ethical authenticity in terms of moral rules, but in terms of the state of the human mind. For him, there is so much conditioning in the human being from family, society, religion, education, culture, fear, desire, memory, and social expectation. Thus, what appears to be a moral choice may be the result of conditioning, not of real freedom. This is especially noticeable in the contrast between public and private behaviour. In public, a person can behave in a sincere or sympathetic manner, but in private that person can have jealousy, anger, egocentricity, or a craving for acknowledgement. Krishnamurti moves the ethical question from "How should I behave?" to "What is really going on inside me?" . "I should be kind.", "I should not be jealous.", or "I must be a good person." This creates a dichotomy between *what is* and *what should be*. Instead of understanding jealousy or anger, a

person may just suppress it to maintain a moral image. Here, instead of transformation, morality can become a semblance.

For Krishnamurti, the first step toward authenticity is observation. A person has to watch fear, jealousy, desire, anger, the need to be approved and other psychological movements without at once condemning or justifying them. This ties in with his idea of choiceless awareness, which is to observe what is happening without choosing to accept what fits in with one's self-image and rejecting what does not. Such awareness may expose the difference between the true psychological condition and the image one portrays to others. But this poses an important critical question: Is awareness enough to make a person ethical? People may know they are being selfish or angry, but still be selfish. So, Krishnamurti does not give a full ethical system or assure that awareness will always lead to moral action. He also questions the popular notion that authenticity is simply "being true to oneself," since the self itself may be conditioned. To act on private desires is not necessarily to be authentic or free. Actual authenticity comes from knowing the reason that creates those desires. So, it is not right to reduce the distinction between public morality and private conduct must not be reduced to hypocrisy. And this may reveal a deep conflict between two realities, i.e. self-image and psychological reality. And ethical authenticity begins with a willingness to confront this contradiction with honesty, rather than hiding behind a *façade of morality*. For Krishnamurti, without knowledge of one's own conditioning, desires, fears and identifications that form behaviour, moral appearance may be dissociated from true inner change.

Public Morality, Private Desire, and the Construction of the Self:

When we factor in the role of self-image, the distinction between public and private conduct becomes even more complicated. Human beings do not just do stuff; they form ideas about themselves. Someone may say, "I am honest.", "I am kind.", "I am religious.", "I am respectable.", or "I am a good person." These identities can provide psychological security. They can give people a fixed image of himself or herself. But that self-image can be a barrier to self-knowledge. If I develop an attachment to this belief that I am a good person, I may become unwilling to see behaviour that contradicts that belief. If I act selfishly, I may rationalise the action away. If someone criticises me, I may respond immediately. I might become more interested in protecting my identity than in understanding my behaviour.

And this may result in mild hypocrisy. We can take the example of a person who may not be consciously trying to fool others, instead, he or she becomes psychologically invested in maintaining an image. The mask is part of his or her identity. Maybe someday he or she will forget it's a mask. Which brings us to an important philosophical question: why do human beings have to look moral? One answer is that moral recognition gives social acceptance and psychological security. To be seen as honest, compassionate or respectable puts someone in a positive light compared to others. Thus, moral identity can assume a form of social power. A person may not only wish to be kind; he or she may wish to be thought kind by others.

Is Hypocrisy Always Immoral?

The discussion must also separate hypocrisy from mere inconsistency. Each and every human being behaves differently in every situation. Someone might be quiet in public but expressive

with friends. At work, someone might hold back their anger, but let off steam in private. Such differences are not automatically hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is something more specific. It occurs when a person portrays himself or herself as following a certain moral standard while knowingly or materially acting contrary to that standard, especially if the public moral image provides some benefit. The person who rails against dishonesty in public but lies for personal gain in private is more obviously hypocritical than someone whose behaviour changes with the situation.

But the psychological situation may be complicated even in this domain. One can be a sincere believer in the value of honesty and also act at times dishonestly. Does that automatically make that person a hypocrite? Human beings can fail to act in line with values which they really believe in. Weakness, fear, temptation, or confusion may lead to inconsistency, with no intent to deceive. This difference is important; otherwise, the idea of hypocrisy becomes too broad. And ethical authenticity also does not demand the perfect consistency in all situations. Instead, it calls for a substantial connection between one's values, consciousness, motives and behaviour. The morally serious person may see that he or she has not lived up to his or her values and admit the failure. Indeed, such acknowledgement might be more morally authentic than a pretence of moral perfection. So, it's not like anti-hypocrisy is perfection.

From Social Control to Self-Knowledge:

The above discussion indicates a gradual change in the understanding of morality. There is a possibility for a person or other people to act morally because society demands it. They follow rules out of fear of punishment, rejection, criticism or a bad name. Morality at this stage is largely external. Because people start asking, "What will people think of me?" At a deeper level, morality is internalised. We begin to believe that there are some things or some activities that are right and things that are wrong. His or her moral rules have become integrated into his or her own thinking, and so he or she no longer needs constant external punishment. This is a huge step forward, because now the person can do right when no one is looking. And there is another philosophical question: where do these inner moral values come from? These may have been inherited from the family, religion, culture, education or social institutions. Thus, the individual can experience socially produced values as if they were entirely personal and freely chosen. So, the next level of inquiry is self-reflexive, and the person asks, "Why do I believe this is the right thing?", "Why do I need others to like me?", "Why do I feel guilty?", "Why am I afraid of criticism?", "Why do I want to be a good man in the eyes of others?" Morality, then, is bound up with self-knowledge.

Krishnamurti takes this inquiry one step further by asking whether it is possible to observe conditioning itself. The person not only substitutes one moral belief for another but also looks at the ground on which beliefs, desires, fears, and identities work. It does not mean that all social values must be rejected. It means that the individual cannot assume that something is true simply because it has been inherited or socially approved.

From Hypocrisy to Ethical Authenticity:

The actual problem of this paper is refreshed now. Instead of asking why people are hypocritical, we can ask: why do human beings want to sustain a moral image? The answer, it

seems, is several interrelated factors. People want social approval, fear rejection, want psychological security, want to maintain a positive self-image, compare themselves with others and want recognition. Some forms of moral appearance are rewarded, and some discouraged, in social settings.

Therefore, people may be more concerned with appearing moral than with whether their behaviour actually matches their stated values. The person wants to be seen by others as honest, caring, religious, responsible, or respectable. The moral identity becomes something to be protected. This forms the moral mask. The mask is not always a deliberate deception. It may be so deeply embedded in the person's self-understanding that he or she no longer recognises it as a mask. One may start to think the image is the actuality, the reality. So, the person who thinks "I am a good person" might be less inclined to explore his or her behaviour than someone who admits "I do not always act according to my values".

Ethical authenticity is where this gap becomes visible. Nor is it to create a new perfect self, but to acknowledge the contradiction between appearance and reality. He or she may find out that he or she wants praise, that he or she is influenced by fear, or their judgment is influenced by social conditioning. Realising these things doesn't make him or her moral, but it does eliminate one major impediment to moral understanding, i.e. self-deception.

The thinkers whom I examined in this paper shed light on different dimensions of the problem of ethical authenticity. Aristotle's virtue ethics shows that morality cannot be reduced to discrete actions, for moral life is a matter of the formation of character. A person who performs a generous deed isn't always a truly generous individual. Kant develops this analysis further by distinguishing between acting for duty and acting from duty. For example, Kant knows that outward conformity is not enough, since moral worth depends on the principle of the will. Nietzsche adds suspicion to the conversation. He wants us to look at the historical and psychological roots of moral values, instead of taking them for granted as self-evident truths. His approach opens the possibility that moral condemnation may sometimes involve desires for superiority, control, resentment or recognition. Sartre then examines the relation of morality and freedom in bad faith. The individual may avoid responsibility by identifying with a fixed role, including the role of the 'good person'. Foucault adds the element of social power, demonstrating how surveillance and discipline can become internalised, so that people themselves regulate their own behaviour even when they are not directly observed. Krishnamurti weaves these various questions into the very fabric of consciousness. He is not interested in whether the person is virtuous, dutiful, moral, responsible, or responsive to surveillance. He asks: Can you really see the conditioning, the fear, the desire, the comparison, the identification that shape his or her moral behaviour?

Conclusion:

It exposes a serious problem of ethical life between public morality and private conduct. There is a huge difference between how people may act differently when they are observed and when they are alone. One might call this difference hypocrisy, but that is only a partial interpretation. Therefore, the central philosophical problem is left open-ended: Can there be ethics without self-knowledge? The views discussed here suggest that morality without self-knowledge easily

degenerates into conformity, performance or self-deception. But self-knowledge without ethical responsibility can degenerate into mere self-observation. Thus, we have to bring both awareness and responsibility together. Ethical authenticity, then, may not be a state in which the individual finally becomes a 'good person', but a continuing freedom from the need to hide what one is behind the image of what one thinks one ought to be.

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