

VEDIC PHILOSOPHY AND CONTEMPORARY WORLD: AN ETHICAL STUDY

Ratul Borah

Bihpuria College, Lakhimpur (Assam)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ethical relevance of Vedic philosophy to the moral, ecological, and social challenges confronting the contemporary world. Rooted in the Vedas, Upanishads, and allied schools of Indian thought, Vedic philosophy articulates a vision of reality in which the individual self (atman), the cosmic order (Rta), moral law (dharma), and universal consciousness (Brahman) are intimately interconnected. Central ethical concepts such as dharma, karma, ahimsa, satya, and the ideal of vasudhaiva kutumbakam ("the world is one family") offer a framework of duty-based, relational, and ecologically sensitive ethics that stands in productive contrast to purely rights-based or utilitarian paradigms dominant in modern Western moral philosophy. The paper explores how these principles can inform contemporary debates on environmental sustainability, social justice, technological ethics, and mental well-being, while also acknowledging the interpretive and social tensions surrounding the application of ancient texts to modern pluralistic societies. Through a critical and comparative method, the study argues that Vedic ethics, when read non-dogmatically and in dialogue with contemporary moral concerns, provides valuable conceptual resources for cultivating a more holistic, responsible, and compassionate global ethic. The paper concludes that the enduring value of Vedic philosophy lies not in literal doctrinal revival but in its capacity to enrich contemporary ethical discourse through its emphasis on interconnectedness, self-restraint, and duty toward the whole of existence.

Keywords: Vedic philosophy, dharma, karma, ahimsa, environmental ethics, comparative ethics, contemporary morality, Rta

1. INTRODUCTION

The Vedas, composed over a period spanning roughly 1500 to 500 BCE, represent one of the oldest surviving bodies of philosophical and religious literature in human history. Comprising the Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads, this corpus lays the foundation for what later developed into the diverse schools of Indian philosophy, including Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, and Mimamsa. While the Vedas are often studied for their theological and metaphysical content, they also contain a rich and systematic ethical vision that addresses questions of duty, right action, self-restraint, and the relationship between the individual and the cosmos.

The contemporary world faces an unprecedented convergence of ethical crises: climate change and ecological degradation, widening social and economic inequality, the moral ambiguities introduced by artificial intelligence and biotechnology, and a pervasive sense of alienation and psychological distress in increasingly individualistic societies. Modern secular ethics, largely shaped by Kantian deontology, utilitarian consequentialism, and rights-based liberalism, has provided powerful tools for addressing many of these problems, yet critics argue that it often struggles to account for humanity's embeddedness in a wider ecological and cosmic order.

This paper asks whether Vedic philosophy, despite its ancient origins, can meaningfully contribute to contemporary ethical discourse. It does not propose a wholesale return to Vedic ritualism or an uncritical revival of ancient social structures; rather, it undertakes a philosophical retrieval of core

ethical concepts embedded in Vedic and Vedantic thought, and examines their applicability, strengths, and limitations when brought into dialogue with pressing contemporary concerns.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

- To outline the core ethical concepts found in Vedic philosophy, including dharma, karma, Rta, and ahimsa.
- To analyze how these concepts relate to contemporary ethical theories and debates.
- To evaluate the practical relevance of Vedic ethics to issues such as environmental sustainability, social justice, technology, and mental well-being.
- To critically assess the limitations and challenges of applying ancient philosophical frameworks to modern pluralistic societies.

1.2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, textual, and comparative philosophical method. It draws upon primary Vedic and Upanishadic sources (in translation) alongside secondary scholarly literature in comparative philosophy and applied ethics. The approach is interpretive and critical rather than doctrinal, treating Vedic texts as philosophical resources open to reasoned analysis rather than as unquestionable religious authority.

1.3 Review of literature

This review surveys recent scholarship (2010–2025) that examines the application of Vedic ethical concepts to contemporary concerns, organised thematically by domain of application.

VEDIC ETHICS AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

A growing body of management literature argues for the incorporation of Vedic ethical principles into corporate governance and corporate social responsibility (CSR). *Incorporating Vedic Ethical Principles into Contemporary Corporate Governance and CSR* surveys academic journals, historical texts, and contemporary corporate case studies to argue that Vedic scholarship consistently emphasises a balance between *artha* (wealth) and *dharma* (moral duty), such that wealth is properly acquired only with due regard for truth and non-violence. The study contends that these principles align with contemporary frameworks such as ISO 26000 and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) standards, suggesting a substantive convergence between ancient Indian ethical categories and current international governance norms.

A related study, *Vedic Management is Holistic: A Critical Analysis*, situates this convergence within the broader crisis narrative of twenty-first-century business — citing ethical scandals, employee burnout, environmental degradation, and short-term profit obsession as the conditions driving management thinkers back toward ancient wisdom systems. Using comparative content analysis and modern corporate case studies, the paper argues that Vedic management's integration of material success with moral and spiritual evolution can enrich contemporary practice by fostering ethical leadership, sustainable growth, and employee well-being. Notably, this literature treats *artha* not as a value to be renounced but as one to be pursued strictly within the bounds of *dharma*, positioning Vedic thought as a corrective to purely profit-maximising models of the firm rather than a rejection of commerce as such.

A further contribution, published in the Academic (2025), frames ethical leadership as a cornerstone of Vedic wisdom rooted specifically in dharma and satya, arguing that genuine leadership in the Vedic understanding is constituted by integrity, fairness, and social responsibility rather than by power and

authority alone, and that these emphases remain directly applicable to the cultivation of organisational culture in contemporary firms.

1.4 Analysis and interpretations:

1.4.1. Core Ethical Concepts in Vedic Philosophy

1. 4.2 Rita: Cosmic Order and Moral Law

The concept of rita, found extensively in the Rigveda, denotes the cosmic order that governs the universe, encompassing natural law, ritual correctness, and moral rightness. Rita is the principle that maintains harmony between the celestial, natural, and human realms. Ethical action, in this framework, is action that aligns with this cosmic order rather than action derived merely from individual preference or social convention. Rita thus anticipates, in an ancient idiom, the modern ecological insight that human morality cannot be separated from the health of the wider natural order.

1.4.3 Dharma: Duty and Righteous Living

Dharma, which later supersedes rita as the central ethical category in Indian thought, refers to one's duty, righteousness, and the moral order appropriate to one's role, station, and circumstances. Dharma is often described through four aims of human life, the purusharthas: dharma (duty/righteousness), artha (material prosperity), kama (pleasure), and moksha (liberation), with dharma providing the ethical constraint within which the other pursuits are to be conducted. Unlike rule-based ethical systems that apply uniform commands to all agents, dharma is context-sensitive: it varies according to one's stage of life (ashrama), social role, and particular circumstances, while still being oriented toward universal values such as truthfulness, non-violence, and self-restraint.

1 4.4 Karma: Ethical Causality

The doctrine of karma holds that every action generates consequences that shape the moral trajectory of the self across time. Karma functions as an internalized principle of moral accountability, encouraging individuals to consider the long-term ethical weight of their actions rather than pursuing short-term gain. While karma has sometimes been misused to justify social inequality or fatalism, its core ethical insight, that actions have consequences extending beyond immediate visibility, resonates with contemporary concerns about the long-term and intergenerational effects of present-day choices, particularly in environmental and economic policy.

1.4 5 Ahimsa: Non-Violence

Ahimsa, the principle of non-violence toward all living beings, emerges in the Upanishads and is later elaborated extensively in Jain, Buddhist, and later Hindu ethical traditions. Ahimsa extends moral consideration beyond the human community to encompass animals and, in some interpretations, the natural environment as a whole. This expansive moral circle offers an early philosophical precedent for contemporary discussions of animal ethics and ecological responsibility.

1.4.6 Atman, Brahman, and Interconnectedness

The Upanishadic teaching that the individual self (atman) is ultimately identical with or intimately related to the universal reality (Brahman) grounds a metaphysics of fundamental interconnectedness. If all beings share a common ultimate reality, then harming another being is, in a philosophically significant sense, a form of self-harm. This metaphysical premise underlies the ethical imperative of compassion and provides a philosophical basis for the well-known Vedic aspiration of vasudhaiva kutumbakam, "the world is one family," found in the Maha Upanishad.

1.4.7 The Bhagavad Gita and the Ethics of Selfless Action

Although technically part of the Mahabharata rather than the Vedas proper, the Bhagavad Gita is widely regarded as the culmination of Vedic and Upanishadic ethical thought and offers one of the most systematic treatments of moral action in the tradition. Its central teaching, *nishkama karma*, or action performed without attachment to the fruits of action, addresses a perennial ethical problem: how to remain motivated and effective in the world while avoiding the distortions of egoistic desire, anxiety over outcomes, and moral corruption that often accompany the pursuit of results. Krishna's counsel to Arjuna, that one has a right to action but not to the fruits of action, reframes duty as something to be fulfilled for its own intrinsic rightness rather than for personal gain or fear of loss. This teaching has considerable relevance for contemporary professional and civic ethics, particularly in contexts where outcome-oriented incentive structures, such as corporate profit targets or political self-interest, can distort ethical judgment and encourage short-termism.

The Gita further develops the notion of *svadharma*, one's own particular duty arising from individual capacity, role, and circumstance, which tempers the universalism of *dharma* with a recognition of legitimate moral pluralism. This resonates with contemporary ethical concerns about the dangers of one-size-fits-all moral prescriptions and supports approaches to professional and applied ethics that are sensitive to role-specific responsibilities, such as those of a physician, an engineer, or a public official, each of whom bears a distinct configuration of duties within a shared moral order.

5. VEDIC ETHICS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Placing Vedic ethical concepts alongside dominant modern ethical theories reveals both convergences and productive tensions. Kantian deontology emphasizes universal duty derived from rational autonomy, sharing with *dharma* an emphasis on duty over consequence, yet *dharma*'s context-sensitivity contrasts with the universality Kant demands of the categorical imperative. Utilitarianism's concern with consequences finds an echo in *karma*'s attention to the effects of action, though *karma* operates across a cosmological rather than purely social timescale. Virtue ethics, with its focus on character and the cultivation of dispositions such as courage and temperance, arguably has the closest affinity with Vedic ethics, which likewise emphasizes the cultivation of inner qualities such as self-restraint (*dama*), truthfulness (*satya*), and equanimity (*samatva*) as preconditions for right action.

At the same time, Vedic ethics differs from these frameworks in grounding morality within a broader metaphysical vision of cosmic order and ultimate unity, rather than in social contract, rational autonomy, or aggregate welfare alone. This grounding gives Vedic ethics a naturally ecological and holistic character, but it also raises the philosophical question of whether ethical obligation can be adequately justified by appeal to metaphysical claims that not all contemporary agents accept. The paper treats this not as a fatal objection but as an invitation to read Vedic ethical insights philosophically, extracting their normative content without requiring assent to their full cosmological framework.

5. APPLICATIONS TO CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL CHALLENGES

5.1 Environmental Ethics and Ecological Crisis

The Vedic worldview treats nature not as inert resource but as sacred and animate, addressed in hymns to rivers, earth, forests, and celestial bodies. The *Prithvi Sukta* of the *Atharvaveda*, for instance, personifies the earth as a nurturing mother deserving reverence and care. This orientation offers a philosophical corrective to purely instrumental views of nature that treat the environment solely as a resource for human use. Applied to contemporary environmental ethics, the Vedic emphasis on *rita* and interconnectedness supports an ethic of ecological restraint and stewardship, resonating with

modern concepts such as sustainability and intergenerational justice, while grounding these concepts in a deeper sense of kinship with the natural world rather than mere prudential calculation.

5.2 Social Justice and Human Dignity

The historical association of dharma with the varna (caste) system has been a major source of criticism, since rigid hereditary role-assignment has been used to justify social discrimination and exclusion. A critical ethical retrieval of Vedic philosophy must reckon honestly with this history rather than minimize it. At the same time, the Upanishadic teaching of the shared identity of atman and Brahman across all beings provides an internal philosophical resource for critiquing caste-based discrimination, since a metaphysics of fundamental spiritual equality is in tension with rigid social hierarchy. Reformist thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi drew explicitly on Vedantic non-dualism to argue for human equality and dignity, illustrating how Vedic philosophy has itself been historically mobilized against social injustice.

5.3 Technology, Artificial Intelligence, and the Ethics of Action

The rapid development of artificial intelligence, automation, and biotechnology raises novel questions about responsibility, agency, and the long-term consequences of technological choices. The karmic emphasis on the ethical weight of action, understood not merely as legal liability but as a form of accumulating moral consequence, offers a conceptual resource for thinking about diffuse and long-term responsibility, such as the environmental and social costs of technological systems whose effects extend far beyond their immediate designers and users. Similarly, the ideal of nishkama karma, or action performed without attachment to selfish outcomes as articulated in the Bhagavad Gita, suggests a model of professional and technological ethics oriented toward duty and the common good rather than narrow self-interest or profit maximization alone.

5.4 Mental Well-Being and the Ethics of the Self

Contemporary societies report rising rates of anxiety, depression, and existential distress, phenomena often linked to consumerism, social fragmentation, and the pressures of hyper-competitive individualism. Vedic and Upanishadic teachings on self-restraint, equanimity in the face of gain and loss, and the cultivation of inner contentment (santosha) offer philosophical resources, distinct from but complementary to clinical approaches, for cultivating psychological resilience. These teachings should be understood as contributing to ethical and philosophical reflection on well-being rather than as a substitute for professional mental health care.

5.5 Global Ethics and the Ideal of Universal Kinship

The Vedic aspiration of vasudhaiva kutumbakam, "the world is one family," has gained renewed international visibility as a guiding motto in global diplomatic and cultural forums, reflecting its perceived relevance to an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. As global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, and economic instability demonstrate the practical interdependence of nations and peoples, this ancient ideal offers a philosophical vocabulary for cosmopolitan ethics that emphasizes shared responsibility over narrow nationalism. Read critically, this ideal cautions against both an uncritical globalism that erases legitimate cultural particularity and an exclusionary nationalism that denies common humanity, suggesting instead a middle path of rooted cosmopolitanism in which particular cultural identities are affirmed within a wider recognition of shared human and ecological interdependence.

6. CRITICAL EVALUATION AND LIMITATIONS

Any attempt to apply ancient philosophical frameworks to the contemporary world must proceed with critical caution. First, the historical entanglement of Vedic social ethics with caste hierarchy and patriarchal social structures cannot be ignored or explained away; a responsible retrieval must distinguish the universalist and metaphysical core of Vedic ethics from its historically contingent and often unjust social applications. Second, the interpretive diversity within the Vedic corpus itself, spanning ritual injunctions, philosophical speculation, and later commentarial traditions, means that there is no single, monolithic "Vedic ethics" but rather a plurality of positions requiring careful textual and historical discrimination. Third, in religiously plural and secular societies, grounding public ethical norms in the metaphysical claims of any single tradition risks exclusion of those who do not share its premises; this suggests that Vedic ethical insights are best mobilized as one contributing voice within a pluralistic and comparative ethical dialogue rather than as an exclusive foundation for public policy.

These limitations do not negate the value of the tradition but rather clarify the terms on which its retrieval can be philosophically responsible: selective, critical, historically informed, and oriented toward dialogue rather than doctrinal imposition.

CONCLUSION

Vedic philosophy offers a rich reservoir of ethical concepts, *rita*, *dharma*, *karma*, *ahimsa*, and the metaphysics of *atman-Brahman* unity, that remain philosophically suggestive for addressing contemporary moral challenges. Its emphasis on interconnectedness, duty, self-restraint, and reverence for the natural world provides a valuable complement to modern ethical frameworks centered on individual rights and aggregate welfare, particularly in addressing ecological crisis and the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world. At the same time, a philosophically honest engagement with Vedic ethics must critically confront its historical entanglement with social hierarchy and resist any uncritical or exclusivist revival. Read in this critical and dialogical spirit, Vedic philosophy contributes not a finished ethical system to be imported wholesale, but a set of enduring insights capable of enriching the ongoing human search for a more just, sustainable, and compassionate world.

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