

# “Aristotelian Ethics Vs. Ethics in Yoga”

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**Abstract**—The first and the foremost instinct that comes to one's mind when one uses the term “Yoga” is something related to exercise, meditation, physical fitness etc. But the word “Yoga” is etymologically derived from the Sanskrit word “Yuj” which means “a union”. This is to say a union of the individual self with the transcendental self. It leads to the complete transformation or unification of individuality with divinity.

The objective of this Research paper is to answer a relevant question, that is: Is there any connection that can be seen between Aristotle's notion of “Eudemonia” and “Kaivalya” as the goal of Yoga? I.E. Is there any parallelism between the main tenets of Aristotelian ethics and yoga Ethics?

The discussion is organized as follows: At the outset, I will enumerate the historical background of Yoga. Secondly, I will highlight the concept of Ethics in Yoga, comprising: emphasis on the ethical path, the Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, the ethical means adopted by a yogi to attain sat-chit-ānanda. Then in next two sections, primarily I will discuss the Aristotle's concept of an ethical being, the Eudemon, which is followed up by showing the parallelism between the two systems, which is the crux of this paper.

**Key Words:** Yoga and Ethics, Aristotelian Ethics, Parallelism.

## 1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Yoga is a 5000-year-old Indian body of knowledge. The concept of “yoga” being partially inclusive of physical exercises where people twist, stretch, do *āsanas*, meditate, and breathe in the most complex ways, also majorly includes the science of ‘Way of Life’. The principle behindhand this practice is greatly to do with the energetic and psychological benefits, knowledgeable when integrating yoga into one's regular schedule.

Although unanimity cannot be seen when the origin of yoga is considered, anticipation claims it to be around 1500 BC as the earliest mention of this tradition can be

found in the oldest surviving literature, which is Rig Veda, in Nasadiya Sukta.

Yoga can be defined with the help of definitions emanating from three oldest texts of the tradition of Yoga :- the Bhagavad Gītā, *Katha Upaniṣad* and the *Yogasūtras*.

*tamvidyād-dukha-samyoga-yiyogam yoga-samjñitam  
tatro-” paramtecittamniruddham yoga - sevayā”  
yatracai-vaātmanātmānampasyann-ātmanitusyati,  
sukham-ātyantikamyat-tad buddhi-grāhyamatīndriyam,  
vettiyatranacaivāyamstithas-calatitattvatah,  
yamlabdhvācāparamlābhammanyatenādhikamtata,  
yasminstithonadukhenaguranā-pi vicālyate.*

[Bhagavad Gītā, 6.22-23]

*Bhagavad Gīta* emphasizes yoga to be the *vijoga* (disconnection) from *samyoga* (union) with pain and pleasure, wherein the mental being undergoes *Yoga Seva* (yogic practices), embraces the cosmic self, experiences supreme bliss by pure intellect. This is the greatest gain.

Yogaś-citta-vrtti-nirodhah.

Tadādrastuhsvarūpeavasthānam.

[Yogasūtras– 1,2,3]

An elaborative version of the *Yogasūtras* can, however, be found in the Patañjali *Yogasūtras* of the Hindu philosophy. As per the *Yogasūtras*, Yoga is the cessation of all fluctuations in the mental being, his consciousness and inner instrument of cognition.

*yadāpancāvatisthantejñānānimanāsāsaha,  
buddhiś-canavitestai, tāmāhuhparamāṅgatim.  
tamyogam-itimanyantesthirām-indriya-dhāranām,*

*apramattas-tadabhavati, yogo-hi prabhavāpyayau.[Katha Upaniṣad, 2-3.10 & 11]*

*Katha Upaniṣad* describes the highest state as the one, in which the five senses of knowledge along with the *mana* cease their normal activities. This firm control or holding back of the senses is, when mind becomes *ekāgra* or fully concentrated, is the state of Yoga.

Thus, we see that all the three highlights the transcendence of the self from the realm of pleasure and pain.

Buddhism too considers Yoga to be a spiritual practice to attain mindfulness, which leads to their theory of momentariness. For without achieving mindfulness, which is an outcome of yoga, one would not be able to comprehend the fact that everything is transitory.

Jainism uses the term *caritra* (conduct) for yoga. They consider bondage to be the result of actions of body, mind and speech. This inflow of karmic particles, which they call *asrava* can be stopped only with the help of right faith, right knowledge and *right conduct*. This right conduct is nothing but the practice of yoga.

## 2. YOGA AND ETHICS

Ethics emphasizes the moral aspect of philosophy. It is also called the philosophic study of morality, because it is morality, which guides the conduct of the people. Ethics guides the moral code of a culture or society, as it ought to be, based on the values of that particular culture.

Ethics in the West (with few exceptions) is identified with reason and the intellect rather than with practice. Knowing something to be true, or wise, or the right thing to do, is different from practicing it and practicing a precept is a lot more challenging than acknowledging its wisdom. Yoga and ethics are complementary to one another. That is to say, the purpose of yoga is essentially ethical and practicing ethics can be understood as yoga.

As ethics has become more secular in the West, the emphasis has increasingly shifted to ethical reasoning and away from ethical practice. It is by understanding yoga through practice, and as practice, that we can best understand the integral nature of ethics within yoga and find a deeper meaning of ethics in our lives.

Apart from social competence in accordance with career and society's well being, Yoga has a Emotional well-being can be understood as the amount of positive feelings that are present, the amount in which negative feelings are absent and the amount in which people are satisfied about their lives (Diener, 1984). The first two are affective components, while life satisfaction is a process in which more cognitive information processing takes place. Researches have shown that positive and negative emotions are independent of each other. The broad spectrum of positive emotions consists of liveliness, enthusiasm, alertness and vitality.

Ethics is the means to yoga. An ethically abiding being, too, is called as a yogi. Practicing yoga is to practice *sadachar*, to follow the eight limbed path of *Aṣṭāṅga yoga – yama* (abstention), *niyama* (self culture and purification), *āsana* (comfortable posture), *prāṇāyāma* (includes control of birth), *pratyāhāra* (control over the senses), *dhāraṇa* (establishing focus), *dhyāna* (meditation), *Samādhi* (the final step of yoga,, means concentration) .

This can be done by following *Sadācāra* i.e. the right conduct in life. *Sadācāra* is the foundation of Yoga, which helps in developing a positive personality. Yoga is rooted in virtue. Ethical discipline is very necessary for success in Yoga. One should be well established in *Sadācāra* to begin with. *Sadācāra* is the practice of *Yama-Niyama*.

The emphasis is more on *yama* and *niyama* because the practice of right conduct or discipline is necessary to reach *kaivalya*. *Yama* and *Niyama* are the two moral backbones of Yoga, which an aspirant must practice in his daily life. Where “*yama*” means, “to take a vow”, “*niyama*,” means “a rule of conduct”. Both the *yama* and the *niyama* are interdependent on each other. These correspond to the Ten Commandments of Jesus or to the Noble Eight Fold Path of Lord Buddha. A regular practice of *Yama-Niyama* eradicates all impurities of the mind and body.

*Yama* is the very foundation of Yoga, without which the superstructure of Yoga cannot be built. Sage Patañjali, in the *Yogasūtras*, brings in the notion of “*yama*” as the building block of the spiritual path. *Yamas* are the “vows” or “constraints” that restrict a being from

committing unethical conducts such as "one should never lie", "one should never harm others" etc.

It focuses on the development of "positive traits" and "annihilation of negative qualities". The sage instructs us that these should be practiced at all levels (actions, words, and thoughts) and without any biasness of colour, creed, caste, time etc.

*Yama* includes five restraints that are "*Ahimsā* (abstinence from injury and killing), *Satyam* (truthfulness), *Asteya* (abstinence from theft or falsehood), *Brahmacharya* (continence) and *Aparigraha* (abstinence from greed).

*Niyama* is the second limb of Patañjali's eight-limbed yoga system. *Niyama* can be literally translated as "codes of conduct or to do's". *Niyama* extend the ethical codes of conduct provided in his first limb, the *yamas*. *Niyama* includes:

*Saucha* (purification): is a central aim of many yogic techniques, and is the first principle of Patañjali's five *Niyamas*. *Saucha* is purity, both internal and external. External purity generates internal purity. The practices of *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma* and meditation cleanse and purify the body and mind, as well as strengthening their capacity to maintain a pure state of being.

*Santoṣa*. (contentment) is not craving or desiring for what we do not have and not coveting the possessions of others. Contentment does not mean satisfaction, but willingness to accept things as they are and to make the best of them. Practicing contentment frees us from the unnecessary suffering of always wanting things, and leads to peace and one-pointedness of the mind.

*Tapas*: It means to practice self-penalty. Literally it means to heat the body and, by so doing, to cleanse it. *Tapas* helps us burn up all the desires that stand in our way of this goal. Actions like occasional fasting and observance of silence are a part of *tapas* that increase the power of endurance. But these all are physical *tapas*. There exist mental *tapas* as well which are more powerful than physical *tapas*. Mental *tapas* can be to keep a balanced mind in all conditions of life, to bear insult and injury, to be ever serene, contented and peaceful, to be cheerful in adverse conditions.

*Svādhyāya* It can be etymologically understood as "*Svā*" means "self" and "*ādhyāya*" means "inquiry" or "examination". Hence, it means an inquiry into the nature of one's own self. Any activity that leads to self-reflective consciousness can be considered *Svādhyāya*. It means to intentionally find answers to the question like "who am I?"

*Íśvarapranidhāna* or surrender to god means "to lay all your actions at the feet of God". This is the practice where the devotee no longer has a will of his own. He turns to be an instrument of the god's hands.

### 3. ARISTOTELIAN'S ETHICS

Aristotle is said to be a Eudemonist. He holds that happiness is the summum bonum or the supreme end of life. Eudaimon comes from two greek words namely – 'eu', which means good and 'daimon', which means guiding spirit. [1] So, the meaning of Eudemonia can be deduced as the realization by the self of its true nature by acting in accordance with its intuitive guiding spirit, the Daimon.

The word "Eudemonia" has been enjoying variety of translations over the time. Where on one hand it can be understood as 'in good spirits', on the other hand it is translated as "happiness". The former implies all the good things that make a person be of good spirits. Like prospering in your career, having good friends, eating well etc.

Eudemonia as happiness means achieving a state of being good and generous with others. Aristotle claims that being generous, altruistic and charitable belongs also to Eudaimonia.

In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle says that eudemonia means 'doing and living well and being content'. [2] For Aristotle this implies that Eudemonia involves activity and a striving for excellence. It is human nature to strive for self-development. Therefore the best form of Eudemonia is gained by the proper development of one's best powers and the most humane attitude. This identifies us as 'rational animals'. It follows that Eudemonia for a human being is the attainment of excellence through the use and application of reason.

Furthermore, this excellence and self-development cannot be isolated and so it requires social competence as well as high professional standards. From this it

follows that Eudemonia, living well, consists primarily in activity. This is to say, to be fully engaged in the activity of his/her work and in a social network of friendships in order to achieve success. But to be fully engaged in the activity too requires mental and physical strength.

Unlike plants and animals who flourish when their needs are met in abundance man has to focus on the life that is good this good life comes into picture only when one realizes the full potential that a human life has.

Aristotle’s virtue comprises of -

1. Theoretical reason, which lies in contemplation, something essentially different from the satiation of animal desire because through this we decide what is best for us.
2. Practical reason, which comprises of activity because true Eudaimonis the one whose happiness lies in the life of virtuous activity.

#### 4. PARALLELISM BETWEEN ARISTOTELIAN AND YOGA ETHICS

We see that Eudemonia comes into picture upon the continuous efforts and realization by the self of its true nature. In Patañjali, yoga is the spiritual effort to attain perfection. It is the realization of the super mind. Here *Puruṣa*, from the collaborated system of Sāṃkhya-yoga is the self or the spirit, which is essentially pure consciousness similar to the Daimon or the guiding spirit. The realization of the super mind is also known as the *sat-chit-ānanda*, pure bliss or contentment, similar to the happiness of Aristotle. We would be observing the problems and the solutions according to both the systems, simultaneously.

##### 4.1 Parallelism in the problem

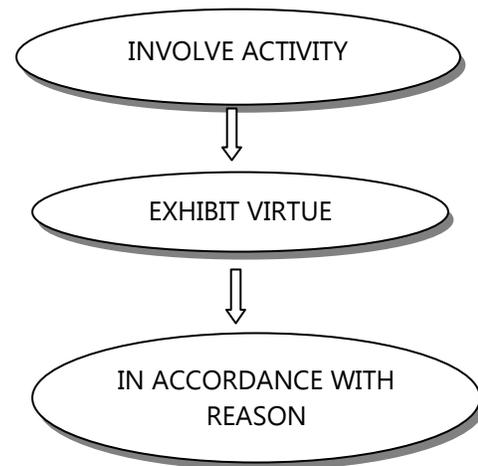
- Aristotle in the book 7 of Nicomacheanethics talks about *akrasia* and *enkrateia* [2] which are incontinence and continence respectively, where incontinence being the problem is our soul concern. An akratic person goes against reason as a result of *pathos* (emotions and feelings) thus experiencing passions and conflicting rational approach.
- The self or the *Puruṣa* in the yoga system wrongly identifies itself with its reflection in *citta* and undergoes modification (*cittavrtti*), as a result, the self becomes subject to birth and death, enjoyer of

all painful and pleasurable experiences, also known as the *klesas*. (*avidya, raga, dvesha, abhinivesha* etc.)

##### 4.2 Parallelism between the solutions

First Solution

- Aristotle’s advocacy of happiness falls in two parts. Firstly in book 1, he identifies happiness with the Summum Bonum, that is the activity of the soul in accordance with the virtue. [2] This can be explained with the help of following diagram;-



In saying that happiness is an activity or *energeia*, one means unlike being intelligent it is not a matter of possessing some power but a matter of exercising it or we can say sharpening our skills. But this virtue is necessary not sufficient. [2]

In yoga too, one needs to possess the discriminative knowledge between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* so that the wrong identification and attachment to worldly objects can be removed by detachment.

Also, *Bhagavad Gīta* lays its emphasis on *Jñānayoga*, which constitutes right knowledge or virtuous knowledge and *Karmayoga*, emphasizing the actions done on the basis of this knowledge.

*Aṣṭāṅga yoga*, consisting of eight steps portrays the practical aspects of the system. We see the discriminative knowledge is fruitless unless acted upon.

Second Solution

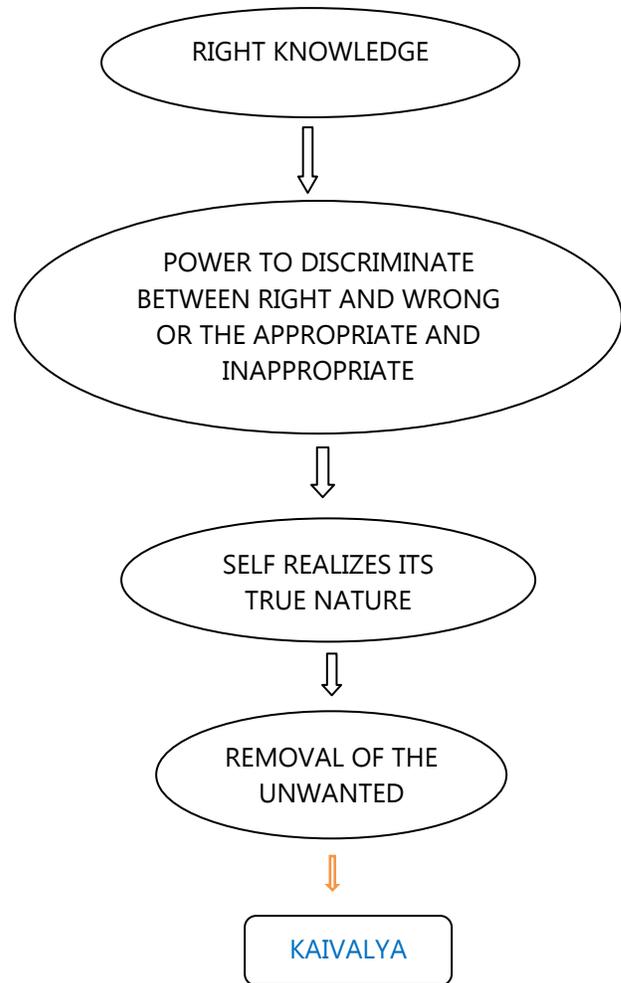
- Secondly in book 10, he talks about *theoria* or contemplation, the activity in which happiness is

truly contained. Aristotle says- intellect is the highest thing in us and the objects that it apprehends are the highest things that can be known.[2]It is the highest form of activity and the most continuous because we are more capable of continuous contemplation than of any practical activity. [2]

- The *theoria* of Aristotle is similar to the final stage of *Aṣṭāṅga yoga. Samādhi*, which means concentration, is an intellectual activity, the highest means to realize the cessation of mental modification, the state in which mind becomes *ekāgra*. It is a continuous process in which mind gets absorbed in the object of meditation. It is an ecstatic state in which connection with the outer world is broken. One has to necessarily pass through this stage for attaining liberation.

#### 4.3 Parallelism in the End Result:-Eudemonia and *Kaivalya*

- The whole purpose of Aristotle's enquiry in *Nicomachean Ethics* was based on the question he seeks to answer – what is the ultimate purpose of human existence? Every one of us seeks happiness but what is the thing that holds the ultimate value? [3] It is nothing but happiness. It is not the goal of one or two but of the whole humanity. All that is desired is desired to make us happy. All other kinds of goods are meant to make us happy or satisfy us in some way or the other. Eudemonia encompasses the totality of one's life. It is attaining this goal that man becomes essentially different from animals. It is the perfection of human nature and enrichment of human life.
- Similarly, Liberation from all kinds of bondage is *Kaivalya*. According to Yoga, bondage is owing to ignorance or non-discrimination between the *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. Liberation is owing to right knowledge, when all kinds of afflictions and their dispositions are burnt by discriminative knowledge and made incapable of producing their effects. This knowledge becomes pure and untainted. Liberation or *Kaivalya* can be diagrammatically represented as follows: -



#### 4.4 Parallelism between the Features

##### 4.4.1 Definitely not Hedonism

- Aristotle's happiness is not the same thing as pleasure because he brusquely rejects the view that happiness contains in constant succession of pleasures. You can't hint happiness with the pleasures that comes from afflictions. To remove what is not required is a more encompassing notion. Thus, he is a eudaemonist and not a hedonist.
- *Puruṣa* or the self upon wrong identification in the *citta* undergoes modifications or *cittavṛttis*, which is an inclusion of both pain and pleasure. But the eternal tranquility is essentially different from hedonism, which is nothing but the after effect of our creation.

- Aurbindo calls this – plunge in the spirit of ignorance. For this very reason *yama* and *niyama* have been adopted because they are nothing but the steps taken on the behalf of the self to remove something unwanted. *Yama* is practiced at all levels- actions, words and thoughts. *Niyama* is the maintenance of a positive environment to grow.

#### 4.4.2 The move from Subjectivity to Objectivity

- Our existence in the world is nothing but the subjective assessment of the qualities of one’s life. It means the meaning of happiness is different for different people. But eudemonia leads to an objectively desirable life, which is one and the same for all. It directs us from the plurality of the pleasures to the singularity of the goal.
- In yoga we know that self is essentially one but under the vicinity of *prakṛti* seeks the plurality of the worldly objects. The pleasures obtained from these will also be different for different people.
- Both the Daimon and the self possess the potentiality, which leads to the fulfillment of their respective selves through the prescribed actions in accordance with knowledge i.e., they both possess fulfilling nature. Because of this very potentiality, humans become essentially different from animals. It is this capacity which is responsible for giving rise to the urge or thirst leading us to thrive for the attainment of the goals. Thus we need to establish congruence between our inherent selves and our day to day activities.

#### 4.4.3 Means and Ends

- Aristotle says that- activities are either necessary and to be chosen for the sake of something else, or to be chosen for themselves. Clearly we must class happiness as one of those to be chosen for themselves [2]. Eudemonia is an end in itself. Because of this very reason it becomes essentially different from hedonism, where it is treated as a means. Aristotle considers happiness to be the end of human conduct. Similarly all the steps taken by the yogi are directed towards *Kaivalya*, which only possesses intrinsic bliss and no instrumental qualities. Thus they look at no other ends beyond themselves.

#### 4.4.5 Not Immediate but Gradual

- Aristotle doesn’t maintain that happiness (in the sense he mentions) is the immediate outcome of every action but is the ultimate goal that will be achieved through the long driven efforts because Aristotle says- one swallow doesn’t make a summer; neither does one day. Similarly, neither can one day or brief space of time make a man blessed and happy.[Book 1, (3)]
- Similarly in Yoga, in order to achieve the ultimate goal, one needs to undergo all the eight steps of *Aṣṭāṅga yoga* – *yama*, *niyama*, *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *pratyāhāra*, *dhāraṇa*, *dhyāna*. All this doesn’t seem like something that can be attained in one day or two. One has a long way to go.

#### 4.4.5 Both tilted towards Divinity

- Both Aristotelian and yoga ethics have a strong tilt towards divinity as Aristotle says – it is the intellect or something else that we regard as naturally ruling or guiding us, possesses insight into the noble and the divine; either as divine itself or ore divine than any other part of us. [Book10, (3)].It is the activity on this very part in accordance with knowledge that perfect happiness will be attained. This something divine is God in yoga. He is the highest embodiment of knowledge and power. Devotion to this divinity is the surest way to obtaining *Samādhi*, leading to *Kaivalya*.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Thus, we see that despite of various differences, they share lots of common features. Like both gave emphasis to practice, both have teleological goal, Eudemonia and *Kaivalya* and both makes a person virtuous or ethical being.

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