A Discussion with
Prof. Arthur L. Caplan (right),
Drs. William F. and Virginia Connolly
Mitty Professor of Bioethics at New York
University’s Langone Medical Center and
Dr. T. D. Singh (left);
Physical Organic Chemist,
Founding-Director of Bhaktivedanta
Institute

T. D. Singh (Henceforth TDS): It seems to me that ethics, in the western perspective, deals with what is right or wrong, what is good or bad in human actions. In India, we generally refer to the spiritual perspective; we accept values in accordance with the religious teachings. The idea is that unless we have a very clear conception about what life is, in particular what human life is, we cannot have a clear understanding of ethics, bioethics, or global ethics. I find this is interesting. Would you like to give your comment or opinion?... To be more precise, my question is also about what we see today around the world, that some molecular biologists are very focused on life as being a product of complex molecular reactions. This is one aspect of what they call the neo-Darwinian theory. The Darwinian concept doesn’t say much about life; it deals only with the evolution of physical species. These two notions are very dear to the biologists and especially the molecular evolutionists, but they deal merely with atoms and molecules, that means, with matter only.

So, these concepts are either called reductionism or materialism, and it seems to me that when we develop our ethics or bioethics or biomedical ethics, we find that there is some kind of incompatibility between these two lines of thoughts.

Arthur L. Caplan (Henceforth ALC): I agree. I think there is more than material reductionism in understanding health. ... Some people would say, all that life consists of is genes figuring a way to get into the next generation, and we are just vessels for carrying these genes around. However, it seems notable to me that we have brains, we have culture, we have ways that are non-Darwinian to transmit

To attain happiness ... one must use all one’s efforts to expand more and more one’s knowledge of God and His works.
— Leonhard Euler
Mathematician

To Know about Life, Matter, and their Interactions is called Knowledge

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information. ... To be clear, there is more going on in evolution than what the Darwinian evolutionists state; we have jumped faster because we have cultural evolution, if you want to put it that way. That fact means the materialistic explanation of Darwinism is not enough to explain us, and we have to feed that interior understanding of what health is, because we are cultural creatures in addition to being biological creatures. Genes probably are not going to invent nuclear weapons. Genes are not going to have ideological conflicts about what's the best political system. Cultural creatures do. By the way, this is also why I believe that to understand ethics, you need to understand that it is a social enterprise; it is what goes on between people, it is not just to have a property like a soul or consciousness. That may be necessary but that's not sufficient. So I do see materialism as an explanatory story, but it is not a full story of what we are now. That's what I would say. So that has to feed our understanding of what health is.

TDS: I feel that the dialog between science and spirituality can help in bringing new lights and a real synergy. Science primarily deals with the physical world frame, with physical knowledge; and religious traditions or spiritual wisdom can inspire ethical views by demonstrating what is the deeper concept of life, the meaning of life, and its purpose. Although ethics is not purely spiritual or theological, I think it is quite close to it.

[Excerpt from the book, Savijnanam vol-9—Scientific Exploration for a Spiritual Paradigm, Bhaktivedanta Institute, Kolkata]

On the Shoulder of Giants

Śrī Tukārāma Ācārya
(Marathi Poet and Saint)

Śrī Tukārāma also known as Sant Tukārāma or Tukoba, was a prominent poet, saint, and spiritual teacher of the 17th century who revolutionized the bhakti movement in Maharashtra, India. He was an ardent devotee of Lord Vitthal (a form of Lord Krishna) and is famous for his Abhanga, devotional poetry.

Tukārāma was born around 1608, in the small village of Dehu situated on the banks of the holy river Indrayani, Maharashtra. His parents were ardent devotees of Lord Vitthal and led a family life of contentment as farmers.

Although young Tukārāma had a fairly comfortable childhood, he was not interested in playing or enjoying. He was attracted to Lord Vitthal, whom he considered as his dear friend. At thirteen, he took up the family responsibilities as his father fell ill and his elder brother had taken up the renounced order of life (sannyāsa). Tukārāma got married to Rakhumabai at the age of fifteen, but later lost his wife and son because of famine. He remarried to Jijabai Avalai.

Witnessing the temporary nature of earthly pursuits, Tukārāma sought the path of self-realization. He went to a secluded place at Brahmagiri mountain and began to pray fervently to the Lord, seeking His shelter for enlightenment about the Absolute truth. After fifteen days, Shri Tukārāma received Lord Vitthala’s audience. He was also personally initiated by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu to the sankirtana movement in a dream. Having acquired the eternal wealth of loving devotion to the Supreme Lord, Tukārāma returned to his village and renovated the temple of Lord Vitthal situated on the bank of the Indrayani River.

Tukārāma spent much of his time chanting the holy names of the Lord and studying the works of Jnaneswar, Namdev and Eknath, famous saints of Maharashtra. Tukārāma was greatly admired and respected by all as a saintly personality (sant) instilled with virtues like devotion to God, generosity, simplicity, and hospitality.

Sant Tukārāma regularly went on sankirtana pilgrimage from Dehu to Pandharpur, along with thousands of his followers and disciples. During these visits, Sant Tukārāma gave regular enlightening discourses, emphasizing the supremacy of chanting the holy names of the Lord as the easiest path for all—regardless of designations such as caste—to attain love of Godhead, the highest perfection of life.

Sant Tukārāma started composing devotional poetry as per the instruction given by Sant Namdev who appeared in a dream and asked to complete his own unfinished work. By the age of 41, Saint Tukārāma had composed over 5,000 Abhangas. He presented the philosophical essence of religious principles described in the scriptures in the simple language of Marathi. The Mantra Gita, a translation of the Bhagavad Gita in the Abhanga form, is ascribed to Tukārāma. His Abhangas are still very popular and highly respected, as these writings were retrieved by the Lord Himself after some envious Brahmins tried to drown them in the river.

Sant Tukārāma’s reputation eventually reached King Shivaji, who invited him and offered ornaments and gems. Sant Tukārāma politely refused the gifts, saying, “What use is this treasure to me; I want only Lord Vitthal. Your gesture shows your generosity but to me these gifts are like pebbles.” King Shivaji was astounded by Sant Tukārāma’s renunciation and devotion, and became his disciple.

Sant Tukārāma departed from this world in his self-same body, singing the holy names of his Lord. It is said that after Tukārāma announced his imminent departure, Śrī Garuda, the carrier bird of Lord Vishnu, landed on the bank of the Indrayani to carry him to the spiritual world.
Vedanta & Science

End-of-Life Care — A Vedantic Perspective

Vedanta concludes that the end-of-life care should be goal-oriented for the spiritual upliftment of both individuals and the society. Vedanta stresses the importance of human life in the cosmic creation. Human life is meant to inquire into the nature of ultimate truth (brahma-jijnasa) and to transcend immediate biological needs. Only in human birth can one have the opportunity to get the perfection of life.

The optimal strategy by which to tackle the problem of aging and dying is scientifically presented in the Varnasrama system, a significantly advocated concept in the Vedantic paradigm. Varnasrama system refers to the religio-social system of living, indicating the procedures that need to be followed to prepare for the last stage of life. As explained in the Vedantic paradigm, the perfection of life is to transcend material existence at the time of natural death. It is therefore recommended that, at least after the age of 50, one should retire fully from worldly life and dedicate oneself to spiritual pursuits.

The Varnasrama system can also be observed to provide a stable caring environment for the elderly that involves components of both individual and collective caring. Individual caring is through prayer and meditation. Vedanta rightly identifies control of the mind as the most important and sublime truth of end-of-life care, and conveys that praying is the means to achieve control over one’s thoughts and for realizing ultimate happiness. With respect to social caring, the Varnasrama system presents the principle that women, whether young or old need to be protected by their fathers, husbands or grown up sons under all circumstances. Regarding the care of elderly men, in both the stages of Vanaprastha (the retired stage of life) and sannyasa (the renounced stage of life), Vedanta recommends intensification of prayer and meditational processes. Austerities for the elderly are based on time, place and circumstances. For example, a famous devotee named Sravanakumar, described in the Vedantic scriptures, carried his parents in a wooden balance consisting of two baskets hanging over a wooden stick to different places of pilgrimage, as both of them were blind. He can be seen as a perfect example of end-of-life care provided by children to their parents. Therefore, caring of the elderly can be observed to be properly formulated in Vedanta. The individual caring of the person is recommended by controlling the mind, and when a person achieves full control over his mental activities in old age, by intense prayer and devotion, renunciation of the physical world is recommended through sannyasa.

We propose three types of approaches to effectively tackle the problem of aging and dying. The first step is prevention, healthy living and wellness of aging people by suggesting that they follow the Vedantic approach of life. The Vedantic approach involves faith in applying the principles of Ayurveda and vegetarianism, dependence on the Supreme Lord, leading a simple life, etc. This includes no meat eating (vegetarianism), no intoxication (no alcohol and smoking), no gambling and no illicit sex. The second approach constitutes religious belief in the form of practicing humility, patience, tolerance and kindness in both the elderly and the young so that these principles become established in the hearts of the population who would otherwise have greater demands for the government to act on their behalf. Incidentally, almost all types of religious beliefs stress the above measures in some form or other, and therefore should be encouraged and allowed for day to-day practice. The third approach is caring for the sick, as the psychological impact of care, love and affection has been proven to have a principal affect in healing of the elderly. Physical caring should be jointly shared by retirement communities, religious congregations and voluntary organizations. With a spiritually integrated approach, successful aging and caring for the elderly can be established even before one retires from professional activities. Therefore, the Vedantic approach recommends a purpose-filled retirement and preparation for death.

[Excerpt from the book, Vedanta and The Science of Aging, Bhaktivedanta Institute, Kolkata]
Conference on
SYNTHESIS OF SCIENCE & SPIRITUALITY
FOR HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT
Visionary: Dr. T. D. Singh

Saturday, 9th September 2017
Satish Dhawan Auditorium, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore

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• Keynote Address: Importance of Synthesizing Science and Spirituality in Modern India
• Session I: Role of Science and Spirituality in Pursuit of Happiness
• Session II: Health and Spirituality
• Students Session: Integration of Science and Spirituality in the Technological Society
• Panel Discussion: Need of a New Science for Holistic Development

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