Chapter : iv

DESCRIPTION AND PRESCRIPTION

The word description and prescription are related and yet different. Description in its very general form means a description. It could be a description either of a fact or a phenomenal. All the scientific laws, for examples, the law of gravitation, law of motion and other laws that governs the working of nature or the physical world could be described. For instance, water is described as H₂O.

In this physical world, there exists the most important animal – a man. Man lives in the society and achieves his predetermined goal through certain laws. As these laws are intimately connected with human beings, they are termed as human laws. We need such laws or prescription of such laws in order to help human being live a moral and ethical life.

SCIENCE AND ETHICS

To understand more precisely, description is related with science whereas prescription is related with ethics. Science and ethics both are concerned with concept but science is concerned with discovery and inventions while ethics is concerned mainly with activity and moral behaviour. Value and fact are different in their connotation. Fact is a part of the world whereas value is a part of a character. Character is concerned with human progress, human motivation, knowledge and realization.

Science is analysis of facts and phenomena thus, it is called descriptive whereas ethics is a science of quality of duty and action.
Therefore, it is called prescriptive knowledge. Stevenson precisely says, “Ethical statements have a meaning that is approximately, an in part, imperative. This imperative meaning explains why ethical judgements are so intimately related to agreements and disagreements in attitude, and helps to indicate how normative ethics can be distinguish from psychology and the natural sciences.”¹

The ethical terms cannot be taken as fully comparable to scientific ones. They have a quasi-imperative function which, properly preserved by the working models, must be explained with careful attention to emotive meaning.

“Prescriptivism is a theory about moral statements. It claims that such statements contain an element of meaning which serves to prescribe or direct actions. The history of prescriptivism includes Socrates, Aristotle, Hume, Kant and Mill and it has been influential also in recent times.”²

Prescriptivism can allow for moral disagreement and explains moral weakness. It can also explain better than other theories the rationality and objectivity of moral thinking. The descriptive element of morality differs between persons and culture but the prescriptive element remains constant. Sometimes, moral statements also content a factual or descriptive element.

In the recent time, the mankind was fortunate enough to be gifted by a scripture that was prescriptive in nature. It was Siksāpatri -- a set of human laws. It is a scripture of morality. In this all comprehensive and divine work of Lord Swaminarayan, the aspect of moral judgement, moral sentiment, moral values and morality are distinctively furnished.
There is an integral relationship between morality and prescription. Though in the same judgement there may be a combination of descriptive as well as prescriptive factors. Moral judgements are fundamentally prescriptive.

As ethics is invariably related with conduct, language of morals is distinct from other types of languages. In other languages there is an emphasis on meaning as well as criterion. This is called its descriptive part. But in ethics there is something more than meaning and that is action. This is called the prescriptive part. There is no ethical life without activity. It is the function to analyze and understand the moral activity.

Moral activity if not limited to cognition but it is supposed to be performatory activity. It tells us about our future course and plan of activity. Moral actions have a reference to other persons and situations in external word. But moral actions cannot be limited to a specific context.

There are moral situations of great complexity in which there are definite contradictions but if all questions are treated in this way, no kind of moral development or learning from experience would be possible. What one basically learns is certain principles related to situations in large variety and complexity. For instance, if a woman has jumped into river probably for committing suicide, then a person, in order to save her is permitted to take that woman into arms but in ordinary circumstances it is not proper to take woman into arms into public. To elucidate the fundamental of elasticity, Lord Swaminarayan says,

"My disciples shall not remain in solitude with their mother, sister or daughter of young age, except in the absolute emergency."
This shows that the moral imperatives of Śiksāpatrī are not absolute but elastic, i.e. prescriptive in nature. In fact, most of our situations in day to day life are relative so far as the implementation of moral rule is concerned. Thus, Śiksāpatrī does not think in terms of law but in terms of rule which is framed by each individual in his or her circumstances of life. There are certain accidents in moral life and one should evolve special code of conduct in such circumstances. As a general rule for all, Śiksāpatrī says that,

"Hence, it is incumbent upon my disciples to follow scrupulously the commandments of this Śiksāpatrī in both letter and spirit and never transgress them." 4

The term value is a specific rule to be followed by every individual in accordance with external, social and moral circumstances. There cannot be a universal law in moral field. Thus, prescription of individual is required to be applied not only to society but to whole humanity. So, what is not possible for entire humanity to practice is not possible for single individual to be practiced. Prescription and universality go hand in hand.

Moral action is a value practiced in consultation with the self, keeping in the mind the experience of other persons. Value judgement is not only an attempt to persuade others or to express one’s own preferences. But it is to commit to others for future guidance. Value judgement has got prescriptive meaning and it is often action guiding. To make a value judgement is to offer some guidance in making future decisions. In order to help His devotees to take value based judgements, Lord says,

"They shall give up the company of ungrateful persons." 5
Prescriptive language is divided into two classes. One is overt imperative and the other is evaluative. ‘Should’ is to be regarded as a member of overt imperative while ‘good’, ‘desirable’ are the members of evaluative words. The imperative class of prescriptive language is in a way fundamental. Ethical language is a class of prescriptive language which is either directly imperative or logically related to an imperative. In Vaśanāmṛta, Lord Swaminarayan urges to His devotees to observe a high standard of ethical and spiritual discipline saying that,

“All of you please, be good enough to act according to my advice without failing. I will consider this as all-inclusive services rendered unto me. I will be very much pleased with you and will bless you if you do so, as you have fulfilled my objective of manifestation.”

Lord Swaminarayan in Śikṣāpātri has more or less used prescriptive language. He has not tried to judge a situation in an objective way because moral language as well as moral practice are more or less relative in nature. Although ethical language consists of such terms which may appear to be prescriptive but actually in practical life it may not be so.

Without the recognition of certain moral facts, definite inclination and certain power of imagination is not possible to exercise moral freedom in case of moral activity. Morality can be regarded as ‘autonomous’ because morality is governed by freewill and sense of ‘oughtness’. There is a rational self-direction for the imperative of moral action.

Morality cannot be limited to rational self, but it requires to be extended to the goodness and happiness of larger mankind. Morality is thought to be not only constitutive of self but of society and world at large.
Each individual is to be considered as one who finds himself related to society. His awareness develops in network of relationship with other individuals. Individual consciousness is seen as the outcome of interaction of individual with various cultural and social factors.

To value something is very much to prefer something but mere preference as such cannot be considered as value. To be a value a preference must have some degree of rationality that is to say it must be capable of being supported by reasons in case if it is questioned. It must also have a degree of consistency over a range of objects. A preference which is liable to change all too quickly from one situation to another is not a value. To highlight this principle in *Vacanāmrta* Lord Swaminarayan gives His own example and says that,

"I am pleased or displeased if a person persists in his display of good or bad temper for days together. I am neither pleased, nor displeased simply on hearing the reports of somebody." 

Even if a person consistently act on moral principles he may still fail to be a moral person. It may happen that he has no idea whatsoever of the moral principle he is following and that he is not guided by pure sense of duty. It would seem that both the factors are necessary in making morality more effective.

In every individual there is potentially a fiber to appreciate goodness and tend to moral activity. Moral obligation means a commitment not only to one’s own self but to other persons related in certain social character. Value is not limited, moral judgement and practice alone but it has several dimensions such as physical, social, intellectual, psychic and spiritual.
Moreover, morality consists in becoming a citizen of the world. One has to become wide, noble and become one with mankind. It is only then that one enlarge his self, one become altruistic and put himself at the service of other people. This is the ideal of perfection where our ego surrenders at the feet of mankind. Thus, one extends the scope of our activity and try to become useful not only to one’s society and country but the entire humanity.

So description means a scientific procedure whereas prescription means a moral procedure. Moral procedure attempts to take the universal form. Just as Kant said that will means universal will. A desire can be satisfied if all persons can desire and all persons can practice it. If only a few persons can practice it, then it is not virtue. So this means that virtue should be made universal and then it can be taught. These two elements universality and teachability are important for prescriptive element in ethics. Just as in Gita, it’s practical part is to do action, is to fight. Similarly in our ethical life, one has to prepare oneself for a righteous life, virtuous life. Of course, it is true that there is a theoretical aspect in ethics. One has to understand virtue, what is a moral life, what are the postulates of morality, what is reflection, standard of goodness, and related parts.

Every religion has its prescriptive form. In Vedic religion, e.g. it was sacrifice (yajña) that was the center of prescriptive religion. Fire is the center of religion and every festival celebration was associated with sacrifice. In fact, our smṛtis prescribed different types of yajñas, (yajñavalkya, manu, parāśara). Pitru yajña, brahma yajña and different forms of yajñas without which our duties are not completed. In fact in Purvamimansa every judgement ended in kuru means do it, please do it. Just as in last canton, Śrī
Kṛṣṇa says ‘Arjuna, yathā iḍāḥā yathā kuru’, now you do according to your will. Similarly, in Purvamimāṃsā the judgements ended with action.

The ethics of Shikshapatri mainly related with inward development, consciousness, inner knowledge and true activity. Religious knowledge of Shikshapatri helps to educate our soul. Most of the precepts, as commanded by Lord Swaminarayan in Śiksāpatrī are illustrious of its prescriptive form. Some of them are as follows:

“All should listen with due attention to the benefits latent in the Śiksāpatrī which is the redeemer of all.” 9

“All my disciples shall observe all the rules laid down in Śiksāpatrī and shall never follow the impulses of their lower instincts.” 10

“And those of my disciples male and female who do not follow the tenets of Śiksāpatrī are considered ex-communicated from this fellowship.” 11

“All my disciples shall as a rule read the Śiksāpatrī daily and those who can not read it shall listen to its recital with great devotion. If one does not find someone to read this Śiksāpatrī, one shall worship it daily, holding every word of it as the personified form of My divine self.” 12

“This Śiksāpatrī should be given to those with spiritual leanings, but it shall never be given those who are devoid of such spirituality. I have thus narrated succinctly the duties of the different classes of My disciples. However, for further elaboration of their duties they should refer to the various scriptures of the sampradāya (fellowship).” 13

The Lord prescribes varṇāśrama dharma (the duties of four major castes); Brahmīn, kṣatriya, vaishya and śudra as:
“None of my follower shall violate the code of varnashram dharma. And shall never accept any code of behaviour other than that sanctioned by the scripture.”  

“My Brahmin devotees shall cultivate the qualities of tranquility, self-restraint, forbearance, contentment and other such virtues. The kṣatriya shall cultivate valour, fortitude and similar qualities.”

“The vaiśya class shall take to agriculture, trade, money-lending and like pursuits; and those of the śudra class shall serve the above named three varnas.”

EDUCATION

In human life, what is more important is knowledge, freedom and consciousness. So one has to educate one’s personality right from the childhood to a young age of maturity. The moral knowledge is innate and cannot be given by book, by universities, by degrees or diplomas, by our teachers and parents or by our fellow citizens. One has to re-discover it from within.

Therefore, religious knowledge and personality development go hand in hand because it is only through the religious knowledge that one can understand the values right from physical to spiritual. Such knowledge should be given right from the childhood. To make a person understand, the sublime moral values, he has to be taught the other primary values like good habits, value of cleanliness, value of respect and regard, value of hygiene and health, value of character, speech, social value and like.

Education is prescriptive in nature. Education is prescription and its aim is development of character. Morality is related with inward
development, consciousness, inner knowledge and true activity. To develop such a morality, Śikṣāpatrī becomes indispensable in life because it covers all the values related to human life – the primary and the profound.

However, prescription takes a pedagogical form, means and teaching skill. It is said that love, benevolence, co-operation and learning are the required standards of social behaviour. It is said that mother’s heart is child’s classroom. Śikṣāpatrī in its true sense is also a mother for the mankind because it nurtures and nourishes the whole human race with its loving hands in the form of codes. Lord Swaminarayan says,

“A school for teaching Sanskrit should be founded and a learned preceptor be appointed there to impart true knowledge i.e. sadvidyā”

The family is the school for moral education. Members of the family imbibe the social virtues of sympathy, fellow-feeling, love and co-operation. They imbibe the spirit of self-sacrifice which is the root of moral life and apply it to wider and wider spheres. The home sentiment is the basis of all other social, moral sentiments and virtues. Śikṣāpatrī ensures the creation, maintenance and promotion of such value-oriented families.

In modern times, R. A. Hare is an advocate of prescriptive ethics. He emphasizes upon educational training in the schools, especially of moral virtue. Unless there is proper education, in society there cannot be proper ethics, religion and spirituality.
**SIKSĀPATRĪ AND PERFECTIONISM**

The Greeks used the term Eudaemonia in the sense of ‘happiness’ or ‘prosperity’ but Aristotle used it in the sense of moral well-being for realization of a person’s capacities in accordance with virtue.

Happiness springs from the harmony of desires brought about by reason. This doctrine is also called the ethics of personality or the ethics of self-realization. It consists in the full development of personality. It consists in the realization of the ideal, rational or social self in intimate relationship with others in society.

Jadunath Sinha says, “Self-realization, according to perfectionism, is the highest good. Perfection means the perfection of character or rational control of feelings, emotions and desires in accordance with the virtue or moral excellence. It is also the perfection of humanity or development of a perfect character in humanity. It also implies the conscious pursuit of this ideal by every person in human society.”

Whatever the prescriptions given either in education or in religion, the goal is common, i.e. perfection. In religion, the goal is perfection in knowledge, devotion and activity similarly the goal of prescription given in education is development of character.

It is the aim of every individual to become perfect. The aim of perfection is related to body, intellect, spiritual life, and culture. Perfection is one of the criteria of moral judgement and morality.

Eudaemonism is the theory of idealism which attempts to unite duty, pleasure, obligation, social culture and harmony of individual. It is also one
of the criteria of our moral perfection. It is aimed as uniting pleasure and
duty because we have several intentions and motives, but their fulfillment is
in harmonizing personality and individuality. According to Bradley, the
moral ideal is concrete and it consists in combing pleasure with obligation.

Self-realization means realization of the rational self and not
realization of sentient self. For this, the working and the nature of rational
self have to be understood. This understanding can be well-developed
through Śikṣāpatri because it not only helps to understand the conscience but
also to harmonize it and cultivate it for self-realization. Perfection gives us
permanent happiness thus, to attain perfection or permanent happiness, the
most important part of the seekers life could be Śikṣāpatri.

*Lord Swaminarayan* compassionately blesses the whole mankind and
says,

“Whoever shall observe the ethics of non-injury, righteousness etc.
sincerely as prescribed by the scriptures, shall derive happiness here
and hereafter.”  

**Notes & Reference:**

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5. Śikṣāpatri, 26
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7. Vaçañāmṛta, Gadhadā Middle 28
9. Śikṣāpatrī, 7
10. Śikṣāpatrī, 205
11. Śikṣāpatrī, 207
12. Śikṣāpatrī, 208, 209
13. Śikṣāpatrī, 210, 203
14. Śikṣāpatrī, 24
15. Śikṣāpatrī, 89
16. Śikṣāpatrī, 90
17. Śikṣāpatrī, 132
19. Śikṣāpatrī, 8