Subjective ethics is an advance over objective ethics, because virtues are superior to duties. Whereas duty is other-directed; virtue is inner-directed. Duty represents tribalistic morality; virtue represents individual morality. Duties are related to experiences of prohibition and fear, but virtues arise from feelings of preference and self-respect. Duty is ad hoc and specific, with reference to particular commandments, codes, and customs; virtue is generic and is expressive of fundamental orientations in life, such as the Golden Rule. [...] You may continue to follow the old rule, but now it is because you must, not because you ought.¹

During the last quarter of the 19th century travelling overseas became a social issue in India as debated among Hindu reformers as widow remarriage or conversion. Among Brahmans and other high caste Hindus it was a breach of dharmic conduct of such gravity that it could not be done without incurring severe social sanction: many returnees were excommunicated from their caste.² It raised the issues of pollution and sin. Of pollution, because travelling overseas meant breaking the rules of one's own caste in two major ways: eating forbidden food and having contact with non Hindus (mleccha samparka), both major sources of impurity.³ It raised the issue of sin because it entailed shirking one's own prescribed duty (disregard for dharma). The problem was not the travel as such but its consequences, like having to eat impure foods and being in close contact with impure substances and persons. Deemed impure, the returnees suffered a social boycott: none in their caste would dine with them and

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³ Samudrāyana (“travelling by sea”) was the term used to designate the religious transgression implied by such journeys; another term with equally sinister socioreligious implications was kālāpāni “black water”.

the prospect of marriage for them and their children became dim. In most cases, they were admitted back in their endogamous group (jāti) after they had undergone rites of expiation (prāyaścitta) prescribed by their Caste Council (pañcāyat) or by other such instances which regulated the internal affairs of their caste. In the case of Narayan Ganesh Chandavarkar (1855–1923), the well-known judge, social reformer and political activist of Bombay, this instance was the sectarian monastery to which his caste (Sarasvata brāhmaṇa, hereafter Saraswat Brahman) was affiliated.

To sin is to fall short of one’s society standards of rightful moral conduct; it is to transgress religious or moral law. Looking for an “objective definition of sin” large enough to apply to all social or cultural contexts, the French anthropologist Robert Hertz (1881–1915) observed that sin not only consists in a transgression of a moral order but also corresponds to a new state which subsists once the initial cause has disappeared: the perpetrator of a sin has become a sinner.4 He further noted that this new state does not cease by itself but requires external intervention: expiation takes place “when certain ritual actions are able to re-establish the state of things prior to the transgression, abolishing it without crushing the transgressor”.5

In Hindu society the notions that the sinner is personally transformed by his transgression and can be purified and restored to his pre-sin state are familiar. Anthropologists have shown that Hindus understand sin (pāpa) as a transgression of the sanctioned rules of dharma, that is to say as a breach of their caste’s codes, which presupposes a close connection

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4 Robert Hertz, Le péché et l’expiation dans les sociétés primitives (Paris: Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1988), 51–52: “le péché est une transgression d’un ordre moral, qui est considérée comme entraînant par sa vertu propre des conséquences funestes pour son auteur et qui concerne exclusivement la société religieuse. L’état de péché enveloppe pour le fidèle des peines et des dangers redoutables: il le prive de la situation, de la capacité, des droits qu’il avait dans l’Église, en particulier du droit de communier; il implique la menace d’afflictions temporelles qui peuvent atteindre le pécheur soit dans sa personne, soit dans ses biens, soit dans ses proches ou ses descendants; surtout, il décide virtuellement du sort de l’âme dans l’au-delà et la condamne à une mort éternelle, c’est-à-dire à des souffrances sans fin et à une exclusion définitive du séjour céleste. Cet état, qui succède inéluctablement à l’acte mauvais, ne cesse pas de lui-même: ou bien par le concours de Dieu, de l’Église et du pécheur, il est aboli par une intervention sacramentaire, spécialement destinée à la délivrance du pénitent; ou bien il se prolonge jusqu’à la mort du pécheur endurci pour produire ensuite ses conséquences effroyables et désormais irréparables.” Robert Hertz died in 1915 before he could complete his research, which was then published posthumously by Marcel Mauss in 1922.

5 Hertz, Le péché et l’expiation, 55.