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An Introduction to Ethics

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Introduction

Etymologically the term “ethics” correspond to the Greek word “*ethos*” which means character, habit, customs, ways of behaviour, etc. Ethics is also called “moral philosophy”. The word “moral” comes from Latin word “*mores*” which signifies customs, character, behaviour, etc. Thus ethics *may be defined as the systematic study of human actions from the point of view of their rightfulness or wrongfulness, as means for the attainment of the ultimate happiness.* It is the reflective study of what is good or bad in that part of human conduct for which human has some personal responsibility. In simple words ethics refers to what is good and the way to get it, and what is bad and how to avoid it. It refers to what ought to be done to achieve what is good and what ought not to be done to avoid what is evil.

As a philosophical discipline, ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live. It also involves the justification of these values and guidelines. It is not merely following a tradition or custom. Instead it requires analysis and evaluation of these guidelines in light of universal principles. As moral philosophy, ethics is the philosophical thinking about morality, moral problems, and moral judgements.

Ethics is a science in as much as it is a set or body of reasoned truths organised in a logical order and having

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its specific material and formal objects. It is the science of what human ought to be by reason of what one is. It is a rational science in so far as its principles are deduced by human's reason from the objects that concern the free will. Besides it has for its ulterior end the art by which human may live uprightly or comfortably to right reason. It is a normative/regulative science in as much as it regulates and directs human's life and gives the right orientation to one's existence.

Ethics is also theoretical and practical. It is theoretical in as much as it provides the fundamental principles on the basis of which moral judgements are arrived at. It is practical in as much as it is concerned about an end to be gained, and the means of attaining it.

Ethics is sometimes distinguished from morality. In such cases, ethics is the explicit philosophical reflection on moral beliefs and practices while morality refers to the first-order beliefs and practices about good and evil by means of which we guide our behaviour (e.g. music and musicology). However, in most cases they are referred to as having the same meaning.

Ethics is not merely a set of 'codes'. Ethics certainly deals with moral codes yet one cannot identify ethics to moral codes. Ethics is not primarily to restrict one's behaviour, rather to help one to find what is good and how to get it. The obligatory character of ethical norms derives from the very purpose of ethical enquiry, i.e. to discover the most ultimate principles of explanation or the most ultimate reasons why one ought to do anything.

Scope of Ethics

Ethics deals with voluntary actions. We can distinguish between human actions and actions of human: human actions are those actions that are done by human

consciously, deliberately and in view of an end. Actions of human may not be wilfully, voluntarily, consciously and deliberately done but all the same they are done by human (e.g. sleeping, walking, etc.). It is the intention which makes the difference between human action and action of human. In ethics we deal only with human actions.

History of Ethics

Ethics is as old as humanity. The first ethical precepts were certainly passed down by word of mouth by parents and elders, but as societies learned to use the written word, they began to set down their ethical beliefs. These records constitute the first historical evidence of the origins of ethics.

In as much as it is the study of human behaviour, we cannot really trace the history of ethics. However, as a systematic study of human behaviour, we can point out how ethics evolved as a discipline. It is not that we have first a straightforward history of moral concepts and then a separate and secondary history of philosophical comment. To set out to write the history of moral philosophy involves a careful selection from the past of what falls under the heading of moral philosophy as we now conceive it. We have to strike a balance between the danger of a dead antiquarianism, which enjoys the illusion that we can approach the past without preconceptions, and the other of believing that the whole point of the past was that it should culminate with us. However, we can observe a gradual development in the ethical thought from the beginning to our day.

In the Western Philosophy, the history of ethics can be traced back to the fifth century B.C with the appearance of Socrates. As a philosopher among the Greeks his mission was to awaken his fellow humans to the need for rational criticism of their beliefs and practices. It was the time when

the philosophers began to search for reasons for established modes of conduct. Socrates, in demanding rational grounds for ethical judgements, brought attention to the problem of tracing the logical relationship between values and facts and thereby created ethical philosophy. Plato's theory of forms could be seen as the first attempt at defending moral realism and offering an objective ground for moral truths. From the *Republic* on through the later dialogues and epistles, Plato constructed a systematic view of nature, God, and human from which one derived one's ethical principles. His main goal in his ethical philosophy was to lead the way toward a vision of the Good. Aristotle differed from Plato in his method of inquiry and his conception of the role of ethical principles in human affairs. While Plato was the fountainhead of religious and idealistic ethics, Aristotle engendered the naturalistic tradition. Aristotle's ethical writings (i.e. *Eudemian Ethics*, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the *Politics*) constitute the first systematic investigation into the foundations of ethics. Aristotle's account of the virtues could be seen as one of the first sustained inquiries in normative ethics. It was a clear mixture of Greco-Roman thought with Judaism and elements of other Middle Eastern religions.

The medieval period was dominated by the thoughts of Christian philosophers and theologians like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. The influence of Christianity dominated the ethical scenario. So much so that during this period philosophy and religion were nearly indistinguishable. The rise of Christian philosophy produced a new era of history of ethics. In St. Augustine, the most prominent philosopher of the early medieval period, ethics became a blend of the pursuit of earthly well-being with preparation of the soul for eternal salvation. The next towering figure of medieval philosophy is Thomas Aquinas. He brought about a true reconciliation between Aristotelian science and philosophy with Augustinian theology. Aquinas greatly succeeded in

proving the compatibility of Aristotelian naturalism with Christian dogma and constructing a unified view of nature, human, and God.

The social and political changes that characterized the end of medieval period and the rise of modern age of industrial democracy gave rise to a new wave of thinking in the ethical field. The development of commerce and industry, the discovery of new regions of the world, the Reformation, the Copernican and Galilean revolutions in science, and the rise of strong secular governments demanded new principles of individual conduct and social organization. Some of the modern philosophers who contributed to the great changes in ethical thinking were Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Benedict de Spinoza, John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill and Friedrich Nietzsche. Further developments in ethical thinking in the west came with Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Here we are not intending to give a detailed analysis of their contribution to ethics. However, the most influential ethical thought during this period were the Utilitarianism, dominated by British and French Philosophy (e.g. Locke, Hume, Bentham, Stuart Mill) and Idealistic ethics in Germany and Italy (e.g. Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche).

The contemporary ethical scenario is a further complex area of study. The contemporary European ethics in the broadest sense attempts to cover a generous range of philosophies running from phenomenology to theories of communicative action. The conditions of contemporary civilization forced philosophers to seek for a genuine ground for ethics and moral life. In much of the English speaking world G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) is taken to be the starting point of contemporary ethical theory. Others like Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Levinas, Max Scheler, Franz Brentano and

John Dewey too have made significant contributions to the ethical thinking in other parts of the world.

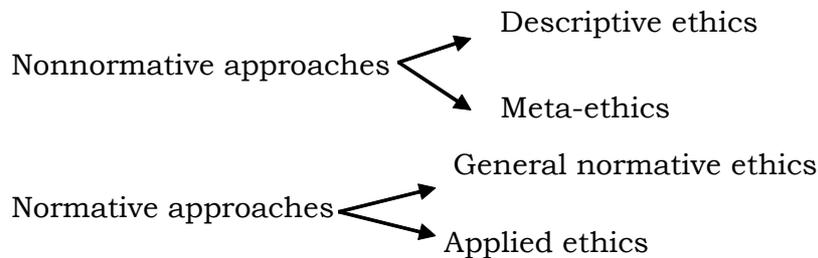
Method of Ethics

Ethics, as a philosophical discipline makes use of the methods used in philosophy. Thus in ethics, both the inductive method and deductive methods are used. Deduction is a process of gaining knowledge independently of experience through pure logical reasoning. Deductive reasoning begins with a universal or general truth and leads to knowledge of a particular instance of it. The classical form of deductive reasoning is the syllogism in which a necessary conclusion is derived from two accepted premises: e.g All men are mortal, Ram is a man, and therefore, Ram is mortal. Induction is a process of arriving at knowledge through experience. Induction begins with the particular and moves to the universal, a generalization that accounts for other examples of the same category or class. For instance, if a number of ravens have been observed, all of which are black, and if no raven has been encountered that is not black, the inferences to the conclusion that the next observed raven will be black or to the general conclusion that all ravens are black, are inductive inferences.

However, in ethics the inductive method (particular to the universal) is generally preferred to the deductive (universal to the particular).

Different Approaches to the Study of Ethics

There are basically four different approaches to the study of ethics. Tom L. Beauchamp, in his book *Philosophical Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* presents them with the following diagram:



The non-normative approaches examine morality without concern for making judgements as to what is morally right or wrong. They do not take any moral position regarding moral issues. The normative approaches instead make judgements as to what is morally right or wrong. They take a clear moral position regarding moral issues.

Among the two nonnormative approaches to ethics, *descriptive ethics* describe and sometimes try to explain the moral and ethical practices and beliefs of certain societies and cultures. This is what sociologists, anthropologists, and historians often do in their study and research. In their descriptions they do not make judgements about the morality of the practices and beliefs but simply describe the practices observed in the different groups or cultures. *Metaethics* focuses on the analysis of the meanings of the central terms used in ethical reasoning and decision-making. It attempts to answer questions of meaning.

Division of Ethics

The whole study of ethics can be divided into General Ethics (nature of moral activity, norm of morality, foundation of morality, end of morality, etc) and Special Ethics (applies the principles of general ethics to the various actions of human activity).

However, when we consider the ethical theories, philosophers today usually divide them into three general

subject areas: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Metaethics investigates the origin and meaning of ethical concepts. It studies where our ethical principles come from and what they mean. It tries to analyse the underlying principles of ethical values; Normative ethics tries to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. It is a more practical task. It is a search for an ideal litmus test of proper behaviour; Applied ethics involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, environmental concerns, homosexuality, and so on. In applied ethics, using the conceptual tools of metaethics and normative ethics, one tries to resolve these controversial issues.

Often the lines of distinction between metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics are often blurry. For instance, the issue of abortion is an applied ethical topic in as much as it involves a specific type of controversial behaviour. But it is also an issue involving normative principles such as the right of self-rule and the right to life and an issue having metaethical issues such as, “where do rights come from?” and “what kind of beings have rights?”.

Ethics and Other Sciences

In our analysis of the definition and nature of ethics, we have seen that ethics as a science is concerned with an end or ideal or standard. Most sciences, instead, are concerned with certain uniformities of our experience – with the ways in which certain classes of objects (such as rocks or plants) are found to exist, or with the ways in which certain classes of events (such as phenomena of sound or electricity) are found to occur. These sciences have no direct reference to any end that is to be achieved or to any ideal by reference to which the facts are judged.

Ethics is distinguished from the natural sciences, inasmuch as it has a direct reference to an end that human persons desire to attain. Although ethics is sometimes regarded as a practical science, it is not a ‘practical science’ as medicine, engineering or architecture in as much as it is not directed towards the realization of a definite result. Ethics is often said to be the fruit of all the sciences since it ultimately perfects human person, by ordering all other sciences and all things else in respect to an ultimate end that is absolutely supreme.

Other sciences		Ethics
Psychology	How a man behaves (a descriptive science)	How a man MUST behave (a normative science)
Anthropology	Nature of human beings and its activity	How man’s actions OUGHT to be
Social and political sciences	Deals with the organization of man’s social and political life	How man’s social and political life MUST or OUGHT TO BE organized in order to be moral
Economics	Concerned with <i>goods</i> , i.e. with those objects which are the means of satisfying any human want.	Deals with those ACTS which are the conditions of the attainment of the highest end of life.

Ethics and Religion

Ethics has no necessary connection with any particular religion. However, it is sometimes argued that without God or religion, ethics would have no point; and therefore insofar as God or religion is in question, so is ethics. This is evidently unacceptable. Although belief in God or religion can be an added reason for our being moral, it is not

necessary to relate it to God or to any religion. The fact that ethics exists in all human societies shows that ethics is a natural phenomenon that arises in the course of the evolution of social, intelligent, long-lived mammals who possess the capacity to recognize each other and to remember the past behaviour of others.

Critics of religion such as Marx and Nietzsche saw religion as a profound source of social conformity, as a means of maintaining the status quo and keeping people confined to their existing social and economic positions. Yet there is another face of religion, one which suggests that religion may be a profoundly liberating force in individual's lives and an important force for social change.

Importance of Studying Ethics

Today, more than ever, the importance of ethics is felt at every sphere of human living. The situation in the present world is characterised by an increasing rate in crime, with no end to such increase in sight. Besides, the power of traditional religions to inspire moral conduct continues to decline. Terrorism, civil wars, industrial pollution, planned obsolescence, misleading advertising, deceptive labelling, crooked insurance adjusting, unfair wages, crime syndicates, illegal gambling, forced prostitution, high jacking, match-fixing... so many are the prevailing trends! Truly, there seems to be hardly a few areas in life remain untouched by growing demoralization! The question that one may ask in this precarious situation is: Are we being sucked into a moral vacuum? Is this our way to the end of ethics?

We can point out at least three reasons why we should study ethics. First, the study of moral philosophy or ethics can deepen our reflection on the ultimate questions of life. The study of ethics helps a person to look at his own life critically and to evaluate his actions/choices/decisions.

It assists a person in knowing what he/she really is and what is best for him/her and what he/she has to do in order to attain it.

Second, the study of moral philosophy can help us to think better about morality. Moral philosophy can help us to clarify our moral positions when we make judgements. It improves our perspective, and makes it more reflective and better thought out. It can also improve our thinking about specific moral issues. In our every day life we are confronted with situations in which we have to decide what is the correct course of action and what is to be avoided. Whether we choose to act or to refrain from acting, we are in either case making a choice. Every decision or choice we make we do so for reasons. However, we should agree that some of these reasons are better than the others in judging the rightness of the decision or choice. However, there seems to be a common agreement that we should all strive to do the right thing, to do what is morally acceptable in a given situation or circumstance. However, the issue of disagreement is over the question of what exactly is the right thing to do.

Third, the study of moral philosophy can help us to sharpen our general thinking processes. It trains our mind to think logically and reasonably and to handle moral issues with greater clarity. Ethics becomes inevitable as by nature human being is a 'social' being, a being living in relationship with other fellow beings and with the nature around. All actions, whether one is aware of it or not, somehow or another affects the others. In order to make a decision/judgement one bases himself on a standard of right and wrong even though the measure may not be the same at all times.

Thus, ethical problems confront everybody. Nobody can really get through life without ethics, even if one may not

be aware of the ethical principles. Consciously or unconsciously all of us are every day making moral decisions. Whether we are aware of it or not, the fact is that we do have ethical attitudes and are taking moral stances every day of our lives.

Why be Moral?

Not few are the people who ask this question: Why should we be moral? Why should we take part in the moral institution of life? Why should we adopt a moral point of view?

In every human person there is a deep desire for good. Human being by nature tend to good – *summum bonum*. Each man/woman desires what is best for himself/herself. The ethical principles and moral practices help one to attain what is best. It helps a person to perfect himself/herself as a moral being. Morality has to do more with one's interior self than the practice of some customs or set rules. Viewed from this point, morality is a deep down desire in human person and is something to do with the very nature of human person. The rational nature of human person makes him/her aware of certain fundamental principles of logical and moral reasoning. This means that there is not only a subjective aspect to every human action but also an objective one that prompts human person to base himself/herself on certain common principles.

We also find that for the functioning of any society we need certain rules and regulations. The conditions of a satisfactory human life for people living in groups could hardly obtain otherwise (neither a "state of nature" nor a "totalitarian state"). The institutions which are designed to make life easier and better for humankind, cannot function without certain moral principles. However, here the question of individual freedom can also come in. How far the society can go on demanding? Should it not respect

the freedom of the individual? Is morality made for man or man is made for morality?

Morality is a lot like nutrition. Most of us have never had a course in nutrition or even read much about it. Yet many of us do have some general knowledge of the field, of what we need to eat and what not. However, we also make mistakes about these things. Often thinking of the good a particular diet can do in the long run for our health, we may go for it although it may bring no immediate satisfaction. So too is our moral life. While nutrition focuses on our physical health, morality is concerned about our moral health. It seeks to help us determine what will nourish our moral life and what will poison it. It seeks to enhance our lives, to help us to live better lives. Morality aims to provide us with a common point of view from which we can come to agreement about what all of us ought to do. It tries to discover a more objective standpoint of evaluation than that of purely personal preference.

Conclusion

Ethics is the study of human behaviour. It studies human actions and judges them to be right or wrong. As a philosophical discipline, ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live. In ethics we deal only with human actions, those actions done by a human person consciously, deliberately and in view of an end. In human history, the origin of ethics and moral consciousness cannot be easily traced back. It is the result of a long process of rational development and evolution.

Ethics makes use of the methods of induction and deduction. Among the different approaches to the study of ethics, the non-normative ethics (descriptive ethics and metaethics) which examine morality without concern for making judgements as to what is morally right or wrong and normative ethics (general normative ethics and applied

ethics) which make judgements as to what is morally right or wrong are the most prominent ones. Although ethics can be regarded as a science it is distinguished from the natural sciences, inasmuch as it has a direct reference to an end that human person desire to attain. Ethics, however, is often said to be the fruit of all the sciences since it ultimately perfects human person, by ordering all other sciences and all things else in respect to an ultimate end that is absolutely free.

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