***LA* 1190 -- *Ethics and Political Theory***

According to the available records, it is the ancient Greece philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who had elaborately discoursed on the theme of ethics throughout their entire lives. While the thoughts of Socrates and Plato more or less corresponded with each other, the third philosopher, Aristotle had altogether a totally different approach to the theme of ethics. The views of this trio were again constantly opposed and curbed by another school of thought called Sophists. Sophists used to teach and believe that ethics are purely subjective and not needed to be observed under any rational moral reasoning.

Socrates never wrote anything in his entire life. But he was killed by the then government on an allegation that he was corrupting the young people by teaching them impiety (especially ungodliness). However, Plato had made Socrates the protagonist in most of his writings and through them we understand what the thoughts of Socrates were.

Before we get into the main thoughts of these three philosophers, it is important to comprehend the intellectual atmosphere of their times. The most predominant school was sophists as we have already learnt and they used to teach several subjects like governance, craftsmanship, athletics, diplomacy, judicial and administrative system etc. In fact there is not much direct evidence on what they actually taught. But through the writings of Plato we do understand that they basically taught the aristocrats and the nobility certain strategies and traits about how to influence the citizens in public gatherings through pure rhetoric and oratory persuasions. The most famous intellectuals of this school were Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Hippias, Thrasymachus etc.

The term *sophist* came from a Greek word *Sophos* or *Sophia* which means wisdom. Their main method of study was rhetoric or using words/language in a strategic way in order to win over any argument. They propagated relativistic views on cognition and knowledge which means truth was rendered purely objective for them. Typical sophist quotations include “Man is the measure of all things,” or “Justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger” etc. they were mostly itinerant teachers and accepted heavy fees in return for instruction in rhetoric and oratory. They emphasized on the practical application of rhetoric and oratory in conducting the civic and political life. Some believe that their liberal attitude towards relativism has played an important role in the growth of democracy in ancient Athens. They were also some of the first lawyers due to their brilliance in argumentation skills. However, many considered their practice of extracting high fees in order to just train the aristocratic youth in manipulating an argument substandard.

Plato:

Plato had criticized the Sophists in most of his writings as greedy and corrupt charlatans with no real interest in developing the city-state. He was particularly repulsive to Gorgias, a very successful sophist who taught the students to argue on any side of an issue. Plato admired his teacher Socrates who was murdered on false allegations. This is one of the reasons for his anger against Sophists.

The main aim of Plato’s philosophy is to teach the humans to attain Eudaimonia which means Fulfillment (or may be perfection). This is possible only through higher levels of thinking.

His “Allegory of Cave” is one important theory where he describes a condition where three men are imprisoned in a cave from the beginning and all they can see all around them is fire. Between them and the fire is a low wall behind which men carry different statues above their heads. Subsequently the fire casts the shadows of these statues onto the back of the cave. Because shadows are all what they could ever see, the prisoners think that the shadows are real. Then one prisoner is released for a short time and therefore he happens to see the real things. When he is brought back to the cave again, he tries to explain his fellow prisoners that what they see are mere reflections and reality is different. But the rest of the two will not trust him because they think they know the reality. So, through this allegory Plato explains that the men are in darkness and won’t understand the truth and truth is mostly hidden from them. They refuse to be enlightened as they are happy being ignorant and reluctant to see the truth. Plato’s Theory of Forms is connected to his Cave theory. His basic arguments is that the physical world that we know is a mere shadow or reflection of the real one. So humans should strive to understand and analyze what is beyond the seen world.

The final idea in which Plato has encapsulated his ideas of ethics was the theory of Philosopher King. In his seminal text, The Republic he tries to address a main problem in human behavior: ethics and justice. He argued that the PK should be the rulers of the polis (the city state or the nations of the ancient Greece). His idea of an ideal polis is the one which is ruled by a PK who rules by his knowledge not mere power. The idea of PK was part of his vision of a just society.

His idea of human soul is also again connected to his idea of Philosopher King. According to him, human soul is divided into Reason, Spirit and Appetite. Humans should be able to balance these three elements of the soul to make moral choices. In his Republic, the leading character, Socrates, proposes the design of an ideal city as a model for how to order the individual soul. Such a city needs two specialized military guards, one is the “rulers” and the other is soldiers “auxiliaries.” The king will undergo a long training in varies fields of wisdom and in this system property, wives and children would be common. The three controversial claims are that even women can become rulers, these ruling men and women should reproduce and keep children communally, and finally that the rulers must be philosophers. These children wont inherit any positions automatically but should be again tested for their caliber and would be promoted accordingly. This was obviously considered most impractical as those times all that a polis needed was a warrior-king not a PK.

But Plato’s argument was that the philosopher is morally and intellectually suited to rule well by following all the ethical and just standards because it is in his nature to love truth and learning so much that they are free from greed and lust that tempts others to abuse power. PK has more inclination towards the forms of Virtue, Beauty and Good and thus will be able to lead the people in a right direction.

He was against the idea of democracy in which many rule and none would have real wisdom of how to run the state. In this context he draws an analogy of ship. An expert captain is needed to steer a ship through storm or any rough season. In a democratic set up, rest of the people who possess no knowledge would discourage a person who is wise and thus the whole ship (state) would drown. With this example Plato emphasizes that a wise man, a philosopher who is thoroughly trained in statesmanship should be appointed to the king.

Aristotle:

Aristotle is a pragmatic intellectual unlike Socrates and Plato. He wrote a book “*Nicomachean Ethics”* and used the term ethics to cover a huge range of topics like art, politics, education etc. the running theme of this text is personal morality and ends of human life. Interestingly he argues that there are no known or established absolute moral standards for the humans to follow. Ethics should be premised on the needs and realities of human nature. This text propagates what can be called “virtue ethics” due to its heavy reliance on the concept of virtue. *Arete* means excellence which is interchangeably used as virtue. So for Aristotle, being excellent and virtuous are the same. Someone is endowed with arete/excellence if he performs his functions well. If a soldier fights well then he is being virtuous because he is able to perform his duty excellently. The word ethics come from the Greek word *ethos* which means character.” Aristotle tries to explain what qualities constitute an excellent character.

He defines the supreme good as an activity of the rational soul in accordance with virtue. Virtue, for him means excellence. A virtuous person is someone who performs the activity of being human well. Humans have rational souls and that differentiates him from other creatures. Since our rationality is our core identity, the supreme good dwells when we execute this rationality well.

According to him the highest good and end of all human activity is happiness. But how does a man achieve this? He argues that man attains this happiness in the continuous process of striving and achieving eternal and universal truth. For example, a man who strives for the protection of his country as a good soldier would attain it as patriotism is one of the highest good and end. This is a good example of virtuous life which is feasible only through the development of reason and wisdom. At the same time, the person also requires sufficient supply of external goods like amenities, leisure and also an opportunity for his virtuous action.

For Aristotle, moral virtue is also a relative mean in the sense that it strikes a balance between excess and deficiency. An ethical person will maintain a moderate life style in every area of his life except virtue. It means an ethically charged man may consume alcohol moderately or completely shun it. But he will not compromise even a wee bit when it comes to the fulfillment of his responsibilities. In other words, he remains moderate with regard to the pleasures and entitlements of his life but always demonstrates readiness and will to perform his duties. Therefore human appetite/desire always remain good and stable as long as it is controlled by reason. This moral virtue is acquired by a combination of knowledge, habituation and self-discipline. Virtue is also a matter of having the appropriate attitude toward pain and pleasure. A timid person might fear to take a chance and thus may remain backward. A courageous person would assess both the merits and demerits of a given task and would not step back from the work at hand. Here the principle feature is not just courage but a combination of both courage and rationality.

Therefore virtuous acts require conscious choice and moral purpose. The best measure of moral judgement is choice, since choices are always made voluntarily by means of rational deliberation. Man carries a personal moral responsibility for his actions. And also, moral virtue cannot be achieved abstractly. It requires moral action in a social environment. Ethics and politics are also closely related, for politics is the science of creating a society in which men can live the good life and develop their full potential.

However, Aristotle does separate the concepts of ‘moral virtue’ and ‘happiness.’ Moral virtue is not the end of life for it can go with inactivity, misery and unhappiness. For instance, a person who keeps on contemplating about the nature might not be able to invent any modern technology or encourage any development as it could be detrimental to the nature. He might think building huge dams or laying roads would harm the nature. Such kind of morals are impractical and render empty. But ‘happiness’ is the end of life. Every man strives for happiness which can be attained by applying reason in perfect proportion. For example, an Engineer might be aware of the damage that can happen to the nature when he builds a dam. In such case he has to apply his reason to build the dam in such a way that it minimizes the damage to the nature and also bring development to the rural areas. He will remain an useless arm-chaired philosopher if merely stops at the moral implications of building a dam or damaging the nature. Thus, happiness is an activity involving both moral and intellectual *arete* (virtue)*.*

Now we tend to get a question of whether acts determine the nature of a person or it is the nature of a person which determines his actions. Aristotle separates acts which create good nature and acts which emanate from good nature once it is created. Excellence is a nature developed out of a capacity by the proper exercise of that capacity. *Phronesis* or practical wisdom is the ability to see the right thing to do in the given situation.

Aristotle differs with Socrates and Plato on the theme of virtues. Socrates argues that no man does wrong willingly. But Aristotle argues that being virtuous is a matter of practice and habit. And a man can willingly commit vice if he does not carefully cultivate good nature. He also prioritizes self-love to friendship. He is considered as early proponents of ‘ethical-egoism’ for having taught this. According to this principle, if we all took enough care to become good people ourselves, the world will automatically become good and there would be no need for selflessness. This concept of self-love is more community-oriented and different from what we have in today’s world. In ancient Greece, a person’s identity is closely tied to the nation in which he is born. So excellency of a nation depends on the virtuous nature of its people and therefore, if a man loves himself in order to make himself excellent/virtuous, it will help the nation to become great.

He also gives a teleological conception of human nature. According to him, everything in the nature has a *telos* or an end-goal (good purpose). For example, the telos of a pen is to write well. It means the telos of an object dwells in its distinct activity. In the same way, the distinctive activity of humans is our capacity for rational thought. Therefore, the exercise of our rational power is our telos. He lists five intellectual virtues namely prudence, art, scientific knowledge, intuition and wisdom. A man will be able attain highest level of excellency when he applies all these virtues in a proper balance.

Fredrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900):

He was a German philosopher who became controversial for all most of his thoughts. He died early and there are serious accusations that his sister Elizabeth had published her own thoughts in his name in order to make profit because he was already very famous by the time of his death in his mid 50s. So some argue that it is difficult to understand what were his exact writings/thoughts and what were attributed to him later due to the mean activities of his sister. Some of his writings were published posthumously and therefore we have absolutely no evidence to dissect what were his ideas and what were not. His writings are often held responsible for igniting anti-Semitism and holocaust during the Hitler’s regime. In this context it could be considered unfair to arrive at any critical conclusion about his thoughts. But there is no other way to study his philosopher who is one of the strongest precursors of postmodernism and nihilism in the modern world. Some even argue that he was not a nihilist as he always expounded his own version of principles (if not moral standards). This course still sees him and presents him as one of the strongest nihilists because whatever ‘principles or standards of life’ that he expounded were in fact had no flesh and blood. Or in other words, they were just asking the man to respond to life in an incoherent, impulsive ways. His ideas were very anti-moral and that’s why he occupies an important place in this course.

For Nietzsche moral values are a mere fiction and that there is nothing in nature that has moral value in itself. Human kind invented the system of moral values and it is not really much different from other animal species which follow no organized culture or morals. We need to look at the trajectory of the evolution of his ideas on man and morality in order to comprehend what his contribution has been to understand his version of the nature of a human-being. First let us look his statement “God is dead.” He was a stark nihilist and therefore it can be understood that he was an atheist as well. Some of his proponents argue that when he said that ‘god is dead’, he meant the man to transcend all the objective realities like god, soul etc and realize his own potential. But when he was arguing that god was indeed dead, he meant not just an abstract idea of god. He was saying that the religious-cultural system which was associated with it is/should be dead.

Why was he so against the principles of Christian moral values? Because he thought they block the evolution of what he calls “Overman”. For instance, in his book “Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Zarathustra, his mythical protagonist arrives and declares “God is dead.” It is interesting because it makes this declaration in the middle of the day, not before the dawn, at the dawn or in the dusk. Why middle of the day? It means Nietzsche wanted to entertain no doubts about the death of the god. For him “God is dead” means in fact “God should be dead” and all humans must be able to see beyond the Christianity. He was not certainly not against all religions because he promotes the ancient Greek gods of Apollo and Dionysia. He was against Christianity because he thought that it has tricked the humans to become passive and otherworldly.

It does not mean that he despises all kinds of morality. He in fact celebrates human cultural evolution and proposes a different set of morals. In other words, he reverses what the society thinks as moralistic, good or positive. He does this by making a fierce attack on the morality proposed Christianity in the New Testament. He alleges that it is Christianity which has reversed the age-old moral values which celebrated war, exploitation, plunder, valor, beauty, violence. In his wrings he juxtaposes violent ancient Greece and Roman cultural principles against the modern Christian values and argues that the ancient values of war, plunder and blood-shed were more akin to human nature than the passive values like love, compassion, kindness, generosity, tolerance etc taught by Christianity. He names ancient violent values as “master-morality” and Christian ones as “slave-morality.” He hated Christianity because he thought that it cripples the human from what he calls “self-realization.” A cultural system which allows a “free-spirit” is what allows a man to unleash himself from the clutches of all objective realities. This “Superman” is referred as “tragic artist” (in ancient Greek drama), “sage”, “free spirit”, “philosopher of the future”, the *Ubermensch* (Superman/Overman) in his writings. This man is extremely indulgent as being free-spirited is the core characteristic of this Overman. It is through this indulgence that he achieves hi self-realization. Let us look at some of his writings to grasp his basic philosophy.

In “The Birth of Tragedy” he hypothesizes why the two contradictory forces namely Apollo and Dionysia existed in the ancient Greek culture? The god Apollo was a god of organization, order and discipline whereas Dionysia was a god of wine, hypersexuality (even intersexuality) and chaos. Why these two forces existed in ancient Greeks who were known for their love for wars, violence, wealth and lust? He kind of suggests here that ancient Greeks knew that death was inevitable and that they had to leave the world how much ever they had loved it. So, they invented the force of Dionysia which represented their love for indulgence and care-free life. Their love for tragedies is in fact their aspiration to unite these two incompatible forces, death and lust for life. In other words, he suggests that since the tragedy is inevitable to humans, they should know how to lead a life of pure indulgence (in order to compensate for the imminent tragedies of life). At the end of the text he promises to the modern man that the god Dionysia would free them from the ensnarement of the Christianity and give them a new life. In this text we also come across Nietzsche’s criticism of Socratic philosophy that truth is objective and it could be realized and attained by the human being. Nietzsche on the other hand argues that ‘truth’ is non-existent and therefore no amount of epistemological contemplations would be able to uncover them. In other words, when there is no truth, how does one find it? This was the main philosophy of this German philosopher. For the same reason he praises Sophists (for having taught moral relativism) and mocks the trio called Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

In his “Beyond good and Evil” he argues that there are no absolute moral standards. In his “On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic” he advances his critique of objectivity still further and argues that the traditional moral standards are a product of Cristian passive doctrines and therefore should be discarded. Feelings of guilt, bad conscience, need for clean heart are the limitations that this religion imposed which in fact destroy the human potential. He argues that there is no panopticon God’s eye from which we may receive a set of universal moral standards. Because there is no absolute moral force (like God), we are then responsible for setting up our own standards which should help the humans to progress and they can be immoral as well.

In another text “Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a hammer” he incorporates many aspects of his philosophy. He proposes what can be called “re-valuation of values” because the idols (ideal moral values and people associated with them like Christ, Socrates etc) were mere hollow beliefs and they can be easily “sounded out” with the hammer of a philosopher. In other words, since the morals are empty things, it is pretty easy for the philosopher to chase them away by mere words (sounds). Man should possess “will to life.” In other words, man should live his life with full interest and vengeance not doodling between what is right and wrong. He disagrees with Socrates that self-knowledge (knowing oneself completely) is virtue. But Nietzsche argues that there is no basis to argue that reason is virtue and that it necessarily brings happiness. For example, Socrates would argue that to be honest is virtue and thus it brings happiness. Nietzsche would counteract him and argue that honesty itself carries no element of pleasure in it as it is an empty concept. He would rather propose that deceitfulness should be considered as a virtue if it brings pleasure in any given case.

He also defies Socratic rationalism as decadent, because it is a method of dialect and doubt rather than an affirmation of reality, human instinct or possibility. He was against reason because it falsifies senses, instincts and urge to improve the human potential to the full. Many of his statements in “Twilight” are provocative, anti-women, humanism, democracy, Judaism etc. In his another text “Beyond good and evil” and “Thus spoke Zarathustra” he affirms his “will to life” repeatedly. Freedom is main principle base for this “will to life.” That’s why in his last book “Ecco Homo” (How one becomes what he is) he wishes to replace Jesus Christ, the otherworldly/spiritual god with the god of Dionysus, the god of lust, indulgence and exuberance.

His other text “The Gay science” discusses his principles of “recurrence of human life” and “god is dead.” He asks the reader “what would you do if a surreptitious being visits you and tells that “you are going to re-live the same kind of life again and again?” Will you be furious, gnash your teeth in anger and curse him or you will be very happy to know this message and praise him for giving you such a wonderful information?” Here Nietzsche basically is asking the reader what kind of life will you embrace? A life filled with joy, enjoyment, indulgence and fulfillment or a life shackled and suffocated with moral values?

Though, some of the sympathizers of Nietzsche argue that his sister Elizabeth manipulated his writings and turned his intellectual charisma to her profit, it should be clear by now that his philosophy was basically against what we call human values. His advocacy of ‘will to power’ is very fierce and there is nothing wrong in arguing that his thoughts might have ignited the flames of gas chambers which charred the Jews to death during the regime of Hitler.

The modern world is predicated on the moral foundation laid down by Christianity. The principles of equality, rule of law, individual freedom, fraternity or criminalizing certain age-old customs like slavery, flesh-trade, gender discrimination etc were the contributions of inspired by the teachings of Christ. Is it actually possible for the human race to digress from this evolution and go back to the Dionysian system where everyone will be greedy, exploitative and lustful?

Dear students, it is in these philosophical and cultural contexts that you are expected to reflect on the current political issues. For instance, take the issue of LGBTQ, environmentalism, the debate over abortion, live-in-relations, Me-Too movement etc and try to understand how we should understand these issues without harming anyone’s rights and political claims.