**Ethics: Definition, Nature, and Scope**

Definitions of Ethics:

1. The philosophical study of what is right or what is wrong in human conduct and what rules or principles should be govern it.
2. ethics is the normative science of conduct and conduct is a collective name of voluntary actions.

Ethics as a branch of philosophy is defined as “an inquiry into the ways of life and

principles of human conduct.”

It is concerned with the validity of principles used to judge human conduct. The term

ethics is derived from the Greek word “Ethos”, which means habit, custom, conduct and

character. It was the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who first coined the word Ethics. The

study of Ethics concerns questions of moral right and wrong, duty and obligation and

moral responsibility. For example: Is Euthanasia (mercy killing) morally right? Are we

always morally obliged to speak truth or is it alright to lie on some occasions? Under

what conditions am I morally responsible for my actions?

Hence broadly speaking, there are two fundamental questions in ethics:

1) What is Good and Bad?

2) What is Right and Wrong?

In the definition of ethics, right at the beginning of this lecture, we defined ethics as an

inquiry into human conduct. Now let us see what exactly we mean by conduct.

We humans perform different kinds of activities in our daily life. These activities can be

broadly classified into two classes:

a) Involuntary

b) Voluntary

Involuntary activities involve those such as our blood circulation, the pumping of our

heart, our breathing, our reflex actions such as sneezing and blinking our eyes etc. We do

not hold any control over such actions.

On the other hand, a voluntary action is an action that a man could have done differently

if he had chosen so. This means, he exercises control over such actions.

Now, the conduct refers to voluntary actions alone. A conduct will never include any

involuntary action. You can blame President Bush for the invasion of Iraq by calling that

a wrong action. But you cannot blame the President for actions such as blinking of his

eyes, sneezing, or blood circulation. That would sound ridiculous. The action of invasion

of Iraq could have been done differently, say diplomatically. But the action of sneezing or

blood circulation are actions which aren’t in his control.

Likewise, one can always blame a sane person if he hurts another person. We judge his

action as morally wrong. But we never morally judge a person as bad who is mentally

unbalanced even if he hurts an innocent person. Ethics presumes human freedom. After

all, how can one judge someone for his actions when he doesn’t have any control over

them? Thus, Ethics will always deal with conduct, i.e., with our voluntary actions.

Non-moral, Moral and Immoral Standards: -

This far we have seen that human conduct deals only with the voluntary actions and

exclude all the involuntary actions. But again we need to make a distinction even in our

voluntary actions when we speak of morality and ethics.

We drive a car, we watch TV, we listen to music, we eat our dinner, we help needy

people around us, we get angry—in short we perform a variety of activities in our day to

day life over which we do exercise control. However, not all these actions are the concern

of ethics. Therefore, we make the following distinction when we speak of voluntary

actions:

1) Non-Moral actions: -

Non-moral actions are morally neutral actions. They do not have any serious

consequences for the human welfare, neither harming nor benefiting as such. All those

actions which are simply outside the circle of morality and upon which the moral

standards do not apply are non-moral actions. For e.g., “My new sports car can speed up

upto 180 Miles per Hour” is not a moral issue. Or I jog at 6 am in the morning, or I love

to listen to Jazz, etc. are all non-moral questions.

2) Moral actions: -

Actions which belong to the group upon which the standards of morality do apply are

called Moral actions. An action is moral if it follows some moral standard. For, e.g., I

follow the moral standard of “speaking truth” and I always speak truth. Such actions are

not morally neutral and we judge them as morally right or wrong. These are all those

actions which may have some serious consequences for human welfare, i.e., either

seriously harming or benefiting. For instance, “ I can speed up my new sports car upto

180 Miles per Hour on the busiest road at noon” is a moral issue, since my action here

can serious injure somebody. Or, my action of supporting education of a needy orphan is

certainly a moral issue, since my action can benefit another human.

3) Immoral actions:-

Whenever an action violates the standards of morality, it is called an immoral action.

Taking the same standard of “truth telling”, if I violate it, and I lie, then my action can be

termed as morally wrong, and thus immoral.

It must be noted that both moral and immoral actions belong to the circle of morality and

its standards are applied to both, however, non-moral actions are completely outside the

fold of morality.

Value: There are two kind of value, general vales and personal values.

General value: a principle that promotes well-bring or prevent harm. Our guidance or our paradigm (complete system) about what is acceptable.

Personal value: emotional beliefs in principles regarded as particularly favorable or important for the individual.

About ethics, generally we can say that, ethics deals with the standards according to that we judge human actions to be wright and wrong. Ethics also deals with validity/truth of the ethical standards or rules i.e., why those rules are valid and on what grounds we ought to observe them.

Branches/Theories of Ethics:-

Since ethics has developed throughout the centuries in the last over two thousand years,

therefore, in order to understand its scope and nature, today we study it by dividing into

three broad areas:

1) Meta Ethics

2) Normative Ethics

3) Applied Ethics

We will briefly describe these branches and the important theories that developed under

these over a period of time.

1) Meta Ethics

Meta ethics is purely theoretical and is actually pure philosophy, i.e., knowledge for

knowledge sake. The aim of meta ethics is to achieve clear understanding. It is concerned

with the origin and meaning of ethical terms, propositions, and arguments. It is critical

and analytical in approach and is bothered about questions such as: what is good? And

why it is good?

Meta ethics investigates where our ethical principles come from, and what they mean?

Are they merely social inventions? Do they involve more than expressions of our

individual emotions?

Meta ethics can be further subdivided into:

i) Cognitivism

ii) Non Cognitivism

i) Cognitivism

According to cognitivists, ethical predicates such as GOOD, are not

meaningless or pseudo concepts, but are clearly meaningful. For them, moral facts do

exist. Cognitivism then further diverges into:

a) Naturalism:

According to the naturalists, the propositions of ethics can be translated into

propositions expressing non moral facts. For them, ethical concepts can be reduced to

some natural properties. i.e., X is Good = X is pleasant.

Or, X is Good because it is approved by a person(s). And X is approved by person(s)

because it is pleasant.

b) Non Naturalism

Non naturalism stands in sharp contrast to naturalism. According to nonnaturalists, the propositions of ethics cannot be translated into non-ethical statements.

Moral facts cannot be reduced to any other facts. Ethical predicates cannot be defined in

terms of some natural or metaphysical property. Ethical predicates are unique. They

reject naturalists, because for naturalists good is synonymous with natural properties such

as pleasure. But non naturalists objects that there are many things which are pleasant and

yet clearly not good.

ii) Non-Cognitivism

According to non-cognitivists, the statements of ethics are meaningless, i.e., “X is

good” is meaningless. They are not propositions at all. Ethical concepts are merely

pseudo concepts. If I say that “that table is brown”, then it’s a factual statement. But if I

say “Stealing is a wrong action” then it is meaningless, since there are no moral facts. For

them the world is amoral, i.e., no values exist in the world. According to them the

statements of ethics express our feelings and emotions, which are also intended to evoke

the same feelings in the listener. Example of such a view is emotivism

2) Normative Ethics

The word “normative” is derived from a Latin word “Norm” which means an accepted standard, or a way of behaving, or doing things that most people agree with.

Normative Science: Standards, rules, norms, or criteria by which we judge certain objects is called normative science.

Normative ethics seeks to provide a general guidance into the rules of actions. These

kinds of ethical theories are practical and provides guidance into our everyday life.

Rather than concerning itself with defining “good” and “bad” and other ethical terms,

they are more concerned with “what man ought to do?” and “what man ought not to

do” and “how man ought to do his actions?”. In simple words we can say that normative ethics is “justified moral values”.

Now, normative ethics is further subdivided into virtue, consequential (teleological), and non-consequential (deontological) theories.

2.1 Virtue Ethics.

2.2 Consequential (Teleological) Theory of Ethics.

Consequential theory of ethics, as the name clearly suggests, believes that the moral

worth of actions depends upon the consequences or results of an action. If the action

leads to the desired consequences, then it is good, otherwise not.

Consequential theories are further divided into:

a) Ethical Egoism (Self-interest theory)

b) Utilitarianism

a) Ethical Egoism

According to ethical egoism, man ought to do those actions which promote his best long

term self-interest and happiness. According to this theory then, one ought to promote his

own well-being and happiness, without bothering much about others around him. Selfinterest and selfishness is the principal standard in this theory.

b) Utilitarianism

According to the theory of utilitarianism, “man ought to do those actions which promote

the happiness and the general well-being of everybody concerned, including himself.”

2.3) Non-consequential ethics (Deontological)

Deontological theory of ethics says that an action is good only if done for the sake of

duty. According to them, the moral worth of an action does not depend upon the

consequences as was the case with consequentialists. Here, the moral worth of an action

depends upon the inner nature of that action itself. Results don’t make an action good or

bad, but the action is by its own inner nature either good or bad. Lying is a bad action

because it is bad by its very nature, even if it has some good results for the person or the

society.

If you want result "B", then do action "A" (Consequentialism)

Do action "A"! (Non-consequentialism)

It should be noted, that this theory is also called deontological as the word Deon is the

Greek word for Duty.

3) Applied Ethics

Applied ethics involves examining specific controversial issues, such as death penalty,

human cloning, nuclear energy, mercy killing etc. (Remember case of Teri Schiavo I

gave in the class, who was in coma)

Applied ethics uses the conceptual tools of Meta ethics, and the principles of normative

ethics, and applies them upon some controversial issues such as those I mentioned above,

or into some narrow areas like business, medical science etc. For example: Business

ethics, bio ethics.

Definition of professional ethics:

1. Professional ethics is standards set by professional organization for the behavior and

values of the people working within a specific field. Codes of professional ethics are established in order to provide guidance to professionals, usually to not abuse client relationship and preserve the integrity and reputation of the acceptable profession.

1. The ethical identity, codes and practices of a particular profession such as professions followed by doctors, lawyers, engineers, businessman. Etc.
2. Rules of acceptable conduct that member of a given profession is expected to follow.