INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY PALAKKAD

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

NOTES

What is Philosophy:

Quite literally, the term "philosophy", means, "love of wisdom." In a broad sense philosophy is an activity people undertake when they seek to understand fundamental truths about themselves, the world in which they live and their relationships to the world and to each other. As an academic discipline philosophy is much the same. Those who study philosophy are perpetually engaged in asking, answering, and arguing for their answers to life's most basic questions.

Etymology:

from the Greek – *Philosophia*: *Philo* = love or loving and *Sophia* = Wisdom. Hence Philosophy means "love of wisdom"

Definitions of philosophy: According to Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary 7th Ed:

1. The study of the nature and the meaning of the universe and of human life.
2. A set of beliefs or an attitude to life that guides somebody's behavior.

ETHICS

Suppose that all your life you have been trying to be a good person, doing your duty as you see it and seeking to do what is for the good of your fellowmen. Suppose also, that many of your fellowmen dislike you and what you are doing, and even regard you as a danger to society, although they cannot really show this to be true. Suppose further, that you are indicted, tried, and condemned to death by a jury of your peers, all in a manner which you correctly consider to be quite unjust. Suppose, finally, that while you are in prison awaiting execution, your friends arrange an opportunity for you to escape and to go into exile with your family. They argue that they can afford the necessary bribes and will not endangered by your escaping; that if you escape you will enjoy a longer life; that your wife and children will be better off; that your friends will still be able to see you; and that people generally will think that you should escape. Should you take the opportunity?

What is Ethics?

Origin:

From the Greek adjective '*ethica*', which again comes from the noun *ethos* which means customs, usages or habits. Ethics is also called moral philosophy. The word 'moral' is derived from the Latin '*mores*' which also means customs or habits.

The field of ethics, or morality studies the proper standards and principles of human conduct. It considers various answers to the question "How should I live"?

Consider these questions…

Do I often pick up quarrels? How can I talk to my mother so that she will listen? How can I help this company keep employee loyalty after all the layoffs? How, basically, should I lead my life? What is the most important thing for me to consider when I make decisions? The focus here is on the details of our lives or on the broad task of how people ought to behave. Ethics usually means determining what it is most important for us to do. Specifying the conduct most befitting us as humans.

How do Ethics differ from other courses?

Most subjects study in a systematic way laying down rules and regulations and following those rules. But philosophy (applied philosophy or applied ethics) does not have such strong rules to be followed, it is an open enquiry into anything from a critical and reflective perspective. Ethics studies the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, proper and improper conduct – but other subjects are not. Other courses are a source of **information**, while ethics is a source of **formation**. In ethics courses, unlike other classes, students are not simply told the score. Instead they are asked to scrutinize competing answers to questions and the arguments advanced to support them.

Ethics like other branches of philosophy, considered to have no orthodoxy that can simply be assumed. No view can be accepted on faith from one generation to the next. Ethical considerations form an integral part of human existence and are constantly disputed. Human beings argue about ethics partly because it is so central to our lives. Ethical issues arise whenever we consider how people behave and what guides their conduct. The study of ethics is concerned with what is good and evil, or right and wrong, for human beings generally, by virtue of their humanity. Most importantly, *Ethics deals with the powers we have to make choices.*

'Free will'

'Free will' is the conventional name of a topic that is best discussed without reference to the will. Its central questions are 'What is it to act (or choose) freely?', and 'What is it to be morally responsible for one's actions (or choices)?' These two questions are closely connected, for freedom of action is necessary for moral responsibility, even if it is not sufficient.

Philosophers give very different answers to these questions, hence also to two more specific questions about ourselves: (1) Are we free agents? and (2) Can we be morally responsible for what we do? Answers to (1) and (2) range from 'Yes, Yes' to 'No, No' – via 'Yes, No' and various degrees of 'Perhaps', 'Possibly', and 'In a sense'. Prominent among the 'Yes, Yes' sayers are the *compatibilists*, who hold that free will is compatible with *determinism*. Briefly, determinism is the view that everything that happens is necessitated by what has already gone before, in such a way that nothing can happen otherwise than it does. According to compatibilists, freedom is compatible with determinism because freedom is essentially just a matter of not being constrained or hindered in certain ways when one acts or chooses. Thus normal adult human beings in normal circumstances are able to act and choose freely. No one is holding a gun to their heads. They are not drugged, or in chains, or subject to a psychological compulsion. They are therefore wholly free to choose and act even if their whole physical and psychological make-up is entirely determined by things for which they are in no way ultimately responsible – starting with their genetic inheritance and early upbringing.

Incompatibilists hold that freedom is not compatible with determinism. They point out that if determinism is true, then every one of one's actions was determined to happen as it did before one was born. They hold that one cannot be held to be truly free and finally morally responsible for one's actions in this case. They think compatibilism is a 'wretched subterfuge…, a petty word-jugglery', as Kant put it (1788: 189–90). It entirely fails to satisfy our natural convictions about the nature of moral responsibility.

The incompatibilists have a good point, and may be divided into two groups. *Libertarians* answer 'Yes, Yes' to questions (1) and (2). They hold that we are indeed free and fully morally responsible agents, and that determinism must therefore be false. Their great difficulty is to explain why the falsity of determinism is any better than the truth of determinism when it comes to establishing our free agency and moral responsibility. For suppose that not every event is determined, and that some events occur randomly, or as a matter of chance. How can our claim to moral responsibility be improved by the supposition that it is partly a matter of chance or random outcome that we and our actions are as they are?

sanguine: optimistic or positive, especially in an apparently bad or difficult situation

The second group of incompatibilists is less sanguine. They answer 'No, No' to questions (1) and (2). They agree with the libertarians that the truth of determinism rules out genuine moral responsibility, but argue that the falsity of determinism cannot help. Accordingly, they conclude that we are not genuinely free agents or genuinely morally responsible, whether determinism is true or false. One of their arguments can be summarized as follows. When one acts, one acts in the way one does because of the way one is. So to be truly morally responsible for one's actions, one would have to be truly responsible for the way one is: one would have to be *causa sui*, or the cause of oneself, at least in certain crucial mental respects. But nothing can be *causa sui* – nothing can be the ultimate cause of itself in any respect. So nothing can be truly morally responsible.

Suitably developed, this argument against moral responsibility seems very strong. But in many human beings, the experience of choice gives rise to a conviction of absolute responsibility that is untouched by philosophical arguments. This conviction is the deep and inexhaustible source of the free will problem: powerful arguments that seem to show that we cannot be morally responsible in the ultimate way that we suppose keep coming up against equally powerful psychological reasons why we continue to believe that we are ultimately morally responsible.

DIVISION OF ETHICS

Today Ethical theories are divided into three subject areas:

1) Meta-ethics, 2) Normative Ethics, and 3) Applied Ethics.

1) 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-ethical answers to these questions focus on the issues of universal truths, the will of God, the role of reason in ethical judgments, etc.

2) Normative Ethics takes on a more practical task, which is to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. This may involve articulating the good habits that we should acquire, the duties that we should follow, or the consequences of our behavior on others.

3) Applied Ethics involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, environmental concerns, homosexuality, capital punishment, nuclear war etc.

CHALLENGES TO ETHICS

ETHICAL SUBJECTIVISM:

It means that no one can say what is right and wrong except the person or people involved. To put it another way, ethical subjectivists hold that whether some act is good or bad is a matter of how it appears to the individual who is doing the evaluating. If the individual regards it as the right course, then so it is; if he or she does not, then it is not. All depends on the person concerned.

Some would argue that something is right if someone believes it to be right. One argument for ethical subjectivism is that nothing can be invoked to demonstrate that something is right or wrong. People are unique. They are all creative, free agents and share nothing in common aside from the fact that they are all free to do as they will. There is no human nature from which to glean principles to help us make our choices.

Even our understanding of the world may be entirely unique and not shared with others. We must acknowledge this fact. There is no right and wrong; there are only the choices that we make. Indeed, human life is the complex and confusing affair that it obviously is because life shapes us into the selves that we all are. To pretend that some standards can be identified to guide us in our conduct is self-delusion and invites us to kid ourselves instead of accepting the reality that we are free and on our own. (This attitude is very close to the existentialist view of the human situation.)

Another subjectivist viewpoint asserts that we are not free at all. We cannot make choices, right or wrong, about our actions. We are guided by our innate constitution (instincts) or by our environment (sensory or social stimuli) to do as we will. Our likes and dislikes come

about arbitrarily, without our having a hand in their development or assessment. We are like the rest of the animal kingdom (except with respect to our greater biological complexities), and we move about in our world in accordance with the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology, economics, and politics. These laws govern our behavior. They are not easy to identify, true, and it remains for science to determine exactly what does play a decisive role in human affairs. But there is no reason to think that we differ from molecules, stones, planets, plants, zebras, and the rest of nature, all of which conform to a predetermined, preexisting order of things. In short, we are complex machines developed through evolution by the forces of nature. Considerations of right and wrong are mere prescientific confusion.

Objections: rendition: interpretation

Ethical subjectivism poses two challenges to ethics. First, in most of its renditions human nature is a myth – each person must create his or her own nature. Second, it does not permit us to identify a standard of moral conduct.

In objection to the subjectivists we could go on to claim that the theory in fact proposes a **standard** of right and wrong, however much this is denied. Because we human beings are self-moved, free, and undetermined, it is our task to carry out the activities we can freely engage in, to be creative as only human beings can be. To be individuals true to the requirements of our human nature is to be creative, ever-growing, ever-developing, never-stagnant beings coping with our own circumstances. Whatever our freedom consists in, whatever it is that we are ultimately free to do, is just what we ought to do and do well.

ETHICAL NIHILISM

The term "nihilism" originated in the Latin word *nihil,* meaning "nothing." Most nihilists are actually fervent opponents of their culture's dominant values, although more broadly speaking, nihilism advocates opposition to all moral and political values. The nihilist rejects the very idea that moral (and political) values should be instrumental in human life.

Moral principles are devices of exploitation. Nihilists see moral values as means by which the productive, imaginative, genuinely powerful elements of humanity are subordinated to its baser members. Consciously or unconsciously, moralists, according to the nihilist, seek to sabotage the very best in human beings. By intimidation, threat of punishment, doctrines of divine retribution (for example, the idea of hell and damnation in an afterlife), and the like, moralists impose upon people practices, systems, and institutions that destroy the life-sustaining features of the human race.

Friedrich Nietzsche (19th century French Philosopher and a Nihilist) rejected Christianity's conceptions about morality (such as doctrines about the supreme virtue of humility, self sacrifice, and charity). He himself predicted that the twentieth century would see a return to nihilism.

The nihilist's position, in general, reflects total dismay and disgust with the so-called morally good human life. As a result the nihilist sometimes rejects and opposes all actual and possible moral positions. But as with Nietzsche, the nihilist often responds with a sharp attack on prevailing ideals and values only to cry out for new ones. Beyond the occasional call for new values, nihilists in general do not believe that values can be demonstrated objectively.

Therefore the new values must in some sense be relative to the character of the willing individuals who select them.

Criticism

Nihilism is more often a desperate (though brilliant, powerful, and even dazzlingly beautiful) form of protest than a precise argument in support of some philosophical viewpoint.

First, in a basic sense values are just what the nihilists are asking for. By opposing values, they proclaim some of their own. The strict nihilist tells us to abandon our concern with values and moral truth. However petty the procedure may appear to him, we must determine whether the call itself is warranted. Is it true that we ought to abandon a concern with values? Is this universally true? Will the quality of life be improved if we do so? The nihilist is apparently obliged to answer yes to all these questions. But the nihilist who does so is not being candid with us. Nihilists do not tell us to discard all values. Instead they advise us that certain moral positions are in fact wrong and destructive.

Nietzsche too criticized from a moral point of view; he too argued for what should be done rather than for what was being done. He foresaw a future time, furthermore, when proper values would be generated, after the improper ones had wrought their destruction.

Notions of morality in a culture may become distorted by news media or by the pronouncements of politicians, religious leaders, or parents. Nevertheless, morality may also manifest itself properly.

TYPES OF MORAL THEORIES

Deontological and Utilitarian Moral Theories

Deontological Moral Theory:

The word deontology derives from the Greek words for duty (*deon*) and science, or study (*logos*). In contemporary moral philosophy, deontology is one of those kinds of normative theories regarding which choices are morally required, forbidden, or permitted. In other words, deontology falls within the domain of moral theories that guide and assess our choices of what we ought to do (deontic theories), in contrast to virtue theories which fundamentally assess what kind of person we should be. A deontological moral theory focuses on the intention (purity of intention) that underlies an action. In everyday ethical talk, for example, we often hear the expression "It is the thought that counts." If someone does something that is highly valued but the person has ulterior motives (for example, he or she wants power or praise or favors granted in return), then the act itself is deemed morally insignificant.

Immanuel Kant advanced this point. By his account a moral act must aim for nothing beyond its realization as a moral act. The moral goodness of a deed derives from its being

intended by the agent to be nothing except a morally good deed. A person may act in accordance with ethics or morality, but if she does it for pleasure or hopes to go to heaven or to win public approval as a result, no moral praise will be forthcoming even though the act accords with morality. An agent exhibits moral goodness only when he has the purest intention to be morally good.

Kant on Ethics and Duty (Kant's Moral Philosophy)

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is known for his famous ethical treatise viz. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785).* Kant set out to restore reason to what he regarded as its rightful place in our moral life. Specifically, he attempted to show that there are some things that we ought to do and others that we ought not to do merely by virtue of being rational. Moral obligation thus has nothing to do with consequences, in Kant's view, but arises solely from a moral law that is binding on all rational beings. Although Kant's own expression of his theory is difficult to understand, the main thrust can be formulated in two intuitive principles: universalizability and respect for persons.

According to Kant there is nothing absolutely good except a **good will**. A will is good when it is determined by respect for the moral law, or the consciousness of duty. An act that is done from inclination is not moral. Moreover, the rightness or wrongness of an action does not depend on its effects or consequences; it is immaterial whether happiness or perfection results, so long as the motive of the agent is good.

According to Kant moral law is a **Categorical Imperative** (an unconditional command). Categorical imperative does not say do this if you would be happy or successful or perfect, but it says: Do it because it is your duty to do it (duty for duty's sake).

Kant gives three Maxims which will guide an individual's behavior.

MAXIM 1: Always act in such a way that you *will* the maxim or determining principle of your action to become a universal law.

MAXIM 2: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.

MAXIM 3: Therefore, every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends

The Categorical Imperative is a universal and necessary law, *a priori*, and it is inherent in reason itself. It is present in the commonest man; though he may not be clearly conscious of it, it governs his moral judgments, it is his standard of right and wrong. The rational will, therefore, imposes upon itself universal laws, laws that hold for all and are acceptable to all. If everybody obeyed the law of reason then a society of rational beings would result as a kingdom of ends, a society organized by rational purposes.

A categorical imperative, in other words, implicitly commands a perfect society. Therefore every rational being ought to act as if he were by his maxims of universal principles, a legislating member of a universal kingdom of ends. She is both **sovereign** and a **subject**: she lays down the law and acknowledges the law.

To conclude:

In Kant's view, what is distinctive about human beings, which makes them different from "things" or inanimate objects, is the possession of reason, and by reason Kant means the ability to posit ends and to act purposefully to achieve them. In acting to achieve ends, human beings also have free will that enables them to create rules to govern their own conduct. This idea of acting on self-devised rules is conveyed by the term **autonomy** , which is derived from two Greek words meaning "self " and "law." To be autonomous is quite literally to be a **lawgiver to oneself**, or **self-governing**. A rational being, therefore, is a being who is autonomous. To respect other people, then, is to respect their capacity for acting freely, that is, their autonomy.

Kant's ethical theory thus yields at least two important results: the principles of universalizability and respect for persons, which are important elements of ethical reasoning

UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism is a theory of ethics based on a principle formulated in Jeremy Bentham's book *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789). He argues: by the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question…. Thus actions are to be judged only by the contribution they make to increasing human happiness or decreasing human misery. The moral validity of a law or rule, or the value of an institution depends on the same considerations. If the tendency of an action is to increase the happiness of the community is greater than any tendency to diminish it, then it is comfortable to the principle of utility. A pertinent consideration is its contribution to happiness.

According to Utilitarianism the morally right action is the action that produces the most good. The Classical Utilitarian, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, identified the good with pleasure. They also held that we ought to maximize the good, that is, bring about 'the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number'.

John Stuart Mill (1803-73)

John Stuart Mill is the most famous utilitarian philosopher. In his book *Utilitarianism* he develops and refines the cruder version of the theory which bad been put forward by his mentor Jeremy Bentham. Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle, for example, is simply 'actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness'. Both Bentham and Mill were hedonists (pleasure seekers) in the sense that their approach to ethics was founded upon the pursuit of pleasure (not, however, merely the pursuit of individual's own pleasure, but rather the pursuit of the greatest overall pleasure). Actions for both philosophers were to be judged according to their probable consequences, not according to any religious code or set of binding principles.

The phrase 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' is sometimes used to describe the utilitarian approach to ethics, but this can be misleading. What both Bentham and Mill were interested in was achieving the greatest *aggregate* happiness (that is, the largest total sum of happiness) irrespective of how that happiness was distributed. It would be consistent with this approach to think that it would be better to make a few people extremely happy than to make a much larger number slightly happier provided that the sum of happiness in the first case was larger than the sum in the second.

Mill's utilitarianism differs from Bentham's in that he gives a more sophisticated account of happiness. For Mill, there are qualitatively different sorts of pleasure: higher and lower pleasures. Higher pleasures are to be preferred to lower ones. Bentham, in contrast, treats all pleasures equally.

Mill on higher and lower pleasures

One common criticism of simple versions of utilitarianism, such as Bentham's, is that they reduce the finesses of human life to a stark calculation of animal-like pleasures, with no concern for how these pleasures are produced. Utilitarianism of this kind was ridiculed as a doctrine only worthy of swine.

Mill meets such criticisms with his distinction between higher and lower pleasures. As he puts it, it is better to be a dissatisfied human being than a satisfied pig; and better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied fool. Human beings are capable of intellectual pleasures as well as the brute physical ones; pigs cannot have intellectual pleasures. Mill argues that the intellectual pleasures, those he calls higher pleasures, are intrinsically more valuable than the physical lower ones. His argument in support of this is that those who have felt both kinds of pleasure will certainly prefer the intellectual kind.

Conclusion

Since the early 20th Century utilitarianism has undergone a variety of refinements. After the middle of the 20th Century it has become more common to identify as a 'Consequentialist' since very few philosophers agree entirely with the view proposed by the Classical Utilitarians, particularly with respect to the hedonistic value theory. But the influence of the Classical Utilitarians has been profound — not only within moral philosophy, but within political philosophy and social policy. The question Bentham asked, "What use is it?," is a cornerstone of policy formation. It is a completely secular, forward-looking question. The articulation and systematic development of this approach to policy formation is owed to the Classical Utilitarians.

Acknowledgements:

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