

Ethics and Values
Dr. M Rashmi
Department of Social Sciences
VIT University, Vellore

Lecture – 1
Understanding Ethics and Morals

Hello everyone!

In this lecture we will look into the meaning of ethics, and its relationship with morality. We can look at ethics as an academic discipline or as a philosophy or rather more as a rational process of understanding our moral behaviour. Now what does it mean? In very simple terms, we can say that ethics deals with the ways of thinking and understanding philosophically about morality.

Morality or moral behaviour is not necessarily the result of philosophical reflections. These philosophical reflections demand a sense of rationalization because sometimes we have to justify our decisions, our assumptions, our perceptions and definitely our actions. Moral assumptions, customs, beliefs and practices of human societies and cultures did not come into existence within one day; rather they evolved over a period of time as a result of various situations encountered in its process of social or cultural evolution. And ethics as a reflective process reflects upon these moralities. That is why it is also called as moral philosophy. It deals with philosophical reflections and analyses the moral judgements we make. We do make a lot of different kinds of moral judgements in our life like when we say it is always good to help others, we should be honest in our intentions, lying is a bad habit. Similarly, we can gather various examples of right and wrong; good and bad from our own personal life. But what we have to understand is, when we make such moral judgements by defining something as good and bad, we should know that these perceptions are deep rooted in our culture and our education, which might undergo changes. None of our assumptions can remain permanent; they definitely get modified with time through the process of socialisation. As children we might have followed certain fundamental morals taught by our family through the process of socialisation, but again through the same process we gather experiences and educate ourselves. In this process we get exposed to different cultures, customs, practices and moral assumptions and we sometimes change, modify or even question our own morals to develop another version of assumptions with substantial changes. The term “ethics” is derived from the Greek word “ethos” which means character, habit, customs, ways of behaviour, etc. And the term “morality” corresponds to the Latin word “mores” which signifies customs, character, behaviour, etc. Now, as you can see both of these terms have a lot to do with customs, character, habit and behaviour. So, it’s very important for us to understand that these words or rather these disciplines are associated with customs and behaviour of human beings.

Let’s pause for a moment and have a quick reflection spot:

Which among these definitions correspond to the discipline ethics?

- a) It is a normative science of conduct of human beings living in society.
- b) It deals with certain standards of behaviour.
- c) It is a moral philosophy.
- d) It is a study of morality.
- e) It is 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.

Think for a moment and identify the correct answer. Now, all these definitions correspond to the discipline ethics. As we already discussed, ethics is a moral philosophy which reflects upon what is good and bad in a human conduct for which a 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. So, the ultimate aim of ethics is to guide human behaviour and develop harmony among social beings. Harmony is a very important condition to ensure progress, happiness and well-being of human kind. We now come to the end of this lecture and in this lecture we learned some definitions of ethics. In the next lecture, we will understand the relevance and scope of ethics.

Thank you!