

Ethics and Values
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Lecture – 2
Scope of ethics

Before we start today's lecture, let me ask you a simple question from the previous lecture.

Take a moment and try to remember the answer,

The term ethics is derived from the Greek word _____.

Do you remember which that Greek word is? I hope you got it right!! The word is “ethos”.

In the previous lecture, I spoke about the ultimate aim of ethics, which is to establish harmony among individuals and society. Alexander Frank Skutch, a well-known naturalist, writer and philosopher stated in his famous book “Moral Foundations: An Introduction to Ethics” that ethics is an effort of harmonization to mitigate conflict. Any effort of harmonization, let it be conscious or unconscious is essential for sustaining a society because without this phenomenon, no societies can survive and exist.

For this some form of regulations, norms or guideline of behaviour is required. Ethics deals with these principles which guide our conduct. It is not merely following a tradition or custom. Instead it demands analysis and evaluation of these guidelines in light of universal principles. For example, you might be aware of the endosulfan tragedy in Kerala. Endosulfan is a pesticide which was extensively used in plantations and farming activities especially during the 1980s and 1990s. This pesticide had serious consequences on the health of people who were living in the nearby areas. As you can see, the effects were deadly. These are objectionable actions and we have solid reasons to call them objectionable. Freedom is being treated nowadays particularly as a very important virtue or a very important principle to be observed. Yes we should respect the freedom of individuals. No doubt on that! But at the same time don't you think if we give freedom to everyone during all time, in all locations, wouldn't it cause an anomic situation? That is why in certain locations, certain places freedom of individuals have to be limited, controlled and restricted. This is an image of the salt Satyagraha or famously known as Dandi march. I will be talking about the concept of Satyagraha in the lecture where I will be discussing about Gandhian philosophy. Here, Gandhiji led this nonviolent act of civil disobedience to protest against the British repressive monopoly on the collection and manufacturing of salt and also levying a salt tax. What he did was a violation of law and a criminal offence during the colonial times. But Gandhiji's action also represents the virtue of freedom and it's against the injustice imposed by the British.

Now let's discuss the scope of ethics. Ethics primarily deals with voluntary actions. Now, what are voluntary actions? Take a moment and reflect upon the options.

- a) Human actions done by humans consciously, deliberately and in view of an end.
- b) Human actions done by humans unintentionally and unconsciously.

I hope you selected the right answer. Option a) is the right answer. Now, why is ethics concerned about voluntary actions and not involuntary actions? The one factor which makes the difference between these two actions is the intention. And ethics is all about these intentions. Suppose you decide to work for the rural community, now why are you doing this? People sometimes ask this question to themselves, and you have to be genuine while answering yourself. Is it only for fame? or is it for helping the community? And if fame comes or not, is not a matter for you. So, as you can see, when we make a decision or do an action, the intentions behind it define the ultimate quality of the action.

Now let's have a look at the scope of ethics. The scope or the relevance of ethics includes systematic issues, corporate issues and finally individual issues: Systematic issues encompass questions about the morality of capitalism or of the laws, regulations, industrial structures and social practices within which business operates. For example, whether the laws are being relaxed to some business owners or to ensure proper framework for businesses to address issues like discrimination in the workplace, unsafe working conditions, responsibility towards the environment etc. Corporate issues involve questions about the morality of the activities, policies, practices or organizational structure of a company as a whole. For example, the policies of the company, are they ethical? Suppose a company has a policy of selling their products to the customers below the MRP without hampering the quality of the product, we can say that the corporate is ethical in behaviour. Let's look at another example, you might have heard of the term called corporate social responsibility (CSR). Now, corporate social responsibility is a concept whereby companies are meant to integrate social, economic and environmental concerns in their business operations and interactions with stakeholders. In India, CSR is law and India is the first country to legally mandate CSR in the year 2014. Based on this law, any corporate of a certain turnover and profitability should spend two percent of their average net profit of past three years in CSR. How many companies are doing that? If they are not following it properly, then we can say that they are unethical in behaviour. Individual issues include questions about the morality of the decisions, actions or character of an individual which means whether certain actions of an individual are really acceptable or ethical in a society or not. Suppose you happen to see a road rage or a road accident victim, now what should be our moral responsibility? Shouldn't we go and help that person or should we stand there as spectators, and as we see now, take a picture or video of it to post it on social media or find immediate help. What should we do?

Now let us look at a case, the government has now made it compulsory for businesses with over INR 50 crore turnovers to generate e-invoices for business to business transactions from April 1. Think for a while and tell me, this is addressing which type of ethical issue? We have three options,

- a) Systematic,
- b) Corporate and
- c) Individual

Now here you have to understand that the government or the system has come with the law to ensure transparency during business operations. So, this case is an example which addresses

systematic issues. Similarly, you can identify various examples on these issues. So, let's summarise what we have understood about ethics. Ethics is the study of the values and guidelines by which we live. Ethics is a science as it is body of reasoned truths organised logically. Ethics is theoretical and practical as it provides both fundamental principles on which moral judgements are arrived and it is also concerned about the end to be gained and the means to attain it. Generally, the terms ethics and morality are used interchangeably, although at some perspectives we can differentiate them. Many people think of morality as personal, subjective or normative whereas ethics defines the standards of good and bad distinguished by a community or a social setting. For example, your local community may think of live-in relationship as immoral, and you personally may agree with that. However, the distinction can be useful if your local community has no strong feelings about cohabitation or live-in relationship, but you consider it as immoral on a personal level. By these definitions of the terms, your morality would contradict the ethics of your community. With this we come to the end of today's lecture. In the next lecture, we will briefly understand the meaning of values. Thank you!