Nature of Ethics and Ethical Thinking

The English word ‘ethics’ derives from the Greek word ‘ethos’ which means conduct/ behavior/ character/custom etc. So literally ethics may be defined as the study of what is right (good) or wrong (bad) in behavior. Ethics is also called moral philosophy. Here we study some moral principles which help us to distinguish between right or wrong behavior.

The study of ethics helps us to know people’s beliefs, moral standards, the meaning of ethical terms and concepts, values and morals; learn the good and bad of them, and practice them to bring their well-being and happiness. It involves the inquiry on the existing situations, form judgments and resolve the issues. In addition, ethics tells us how to live, what we should or ought to do in a particular situation.

William Lille defines ethics as ‘the normative science of conduct of human beings living in a society- a science which judges this conduct to be right or wrong, to be good or bad, or in some similar way’. According to this definition, ethics is a science in the sense that it is a systematic and more or less complete body of knowledge about rightness/ wrongness of human conduct. Again, ethics is normative science, not positive science. The sciences which are studied in the laboratories are descriptive or positive. Positive science describes objects or phenomena as we observe them with our eyes or other sense organs (physics, botany etc.), or in the case of mental process like desiring and willing as we observe them by introspection or looking inside our minds (psychology). There is a group of sciences, however, which don’t deal directly with observed facts, but which deal with the standards or rules or norms or criteria by which we judge certain objects and those sciences are called normative sciences. As ethics deals with the standards by which we judge human actions to be right or wrong, so it is called normative science. Other examples of normative sciences are, e.g., Aesthetic and logic,

Further, ethics deals with the voluntary actions. Non voluntary actions are not the subject matter of ethics. Also ethics does not deal with the behavior of children, mads, and people who live outside of society and whose behavior don’t affect others.

Types of Ethics

1. Descriptive Ethics: This is a form of study into the beliefs and attitudes of individuals or a group of people or a society. The aim of descriptive ethics is to uncover peoples believes about such things as values, which actions are right or wrong, and which characteristics of moral agents are virtuous. As descriptive ethics involves empirical investigation, it is a field which is usually investigated by those working in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, biology etc.

2. Normative Ethics: The branch of ethics which is concerned with standard or criteria or principle to determine what is right and wrong. Normative ethics supplies us some moral principles with the help of which we can know what is right action and how we should act in a certain situation.

3. Meta-ethics: It is also called analytic ethics. The primary task of this discipline is to clarify the meaning of ethical terms and concepts. It raises the questions like- what is meant by ‘good’ or ‘bad’; ‘right’ or wrong’. Justifying moral judgements and moral standards are also the subject matter of meta-ethics.

4. Applied Ethics: It refers to the practical application of moral considerations. Here we apply the normative moral principles to deal with the ethical issues of our everyday life. It is ethics with respect to real world actions and their moral considerations in the areas of private and public life, the professions, health, technology, environment and leadership.

(See, William Lille--An Introduction to Ethics, ch.one. W.K Frankena—Ethics, ch. one).

An Example of Ethical Thinking

We know that Socrates spent his life doing what is good for his fellowmen. But many of them disliked him and regarded as a danger to society, although they could not really show this to be true. After a trial Socrates was condemned to death by a jury, all in a manner which is considered by many unjust. When Socrates was in jail some of his friends arranged an opportunity to escape and go into exile with his family. They argued that they could afford the necessary bribes and would not be endangered by his escaping; that Socrates would enjoy a longer life, that his wife and children would be better off, that his friends would still be able to see him, and that people generally would think that Socrates should escape. Should Socrates take this opportunity?

Socrates, however, didn’t agree to escape. His decision was not based on emotion, neither he answered the question by appealing to what common people generally think. In order to make the decision he applied some moral principles like we ought never to harm the state by violating its law, that we should not break our promises and agreement; one’s state is virtually one’s parent and teacher. So Socrates’ answer was based on reason.

It is important to notice here that in each of these arguments Socrates appeals to a general rule or principle which many of us accept as valid. In this pattern of moral reasoning one determines what one should do in a particular situation by reference to certain general principles which one takes as premises from which to deduce a particular conclusion by a kind of practical reasoning. (Taken from W.K Frakena -- Ethics, pp. 1-3).

Why Study Ethics? The Uses of Ethics

Ethics is a branch of philosophy. The literal meaning of philosophy is love of wisdom or love for knowledge. So ethics is primarily a part of the quest for knowledge. We naturally want to know the truth of things, and ethics aims at the finding out the truth about something that is both interesting and important – the rightness and wrongness of human conduct. There is, however, no guarantee that the man who studies ethics and understand the differences between right and wrong will necessarily follow right, just like a man who knows a lot about religion may not be pious in its real sense.

At the same time, there is no reason to doubt that, if other influences are favorable, the knowledge of ethics will give some help in the pursuit of goodness. The student of ethics is more likely to be right in his application of moral rules to a particular case than the man who has an equal knowledge of the circumstances of the case but no knowledge of ethics. He is more likely, among other things, to be less biased and more comprehensive in his outlook. And the chief value of ethics is not in the guidance it gives in particular cases, but in the development of width of outlook and seriousness of purpose in dealing with moral matters generally. These are qualities of outstanding and permanent value in the good man, and there is every reason to think that the student of ethics has more chance to attain hem than the ordinary man.

Study of ethics improves one’s cognitive skill- skills of the intellect in thinking clearly, increases proficiency in recognizing moral problems, helps searching beyond obvious the alternative responses to issues and being receptive to creative solutions, teaches to express and support one’s views to others and assessing different views along with forming consistent viewpoints based on facts. Ethics also teaches how to act in morally desirable ways such as willing and able to be morally responsible, showing concerns for the wellbeing of others besides oneself, tolerance of diversity. i.e. respect for ethinic and religious differences and acceptance of reasonable differences in moral perspectives, believing in using rational dialogue for resolving moral conflict/dilemma, willing to uphold moral principles etc.