UNIT 4   ETHICS IN THE HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY
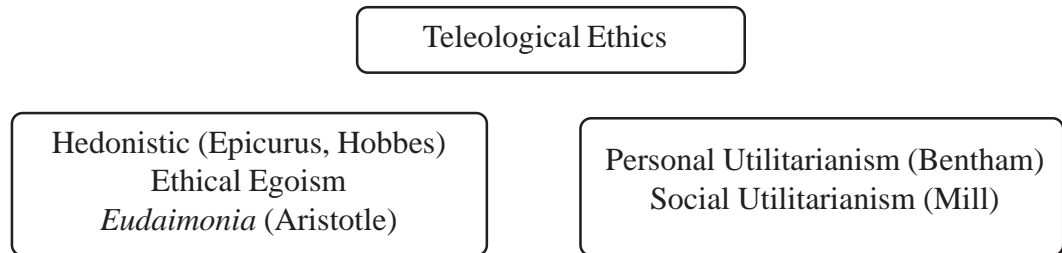
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4.0   OBJECTIVES

As Sir David Ross points out, in a classical work *Foundations of Ethics*, written over sixty years ago, there are, broadly speaking, two approaches to ethics. This is better known as the distinction between deontological and teleological ethics. The Greek word for an 'end', in the sense of a goal to be achieved, is *telos*. Hence, 'teleological' ethics comprises all those kinds of ethics which see the criterion of morality in terms of whether an action fulfills the overall total end of human life in general and of moral activity in particular. The word 'deontological' was coined by the British moralist, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), from the Greek word, *deon*, literally, that which is binding. Deontological ethics views the morally good in terms of doing ones duty. Deontology would be the science of moral duties. We shall see that these two approaches differ more in emphasis than anything else; they are not mutually exclusive water-tight compartments.

4.1   INTRODUCTION

Let us start with teleological approach. Ever since Aristotle, practically the entire Western tradition of philosophizing has accepted his contention that the ultimate human end is "happiness." Now this could be understood as either exclusively, or with a strong stress on, individual or private happiness. This, in turn, can be understood in two further ways: as pleasure (but not in the narrow, crude sense that the term usually implies), in which case we have the school hedonistic ethics; or it can be seen as self-realization and this is the *eudaimonic* approach. The other alternative is to see happiness more from the standpoint of others, of the community. Thus the utilitarian ethics may once again be looked at from a personal

or a social dimension. Summarizing all this in a convenient diagram, we can represent it thus

Teleological Ethics

Hedonistic (Epicurus, Hobbes)
Ethical Egoism
Eudaimonia (Aristotle)

Personal Utilitarianism (Bentham)
Social Utilitarianism (Mill)

Deontological approach comprises a rather heterogeneous group of people whose sole title in common is that they look upon moral actions from the point of view of "duty" or "obligation". In other words, it is the morally "right", rather than the morally "good" which is their concern. The key question for them, then, is why the morally "right" should be so, in other words, what makes "duty" a "duty"? Some of the prominent philosophers of deontology are Ockham, Durkhiem, Kant and Aquinas

4.2   EPICURUS (CIRCA IV CENTURY BCE)

Epicurus sought to eliminate all unpleasant feelings like fear and anxiety from the contemporary psyche and promote emotions of well being, harmony and pleasure. Not surprisingly, he summoned his followers to meet in a beautiful garden (Epicureanism is, thus, sometimes called, the Philosophy of the Garden) and seek after pleasure. This was not the base 'wine-women-and-song' kind of thing that the English word 'Epicurean' now implies, but the appreciation of the nobler and higher refinements of life, such as friendship, art, music, and the like. Moreover, he stressed the quest, not for the fleeting, transitory thing, but that pleasure which might last for a life-time. In other words, absence of pain and serenity of mind (Greek, *atarxia*), rather than pleasure- gratification was his aim. Now *atarxia* was to be sought, first of all, by removal of all false fears, such as the fear of death and the fear of the gods. Such fears, like all vices, were "not conducive" to *atarxia*. Indeed, he saw the highest virtue of all to be *phronesis*, discernment, the ability to size up and estimate the quality and lastingness of pleasure and pain enshrined in various possible actions, so as to maintain a life in the best possible state of *atarxia*. What is relevant for us is Epicurus' insight is that the criterion of morality is conduciveness to our human final end.

4.3   ARISTOTLE (IV CENTURY BCE)

Aristotle's ethics begins with the observation that all beings seek their perfection. Humans are no exception to this universal principle and, indeed, 'happiness' is really to be founded in the attainment of human perfection or self realization. He then goes on to distinguish between two kinds of human actions that can help us attain authentic happiness and these are the moral and intellectual virtues. Virtue is defined as a habitual state or disposition of the soul and Aristotle is well-known for his dictum that virtue is golden mean between two extremes: thus courage is the mid-point between the "vice of excess" of foolhardiness and the "vice of the minimal," cowardice. He gives pride of place and space to the five intellectual virtues: practical knowledge (*techne*), prudence (*phronesis*) ratiocination or the ability to make arguments and proofs thanks to logic (*episteme*)

intuitive insight (*nous*) and wisdom (*sophia*), the highest and noblest of them all. It is wisdom which enables us to attain the true happiness which is our last end. It is clear that his is a teleological ethics par excellence: the guiding motive in it all is not law or obligation, but what is conducive to one's end. In other words, for Aristotle, moral rightness or wrongness is seen more in terms of the "good" consciously intended by the human agent. Thus, moral badness is linked to ignorance in the sense that no one seeks evil knowingly and willingly, as such.

4.4   THOMAS AQUINAS (1224-1274)

Thomas Aquinas was arguably the greatest catholic luminary of the middle ages. This Dominican monk, basing his moral philosophy on the teleological *eudaimonia* of Aristotle stressed God as the ultimate end or "supreme good" of humans (as, indeed, of all beings). His Christian convictions, however, led him to aver that only with the help of God's grace – a free, supernatural gift – could we attain our fullest encounter with our last end, in the next life. God has a plan for all creation – not a kind of fatalistically predetermined one, but rather a vision of creative development, enshrined in the dynamism of every being and directing it to its full flowering. In other words, God's eternal law for all beings is manifest in the natural law, inbuilt into their own natures or essences. This "natural law" is accessible to humans partly through revelation and partly through human reason.

The norm of morality for Aquinas, then, is ultimately God's eternal law or "eternal reason", but more proximately it is "human reason" which can work out its implications by critically reflecting on what the "natural law" entails. That which is in conformity with the demands of the natural law, as discovered partly by the right use of human reason, is morally good; that which is not, is morally bad. Obviously, for Aquinas, the norm of morality ("natural law") is intrinsic to the human act and not an extrinsic command or anything else outside of it.

Aquinas, inspired by Aristotle, distinguished between "speculative" and "practical" reason: the former had to do with theoretical knowledge, the latter with issues of a more practical import (action, more precisely, moral conduct). Furthermore, each of these could be subdivided into a more discursive or argumentative part (ratio, rationality) and a more intuitive aspect (*intellectus*). The intuitive part of speculative reason furnishes ratio with those basic "first principles" it calls upon to carry out its reasoning process (e.g. the principle of identity and contradiction). These "truths" are self-evident and do not require any "proof": indeed, as first principles, they cannot be proved but are the implicit propositions of all argumentation and proof used by ratio. In the same way, there are also some "self-evident" first principles of practical reason, called *synderesis*, such as, "Do good and avoid evil". Aquinas calls them the "first principles of the natural law". The above mentioned example is, of course, relevant to morals. But *synderesis* also has its bearing in other spheres of activity. Aquinas adds some illustrations. For instance, there are those which we humans share with all beings: the principle of self-preservation is one such. Then there are those we share with animals – procreation or reproduction is one of the most important of these. Then there are those which are proper to humans alone: besides the moral one quoted above, there are also similar obligations such as the need to live in society and to get to know about God. These, as we shall see, should not be identified with what we call "conscience".

From these "first principles" which, generally speaking are universal and unchanging, we derive "secondary and more specific ones" which, though also of universal and unchanging import, at least theoretically, are susceptible to change or adaptation in particular concrete cases. Thus, the secondary principle which directs one to always tell the truth and never utter falsehood may be relaxed when an unjust aggressor asks one to tell him where his father is hiding. This is, furthermore, how Aquinas explains how there appears to be variance among the moral practices of people. It is due to wrong argumentation from the first principles: thus, unknown to certain people, they accepted some perversions and corrupt practices as ethically sound. Finally we cannot omit mention of Aquinas' rather thorough treatment of the virtues, among which we must draw attention to prudence, which safeguards Thomistic ethics from the pitfalls of legalism and inflexibility.

4.5   WILLIAM OF OCKHAM (1290-1349)

This medieval Franciscan friar, an inveterate enemy of Thomism, is the person mainly responsible for having established a deep rooted empirical trend into British philosophy, a heritage that would be called upon and developed by Locke, Berkeley and Hume some five hundred years later. As a counterblast to the intellectualism of Aquinas, he championed voluntarism: Ockham appears to be concerned with upholding God's freedom and omnipotence (as he understood it) at all costs. Thus he refused to recognize the wrongness of human acts as stemming from any inherent quality in themselves, but wholly and entirely from the free decision of God, whose omnipotence was absolute, being restricted only by what would be logically contradictory.

But Ockham seems to confuse the whole issue by giving a place to both God's ordered power as well as right reason. The former refers to God's free decision, whereby he has established the actual moral order, opting to make certain actions right and other wrong. He would hardly make a general change in this matter. All this seems to conflict with his other notion which says that a morally good act should also be in conformity with the "right reason." Indeed, he goes along with the common medieval assumption that a person is obliged to follow what, according to his sincere conviction, is in conformity with it, even if he were in error. But this last idea seems to do more credit to Ockham's head than his heart. For if he thereby opened up the possibility for a person who does not accept divine revelation (how else, except through divine revelation could we come to know what is right and what is wrong, since God freely decides this), yet there seems to be a certain contradiction here: if "right reason" can somehow account for moral rightness, then it is not quite dependent exclusively on God's free choice.

4.6   THOMAS HOBBES (1588-1679)

In his classic book *Leviathan* named after the gigantic monster mentioned in the book of Genesis and which was his image of the all powerful state, Hobbes gave us his description of "man in the free state of nature", that is, before humans banded together to set up social structures and institutions. In a word, life was sheer hell in those times: man behaved unto man like a ferocious wild beast (*homo homini lupus*). Indeed that is why humans established the state: its primary

aim was to prevent, by sheer superior brute force, humans from attacking each other, expropriating each others' property and tearing each other to shreds. The price each had to pay to attain this measure of peace and order was the sacrifice some of his freedom and his natural desire to possess everything for himself. Like Epicurus, Hobbes was a hedonist: pleasure was the motivating principle for him too. It was the naturally human desire for pleasure (in the form of peace, harmony and a longer life) that led him to set up the state. The state, then, enacted various laws to make humans behave in accordance with the laws of nature. Civil law would codify them in more precise and relevant forms proper to each nation. The state would need to be invested with all power and authority so that none would dare to challenge it. Then only would it be able to curb the natural urge of humans to rape, loot and tyrannize. Power is thus a necessary constituent of law. In effect, for Hobbes, actions are bad because they are forbidden, not the other way round. The source of moral rightness or wrongness, the criterion of morality, is what is the law says, whether it be divine law or positive (civil) law. The ethical teachings of Hobbes have been qualified in various ways. Some call it "Ethical Egoism" in as much as it is based on the allegedly natural and reasonable human urge to seek pleasure and self-preservation. Others prefer to dub it "Social Utilitarianism" because it grounds law on the desire of humans to live in peace and harmony with each other. A third view is that it is a kind of "Moral Positivism" because it posits divine power (or God's will) as the ultimate ground of moral good, as the sole criterion of morality.

4.7   JEREMY BENTHAM (1748-1832)

Bentham saw the ethical issue from a more individualistic point of view. His argument was that, since society is made up of individuals, it would be quite in order to view the whole subject from the perspective of individual utility-seeking as the basis of ethics. A "good" law, for Bentham, is one in which "utility" is effected resulting in pleasure or happiness to the party whose interest is concerned. Drawing apparently on Hobbes, he takes it as a clear datum that the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the chief human motives in decision making. Yet, he emphasizes, he is not speaking merely of sensual pleasure but also that which arises from intellectual study and benevolent.

Most human beings, however, do not know precisely how to apply this standard in daily life, especially when it is a matter of making an option between multiple choices. To this end he offers "a felicific calculus" as a guideline for the common man in his decision making process. First of all, he observes, it would seem reasonable that one should choose that action which would bring about the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number of persons for the longest stretch of time. He then proposes seven norms to help one in making such a measurement. It is all a matter of focusing on the pleasure concerned and checking out its intensity, duration, certainty, nearness, fecundity (its capacity to include other pleasurable sensations), purity (its freedom from any admixture of unpleasant sensations) and inclusiveness (the number of people affected by it). Bentham widened the meaning of pleasure to involve certain altruistic and "unselfish" elements. Be that as it may, the stress he put on the quantitative dimension of pleasure almost "begs for a misunderstanding".

4.8   IMMANUEL KANT (1724-1804)

The "sage of Konigsberg" was to have a major impact on the development of contemporary western thought. The second volume of his famous philosophical trilogy of the "critiques" was devoted to new and revolutionary insights into ethics. Right at the onset of his critique of practical reason he rejects all such system that is based on a "heteronomous" source, that is, on some principle or norm outside the human person. Were we to maintain such a point of view, he tells us, in effect, if a person had to reject that norm, and then there would be no basis helping him or her to be a moral person. Thus, he begins by noting that in us there are not only some a-priory (hence universal and necessary) principles of speculative knowledge in us, but similar principles of practical knowledge. In as much as these are a-priori, they constitute an internal norm of morality in man: "autonomous principles."

For Kant, the only thing that can be called "good" without qualification is a "good will" – all other "goods," such as health, wealth and long life can be used for bad ends: they are only relatively "good". Now, what precisely is a "good will"? A will which acts for the sake of duty alone (and no other motive) is a good will. This is perhaps Kant's way of telling us that a "good will" does not act out of self-interest. Be that as it may, the kind of language he used has given his doctrine a very "rigorist" appearance. This "duty" is rooted in the moral law itself, which, in turn, is manifest moral consciousness (a-prior synthetic practical judgments). Now, "universality" is the very form of the moral law – so, once again, a certain rigidity is to be expected of its "categorical" demands: allowing the possibility of exceptions would do violence to this "universal" form of the normal law. The first general formulation of the basic categorical imperative is, for Kant, "I must act such that my way of acting could become a universal procedure." There are other formulations popularized by Kant, especially "Never treat a person merely as a means," but they always enshrine some kind of universality as constitutive of its very form. He derived three "postulates" from the undeniable fact of the categorical imperative: human freedom, the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. This is no contradiction of what he had maintained in the earlier Critique: there he held that one cannot prove these truths from pure reason, whereas in the second critique he says that practical reason can and must postulate.

4.9   JOHN STUART MILL (1806-1873)

Author of a treatise entitled, *Utilitarianism*, Mill was even more direct and explicit than Bentham in holding that "utility" or "the greatest happiness principle" should be "the foundation of morals". However he seemed to widen his criterion to involve not just "the happiness of mankind, but "rather, of all sentient beings".

But he went on to add further refinement and precision to Bentham's initial approach. First, he stressed that there is also a qualitative difference between pleasures, and not just a quantitative one. Next, he suggested that what the individual seeks is not his personal or private happiness but the common happiness of all. He even endeavors to give a rational basis to the pleasure principle by appealing to "the conscientious feelings of mankind", that is, the fact that everybody would say so.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1)   What is the common principle in Epicurus', Thomas Hobbes' and
Jeremy Bentham's philosophy?

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2)   Briefly explain Aristotle's views on virtues.

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3)   What are the seven norms proposed by Bentham for the measurement
of pleasure?

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4.10 EMILE DURKHEIM (1858-1917):

A French positivist, whose thinking was affected by the rise of the natural sciences,
he is also hailed as the father of Sociology. One of his key writings is the
Elementary Forms of Religious Experience, in which he attempted to give a
materialist (positivist) explanation even for religion. From his study of Totemism,
which he held to be the originary form of all religions, he concluded that "the
gods" where nothing more than the tribal society conceived symbolically. From
this he concluded that religious rites, worship and dogma were nothing but various
ways and means to make people accept and submit themselves to the laws and
customs of their closed tribal group. This same approach he also employed to
morality, too. Moral laws, then, are nothing but positive laws enacted by a given
society to ensure its stability and preservation. In other words, the norm of morality
is plainly and simply concrete positive law. It would be more accurate to call it
sociological positivism as it is grounded on human social, rather than individual
or private, law.

Durkhiem has well brought out the link between human social consciousness and moral development. However he is loath to admit – against the views of even some of his later disciples – that there seems to be a common underlying structure, some kind of common principles at work everywhere, that is, the basis of the admitted diversity of moral set-ups. Again if morality is primarily a matter of "following the crowd," how do we account for the emergence of radical thinkers who openly and daringly rejected and challenged the existing mores of a given society?

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Brief Durkheim's materialist explanation of religion.

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2) Explain Kant's views on moral obligation.

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3) Explain Thomas Aquinas' views of moral philosophy.

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4.11 LET US SUM UP

It is quite common to find ethics defined, as Paul W. Taylor does, in an excellent introduction to this discipline: "Ethics may be defined as philosophical inquiry into the nature and grounds of morality". We do not, however, find this approach very illuminating for, as we have seen, "morals" is nothing but the Latin equivalent of the more Greek term, "Ethics". If we try to avoid this "*idem per idem*" repetitive definition by saying it studies "the goodness or badness" or "the rightness or wrongness" of human actions, this does not get us much further because, as we have equally seen, terms like "good" or "bad", "right" or "wrong" are susceptible to many understandings and so possible confusions are not quite dispelled. That

is why we try to make clear in precisely what sense that they result in someone being better personal all-round (and not just in some restricted sphere – a good singer, or student, or tennis player).so our definition of ethics would run something as follows: Ethics is a branch of philosophy which studies human actions from the point of view of their enabling a person to become more fully human, more fully alive. We can therefore say that ethics is that branch of philosophy which studies what makes a person truly liberated.

Now, any worthwhile discussion of ethics, sooner or later, confronts us with the phrase "human acts". We should pause for a moment to underline the meaning and significance of what these words imply. They are actually the legacy of old scholastic thought and still relevant today. We must need to distinguish between what could be called "acts of humans" and "human acts" (the Latin maintains the word play more neatly: *actus humanus* and *actus hominis*). A human act is an act put forward by a person acting in full capacity as human, i.e. out of full awareness and freedom – after all knowledge and free choice are what characterize humans as humans. Only when someone does something knowingly and freely can he/she be held accountable for that act and accordingly, be praised or blamed for it. If someone were, unknowingly, to drink a cup of poisoned tea, no one could accuse him or her of attempted suicide. One might say that what he or she had done was "objectively" a suicidal act (i.e. of itself it would bring about the person's death or serious illness, if medical intervention were not sought immediately), but "subjectively" he or she could not be blamed for the act. This example should also make us realize that we cannot behave as if only "subjective morality" were important, since that is the area where praise or blame ("moral accountability") comes in. if the action were "objectively wrong" in itself it would have some bad effects on the agent – psychologically and physiologically – even if he or she did not do it "full knowledge and full consent," to use the time honoured formula. Ethics, then, is more concerned with actions done as a result of knowledge and free choice: only such actions make us better or worse persons all-round. Acts of humans, that is, actions done unintentionally, unknowingly (including doing an "objectively" wrong action while not knowing such an act is wrong) would not affect one all-round as a person.

4.12 KEY WORDS

Teleology : *telos* is a Greek word for 'end', in the sense of a goal to be achieved. So teleology means the study of end.

Deontology : means the science of moral duties

4.13 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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