

An Introduction to Ethics and Moral Philosophy

**PPT submitted on
Research Publication and Ethics for Research Course Work
Programme
for the session 2019-20, NBU**

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What is meant by “morality?”

- **Morality refers to a code of conduct that is accepted by anyone who meets certain intellectual and volitional conditions, including the condition of being rational.**
- **Morality is an evolved part of human nature, much like a tendency to weave nets as an evolved part of spiders’ nature.**
- **Morality deals with humans and how they relate to others and the world around them. It deals with how we treat one another so as to promote what is good and right.**

Morality is determined by four areas:

- 1. Religion.** Morality is determined by the relation between human being and supernatural being.
- 2. Nature.** By the relation between human being and nature.
- 3. Individuality.** By the relation the individual has to him or herself.
- 4. Society.** By the relation between human being and society.

Most moral systems involve all four of these areas with one being primary.

Where does morality come from?

- **Morality has a subjective or objective origin.**
- **As objective there are three possibilities for the origin of morality:**
 - 1. It is given by a supernatural being.**
 - 2. It is a part of the fabric of nature.**
 - 3. It is a part of the ‘furniture’ of the world, independently of human beings.**

These possible explanations of the origin of morality is expressed in the ‘supernatural theory’, the theory of ‘natural law’ and ‘objectivism’.

Morality need not be based exclusively on religion for five reasons.

- **Supernatural existence cannot be proven.**
- **Non religious people can be moral.**
- **Religious foundation for ethics is difficult to establish.**
- **Which religion would be best ethically?**
- **How could it be shown that one religion is best?**

What is ethics?

1. What makes an act morally right or wrong (a question of conduct)?
2. What makes a person or something good or bad (a question of value)?
3. How to draw the correct conclusion about what we ought to do or what kind of person we ought to be?
4. (1) and (2) are theoretical/conceptual questions and (3) is a practical question about moral reasoning.

Characteristics of Ethical Issues

- Moral disagreements are common. Moral issues are often controversial and open-ended. It is often difficult to arrive at some consensus.
- How serious could people disagree with one another? Could the disagreement be radical and fundamental?
- People even disagree about what and how much they disagree.

Moral Theories

- A moral theory consists of a set of moral principles.
- These principles specify the conditions under which an action is morally right or wrong, or what makes a person or something good or bad. (Theoretical questions (1) and (2))
- They purport to guide our moral reasoning (Practical question (3)).

- Together with facts about different moral situations, moral rules that guide the morality of specific kinds of actions could be derived.
- Together with facts about an individual case, we can further judge whether an individual act is morally right or wrong, or whether a person or something is good or bad.

Structure of moral action

- Person → Action → Consequence
- Person: What makes a person morally good? Be courageous, kind, and so on? Do the motive, character, and intention of the person matter in deciding whether an action is right or wrong?
- Action: What makes an action morally right? Should the motive, character, or intention of the actor be taken into consideration? Should it be solely determined by the consequences?
- Consequence: What constitutes a good or bad consequence?

Three major kinds of moral theories

- Consequence-based theories by Mill and Bentham
- Deontological theories by Kant
- Virtue-based theories by Anscombe

Theoretical Ethics vs Practical Ethics

- The term “applied ethics” is misleading.
- It makes “practical ethics” sound like applied mathematics.
- Ethical theories sometimes give no clear-cut answer to specific moral problems.

Examples: euthanasia and abortion.

Challenges to Morality

- Egoism
 - Psychological egoism: Human actions are motivated by their self-interests.
 - Ethical egoism: One should only promote one's own interests, or it is alright for everyone to do so.
- Relativism
 - Descriptive relativism: People of different cultures follow different norms and have different conceptions of the good.

- **Ethical relativism**: What makes an act morally right and wrong or something morally good or bad depends on the cultural context in which the question is raised.
- **Moral skepticism**
 - Why should I be moral? It is impossible to give a non-question begging answer.
 - We can never justify our moral beliefs and ideas.

- **Moral Nihilism**

- Ethical claims are either fictitious (according to error theories) or neither true nor false.
- They are not answerable to any reality.
- There is no such thing called “morality”.

Is human morality innate?”

- “How do we interpret this question?”
- To ask whether morality is *innate* is to ask whether it morality is in our gene?
- To ask whether *morality* is innate is to ask “whether the human capacity to make *moral judgments* is innate.”

We think Morally because we

- **We Feel good.**

(Intrapsychic functionalism: Freud)

- **2. We Find the truth.**

(Epistemic functionalism: Plato, Kohlberg, and the Rationalists)

- **3. We want to Succeed socially.**

(Social-functionalism: Darwin)

Why I be moral?

- **Why should I do the morally right thing?**
 - **Because ‘I could benefit myself by not doing the morally right thing’.**
- **Morality has also emerged in human affairs and represents a frame of reference along with others.**

Socrates' might respond:

1. Socrates will say truly just people would act morally because they love justice.
2. We have created 'justice' only because we are afraid of suffering.
3. Unjust people find it hard to live with themselves because, they have to live with a bad person, which makes them unhappy.

Plato might respond

- **Plato maintains a virtue-based eudaemonistic conception of ethics.**
- **happiness or well-being (eudaimonia) is the highest aim of moral thought and conduct.**
- **Virtues (aretê: 'excellence') are the requisite skills and dispositions needed to attain it.**

Aristotle might respond

Nicomachean Ethics

- Happiness is the highest good and the end at which all our activities ultimately aim.
- Only happiness is an end in itself, so it is the ultimate end at which all our activities aim. As such, it is the supreme good.
- The difficulty is that people don't agree on what makes for a happy or good life, so the purpose of the *Ethics* is to find an answer to this question.

Aristotle.....

- Aristotle defines moral virtue as a disposition to behave in the right manner and as a mean between extremes of deficiency and excess, which are vices.
- We learn moral virtue primarily through habit and practice rather than through reasoning and instruction.
- Virtue is a matter of having the appropriate attitude toward pain and pleasure.

Kant might respond

- the supreme principle of morality is a standard of rationality that he called the “Categorical Imperative”.
- To do something moral because it makes you feel good or because you hope to gain something from it.
- What does it mean to act out of duty?
- Kant says this means that we should act from respect for the moral law.

- **Since a good will is the only unconditionally good thing, everything else must ultimately trace its justification to this:**
- **virtues such as intelligence or calmness must be directed by it, happiness must be deserved by it, particular ends must be chosen in accordance with it.**
- **The good will is the source of value, and without it, nothing would have any real worth.**
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Bradley might respond

- The aim of ethics is the realization of self.
- The question should be asked along the lines of “What I am to do or be?” or “What is the ideal I seek to realize?”
- Willing and acting in accordance with an ideal is a moral end.
- The realization of an ideal self is necessarily conditioned by an unrealized self, and in this regard, his ethics does not provide a metaphysical basis for relating the thought of the ideal with the reality of the actual.

For John Rawls, Morality is

- “prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other”.

Albert Camus on Morality

- Camus contends that the moral life is to be found in the tendency of man to rebel against the absurd.
- Camus' concept of rebellion, however, does not call for radical, revolutionary actions -*The Rebel*

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

- “the human condition is inherently frustrating, but we betray ourselves and solicit catastrophe by seeking religious solutions to its limitations.
- ***In The Rebel P.101***
- “The rebel obstinately confronts a world condemned to death and the impenetrable obscurity of the human condition with his demand for life and absolute clarity.
- He is seeking, without knowing it, a moral philosophy or a religion.”

Albert Camus.....

- Even though life may lack meaning, morality is still important and everyone, regardless of their philosophical beliefs, should value it.
- Morality simply means doing what we think is morally virtuous, and although it may not always align with the rest of society.

The Stranger and The Fall

Arthur Schopenhauer

The Basis of Morality

- The assumption that animals are without rights and the illusion that our treatment of them has no moral significance is a positively outrageous example of Western crudity and barbarity.
- Universal compassion is the only guarantee of morality.

Nietzsche on Morality

- Nietzsche argued that there were two fundamental types of morality:
- "master morality" and
- "slave morality".
- Master morality values pride and power.
- Slave morality values kindness, empathy, and sympathy.
- ***Nietzsche explains that morality is always just an interpretation.***

Indian Philosophy and Tradition

- The basic nature of man are religious and spiritual, goodness and welfare, universality and fraternity, spiritual integrity, moral uprightnes, benevolence, unselfishness under all circumstances.

The four *Mahāvākyas* of the four *Vedas* expresses the spiritual character of man.

The *Mahāvākyas* are

- ***Prajñanām Brahman.*** (The intelligence is Divine),
- ***Ayamātmā Brahman*** (The soul is Divine),
- ***Aham Brahmāsmi*** (I am Divine),
- and ***Tattvamṣasi.***

***Dharma* as a moral value**

Vaisesika Sutra claims:

*“Yato-bhyudayanihsreyasa-siddhish
sa dharmah.”*

“That which leads to the attainment of *Abhyudaya* (prosperity in this world) and *Nihisreyasa* (total cessation of pain and attainment of eternal bliss hereafter) is *Dharma*.”

- *Dharma* is not for developing intelligence; it is for developing character.

आगमानां हि सर्वेषाम् आचारः श्रेष्ठ उच्यते ।
आचारप्रभवो धर्मो धर्मादायुर्विवर्धते ॥

*Mahabharata, Anushasanparva, Adhyaya 107, Shloka
147*

When compared with all knowledge, good conduct is considered to be superior; because *Dharma* is based on *acharas*. When man abides by *acharadharm*, his life is prolonged.

ऊर्ध्वबाहुर्विरौम्येष न च कश्चिच्छृणोति मे ।
धर्मादर्थश्च कामश्च स किमर्थं न सेव्यते ॥

Mahabharata, Swargarohanparva, Adhyaya 5, Shloka 46

Vyasa says:

With my arms raised, I am lamenting, yet no one listens to me. (O human beings) *Dharma* accomplishes both, earning of wealth and fulfilling of desires. Then, why do you not abide by *Dharma* ?

Suggested Readings:

- Elizabeth Burns & Stephen Law (eds.), *Philosophy for AS and A2*, London: Routledge, 2004.
- Julia Driver, *Ethics: The Fundamentals*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Christopher Hamilton, *Understanding Philosophy for AS Level*, Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes, 2003.
- James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 4th ed., Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003.
- Nina Rosenstand, *The Moral of the Story: An Introduction to Ethics*, 5th ed., Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005.
- Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

**Thank you so much for your
attention.**

Best wishes.